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# **Environmental Concerns in the Poetry of Shiv K. Kumar**

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## **Abstract**

*The present paper is an attempt to explore the environmental awareness as reflected in Shiv K Kumar's poetry. The Post-Independence Indian English poetry has always seen constant changes and challenges, modernity and experimentation. During this period there started a new creative urge and awareness, a new faith and credo and a pledge of sharp departure from the established and accepted themes and techniques. Among many other poets while experimenting with new techniques and themes Kumar has shown awareness about nature and environment. Different scholars have also examined the existentialist and modernistic aspects of Kumar. However, the ecological dimension of his English poetry has not received the kind of critical attention it deserves. The present study seeks to fill this gap and examine the complex and dynamic relationship between his literary sensibility and the physical environment. As Glotfelty, the first American Professor of Literature and the Environment rightly puts it while defining ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (1996: xix). Shiv K. Kumar's most of the poems reveal environmental concerns in terms of poet's instinct towards insects, birds and animals and the effects of modernization, urbanization and industrialization.*

**Key Words:** *environment, physical environment, ecocriticism, modernization, urbanization and industrialization*

The Post-Independence Indian English poetry has always seen constant changes and challenges, modernity and experimentation. During this period there started a new creative urge and awareness, a new faith and credo and a pledge of sharp departure from the established and accepted themes and techniques. Among many other poets while experimenting with new techniques and themes Kumar has shown awareness about nature and environment.

Shiv K. Kumar has written such his literary works as *Articulate silences* (1970), *Cobwebs in the Sun* (1974), *Subterfuses* (1976), *Wood Peckers* (1979), *Trapfalls in the Sky* (1986), *Woolgathering: Poems* (1998), *Thus Spake the Buddha* (2001) and *Losing My Way* (2003). Most of the poems in the collections of his verse deal with Indianness, irony, imagery and concern for sexual desire and fears of aging. In a separate chapter on Ramanujan, Sharat Chandra, Kumar, Nazareth and Seth entitled “Exile: Ramanujan, Sharat Chandra, Kumar, Nazareth and Seth” published in *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (1987), Bruce King points out the concern for sexual desire and fears of aging in many of Kumar’s poetry.

Different scholars have also examined the existentialist and modernistic aspects of Kumar. However, the ecological dimension of his English poetry has not received the kind of critical attention it deserves. The present study seeks to fill this gap and examine the complex and dynamic relationship between his literary sensibility and the physical environment. As Glotfelty, the first American Professor of Literature and the Environment rightly puts it while defining ecocriticism as ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ (1996: xix).

The present study is a modest attempt to study on environmental concerns in the poetry of Kumar.

Most of the poems in Shiv K. Kumar’s collection of verse, *Which of My Selves Do You Wish to Speak To?* (2011) bring into focus the poet’s feelings about the present worst environmental condition in India.

In his 'Feeding the Pigeons' Kumar notices the free natural life of the pigeons and attempts to ensure the 'trust' among them to establish close relationship with them.

A flock of visitors to my lawn –  
Freedom of the air on their wings,  
the earth's greenery under their feet.  
Gingerly they come, hoping toward  
my painful of temptations.  
Assured of trust, they're now  
within my reach. Do they move  
in pairs, I wonder. (WDS, 10)

The poet achieves the trust of them by offering palmful grains.

A white-feathered creature has already  
hoped onto my palm for crumbs.  
Emboldened, I caress the nape of its neck,  
The rondure of its bosom.  
It's drinking it all in.  
Has it abandoned its partner for stranger? (WDS, 10)

In 'Putting an Old Sick Dog to Sleep' the poet expresses his deep feelings about the physical condition of the dog. The disorder in his body due to the hot and humid climatic condition as in the tropics shows that he loses his harmonious life led with his fellow-creatures on the land.

Tropical sun. Its spears, dipped in fire,  
Penetrating through the neem tree  
in whose shade he lay gasping.  
For three days he hadn't touched his bowl  
of milk, as if he'd renounced his life—  
sustaining system to cross the river  
of time to a land where man, bird and tree

Spoke the same language. (WDS, 24)

The poet tries to keep his body safe by sweeping away 'red ants' and 'creatures of doom'. But the human attempt fails to save his life in the natural calamity.

As I drew close, I saw in his eyes a spurt  
of recognition; then he struggled to wag  
his tail to bid farewell. (WDS, 24)

And

A brusque prick in his rear leg, and I visualized  
death creeping surreptitiously through  
his intestines, heart and face. And as his eyelids  
drooped. (WDS, 25)

Along with the feelings of the poet, the instincts of other animals bring all together at the burial of the dog.

