



Tyranny on Nature and Women in Usha K.R. *Monkey Man*

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Abstract

Usha K.R. depicts the irony of the deterioration of her native city Bangalore in an implicit physical metaphor monkey-man. The novel *Monkey-Man* joins a confounded patch work blanket of lives over various decades and political impacts to skim between a mix of a strange mystery, an account of old speculations and newly-found prospects, and present day work-driven society of India. Usha K.R. seems, by all accounts, to be charmed in resuscitating the soul of old Bangalore and delineates the adjustments in the lives of people from different segments of society. In any case, the negative effects of this MNC society weigh more heavily on female and nature. Hence, the novel befittingly portrays an ecofeminist perspective through the sufferings of its female characters and natural landscapes of Bangalore like old lady i.e. Moorthy, smother, garland maker daughter, Pushpa Rani turning into a call centre girl or Bangalore city streets embraced with natural beauty and hence connoting the fact that all are the major victims of this drastic commercial development.

Keywords: Ecofeminist, Industrialization, Globalization, Society.



The most recent work which has again discussed the ill effects of modernization and industrialization on nature and women is *Monkey Man* (2010) by Usha K.R. She has been writing fiction for more than two decades, starting with short fiction and has bagged the prestigious ‘Katha Award’ for her short story ‘Sepia Tones’ in 1995. Her debut novel *Sojourn* was published in 1998 and the second one, *The Chosen*, came in 2003. *A Girl and a River* her third and well acknowledged work for which she won the Vodafone Crossword Award 2007 also got her shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. *Monkey-man* her most recent work got her the nomination for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2012. Usha K.R belongs to Bangalore. She argues that globalism and privatization accompanied by information technology revolution have altered the way people think. Bangalore is the poster city for these changes all over India. She is sublime at telling the narrative of communist ideologues of yesteryears who were raised to trust themselves as the “intellectual thinking treasures” of society and spent numerous espresso mornings enthusiastically talking about and guarding a belief system they had no clue how to execute. She has discovered her space amongst writers today, particularly with a topic that investigates how diverse people cope-up with their changing surroundings.

The novel *Monkey-Man* symbolizes the transformation of a peaceful, hustle-less city which was considered as a ‘Pensioner’s Paradise’ (K.R, *Monkey Man* 13) into a modernized, IT-hub now aspirationally called as ‘Silicon Valley’ (K.R, *MM* 13). The novelist, Usha, K.R. plots this story in her own native place, Bangalore – the city whose features have been severely tainted in the past two decades. She portrays the transformation of this city from being a blustery town of gardens, a pensioner’s ecstasy and a resident’s paradise into one of the most prominent information technology hubs of India. Presently, it's an extremely materialistic city, one of the leading metropolis of India with blooming property prices, fanatical traffic and a maddening rush. *Monkey-Man* interlaces a



complicated pastiche of lives led over numerous decades. There are political influences to float between a blend of a bizarre secret, a story of old generalizations and newly discovered prospects, and present day India's work-driven society. It unfolds the story of diverse families as they experience their lives in Bangalore. Their experience, adolescence kinships and political preferences are depicted in profuse detail. The male protagonist, Shrinivas Moorthy, lives in Ammanagudi Street which he has seen being distorted since his childhood from a natural place, “a nice mix of cows and men” (K.R, *MM* 13) to a area where, “the noise, the traffic, even the sludge of brown mud that flowed in from the excavations on the main road, silting its monsoon drains” (13). This industrialization and globalization of their dwelling place has bothered his mother in a profound way. It is not easy for her to adapt to these modern ways of living. For example, in his childhood the street had many houses that followed the business of cow rearing and the locals including them used to buy milk from these households. But currently all those have been transformed into one or the other IT-related firms and offices. The mother has disliking for the packaged milk either in bottles or plastic bags available these days. The following lines from the novel depict this uneasiness:

Ammanagudi Street had always smelt of cow dung, for a little beyond their houses, just before the road narrowed, there were many Golla households with their cows penned in rows in their compounds. As a boy he had gone there each morning with pail to fetch the milk, fresh and forthy, for his mother had had a horror of milk that came in bottles and later, plastic packets (K.R, *MM* 13-14)

Not only the eating habits get affected but also the homes they live in have been transformed from open and garden bearing bungalows to matchstick type multistoried flats. His mother prefers to live with his sister in Mysore on the pretext of taking care of her children but the actual reason is



her preference for residences in natural environment rather than these concrete based jungles as quoted, “His mother had lived with him in the flat for a few years, bewildered, ill-at- ease in the confined space, before moving to Mysore to live with his sister in a house with a garden; she said her daughter needed help with her three small children” (K.R, *MM* 15).

His mother has such an intimate connection with nature that they form a part of her routine as well as festive life. “Sometimes she wore a crown of turmeric and vermilion powder, and sometimes a mask of white butter with a golden crown. And when she was not ready to face the world she hid behind a screen of marigolds” (K.R, *MM* 16).

The philosophy of Indians towards nature, natural entities as well as to the physical surroundings is in accordance with Vandana Shiva’s approach of ecofeminism who puts Indian community as an admirer and worshipper of natural resources and landscapes as depicted in the novel at several places. Even the name of the street is religiously placed in the name of the Goddess ‘Ammanagudi’. The old-days Bangalore has been depicted as Mother Land; manifesting the feminine correlation with environment. But the proliferative impact of the western culture alienates the Indian society from nature. It is evident in the novel at numerous instances like Moorty’s father converting their bungalow into constricted flats and the selling of cows and sheds by Bhimaiah to replace them with ‘Bhimaiah Plaza’ (K.R, *MM* 14). The conflict between Shrinivas Moorty and his friend Jairam very well portrays the clash between sustainable development and western philosophy of materialistic exploitation of natural assets like land. Jairam favours the construction of a building in the vast grounds of the college premises. The management of the National Trust to which the land was granted years ago wants to make mischievous money from the funds for the construction of this building on the open land. The root cause of change in this ideology from an admirer to an



exploiter is colonization/western philosophy which favours commercial gains over environment sustainability.

The call centre culture, a result of globalization and introduced as succor for the needs of the Western masters, has further deteriorated the relationship with nature as demonstrated by Pushpa Rani, a female employee who works in the midnight shift and most of her mornings go waste as she sleeps during that period. When her shift gets changed she experiences the beauty of sun-rise as quoted below:

The first SMS of the day is from our regular listener Pushpa Rani- Hi P. Rani, my Prani- who says, Bali Today I learnt what good morning really means. . . I saw the sun today in the morning after a whole month! No, she doesn't stay in the Arctic but in our very own Bangalore. It just happens that she was on the eight-to-four night shift till yesterday. Believe me, she says, it's the most glorious sight in the world to see the sun rise. (K.R, *MM* 28).

The modern job has provided financial stability but has alienated her from nature. Her mother was a professional garland maker. Their previous means of livelihood kept them much closer and associated with nature as depicted in the novel:

The four of them, her brother included, would sit amidst the sweet-smelling jasmine in summer or the milder sevanthi or even the odourless kanakambra to string the flowers .She felt a special kinship with the small hours of the morning, mingled as they were with the scent of jasmine. . (K.R, *MM* 76-77).

But being a woman who instinctually gets connected with nature, Pushpa Rani even discovers an association with natural surroundings in her modern glass enclosed night shift job. She



glares at the night sky through the long glass windows of her office and admires the beauty of the rays of sunlight. The author poetically uses natural metaphors like “waves carrying her voice across the sea” (79) and hence provides an ecofeminist perspective even to her professional liability as a call centre employee:

And yet she was also the child of the sun, for her shift permitting, she would work through part of the night, watch the sky lightening through the glass-fronted windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, and see the sun come up. And the prospective customer to whom she was trying to sell insurance or the irate man who was calling to retrieve some piece of information half-way across the world in America, was truly blessed, for the waves that carried her voice across ocean or sky carried also the magic of sunrise. (K.R, *MM* 77)

Before coming to Bangalore, the family lived in a nearby village surrounded by fields. Her father worked to supply the vegetables grown in their small plot to the city market. But the modernized and industrialized business of the city persuaded him to sell his piece of land. Unfortunately, he lost the entire amount and the family shifted to a congested place, Sundarapalya, closer to the main city. This place is a perfect symbol of mingled stage of urban and rural life progressing towards advancement and bringing the reflections of hazardous city life as depicted:

Sprouting in the middle of fields filled with parthenium—that deadly weed, harbinger of respiratory disorders and skin allergies—Sundarapalya had little charm, seeming more a random settlement than a planned colony. But there was no denying its energy. It had the knowingness, the half-knowledge and the erratic growth of an adolescent whose voice has begun to break, whose face has broken out in a rash of acne and whose body has become equally a site of embarrassment and



excitement. Sundarapalya might receive only the backwash of Bangalore, but the lights winked in the distance, the promise of adulthood lay just round the corner.

(K.R, *MM* 87)

Hence, the original essence of the novel is “How the globalised multinational company culture tainted Bangalore?” (88) Usha K.R. is keen on reviving the spirit of old Bangalore and depicts the changes in the lives of humans belonging to diverse sections of the society. But the counter-effects of this MNC culture are more pervasive and pestering for women and nature. Whether it is the old lady i.e. Moorty’s mother, the garland maker’s daughter, Pushpa Rani turning into a call centre girl or Bangalore city streets embraced with natural beauty, all are major victims of this drastic commercial growth. Therefore, the impact of modernization and globalization is devastating for the entire human race but more specifically for nature and woman.

The actual “monkey-man” mystery appears on a few pages in the novel. This is an incident that occurred in the year 2000, where natives throughout India reported the presence of a weird monkey-like creature. Majority of the characters in the novel claim to have witnessed this ‘monkey-man’ in the Ammanagudi Street and therefore are invited on Bali Brum’s (a famous radio-jockey) show. Nevertheless, the narrative is not actually about the Monkey-man episode. Through this incident, Usha K R elicits the monkey man’s obscure, muddled and mythic reflection as a simile for the devastating and monstrous alteration of the city. The unexpected assault of the monkey quickens the internal qualms and insecurities of the characters. The Ammanagudi street whose natural beauty encompassing the fully grown palm trees that flowered in summer and provided shelter to stray dogs, daily vendors and housed many birds gets devastated due to industrialization and globalization. The natural entities create hindrance in commercial projects as “The trees look lopsided, for the telephone department comes from time to time with its high ladder to cut off the



branches which tangle with the overhead telephone wires” (K.R, *MM* 235). Even the roots of the sideways trees were chopped off to broaden the roads but they emerge out forming cracks in the rainy season. There is a stringent injunction through the metaphor ‘roots are stubborn things’ (235) on the prevailing conflict between nature as a self enduring and the devastating efforts of the patriarchal industrialized society which is errant to the whole ecosystem and among human forms mostly to women who bear affinity with Nature. The monkey-man emerges out as a metaphysical symbol that connotes the psychological issues generated in common population due to devastating effects of industrialization against nature, customs and the underprivileged which mainly includes the woman in the patriarchal Indian society.

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