At his burial, they were all here—  
goats, cats and dogs in the neighbourhood.  
And as their wail spiralled to the sky,  
a tremor fractured the earth's spine. (WDS, 25)

The poet feels that the entire atmosphere on the planet earth has become gloomy and sorrowful due to the death of the dog. 'I felt as though the dams behind/my eyes burst, and the floods submerged/the entire planet' (WDS, 25).

In another poem, 'Coromandel Beach', the poet-persona draws attention towards the unidentified root causes of the lives of sea-horses in danger on the beach. He questions:

So why let the sea-horses  
go berserk on the beach,  
chafing and stamping  
all skeletons  
into unrecognition? (WDS, 119)

The poem, 'Cleansing Ganga' reveals the treat of turning pure river water into dirty water day by day due to the constant immersion of ashes, bones and offerings of waste materials to the dead people. Bijay Kumar Das, in his article "Academy Award Winning Indian English Poetry As Post-colonial Text" published in *Critical Essays on Post-colonial Literature* (2001) also comments on the polluted condition of the holy river Ganga in Kumar's poetry. The poet feels:

The waters then get sullied by ritual and dogma—  
ashes and bones,  
wilted floral offerings to the dead,  
and the noontime sweat oozing from the saffron—  
sripped foreheads of the crocodiles  
whose yawning jaws chant mantras  
in some obsolete tongue. (WDS, 73)

The poet hopes that the persona may bring a shift in the cremation places of the human dead bodies along the waistline of the mother river, Ganga.

Maybe if someone could dismantle all scaffoldings  
along the mother river's waistline  
and ask the dead to seek immersion  
in other confluences,  
the little fish will then bleach theses waters  
for the sun's lasers to probe her limpid groin. (WDS, 73)

The water pollution of the rivers in and the other in India brings the water-livings in danger due to the careless human interference in natural oxygen and food cycle process.

Water sanitation is one of the major issues in all the spheres of life. The safety of it has become the prime concern in India. The World Bank Report regarding how India is facing a severe challenge of water reveals:

The World Bank has repeatedly warned that India will face a severe water crisis in 20 years if the government does not change its ways, and clashes are already taking place because the resource is so scarce ... India has no proper water management system in place, its ground water is disappearing and river bodies are turning into makeshift sewers ... [and]... by 2020, India's demand for water will exceed all sources of supply (Gupta: 2008:1-2)

In 'O Delhi', Kumar notices that Delhi has become one of the best examples of losing environmental balance in cities in India. 'I see you singing to the earth's epicentre' (WDS, 75). Modernization, urbanization and industrialization have become the root causes of pollution of every sort in urban India.

Eardrums jabbed by your shrieking sirens,  
eyes blurred by the yellow dust raised by some leakage –  
methylene or espionage –  
I feel the taste of cowdung on my palate. (WDS, 75)

The poet wonders that the city's decline has begun due to the lack of ecofriendly practice. He finds that the growth rate of urban cities is increasing day-by-day in India. The growth is being done at the cost of ecology. The city has totally forgotten its past glory. At present it is facing the problems emerged due to the urbanization.

The ring Road that tightens its noose around your neck  
is a jumble of paradoxes: the sacred Jumna –  
and the Najafgarh Drain whose turgid waters  
breed fish that look like burnt-out midguts  
in some lake of hell. (WDS, 75)

Nath et. al in the introduction of his book, *Urbanization, Urban Development, and Metropolitan Cities in India* observes:

The proportion of the urban population living in the cities had increased progressively from 44% in 1961 to 60% by 1981, and has reached almost 70% by 2001... The number of metropolitan cities has increased from 9 in 1971 to 12 in 1981 and 35 in 2001... Since independence, there has been a tremendous increase in number of population in such urban centres... (xix-xx)

In the poem, ‘Moongazing’, the poet makes his resistance towards the environmental degradation. He satirically highlights the importance and beauty of ‘baby hills’ of Hyderabad. They are being flattened by the builders for erecting shopping molls and buildings for the commercial purposes. Hyderabad, the city of beautiful boulder hills, has now changed into commercial trading centres. These green hills have a variety of wild life with wilderness of trees and shrubs. The government policy has totally neglected the rights of the nonhuman entities. The encroachment over these hills brings about the severe effects on the water cycle. As a result, Hyderabad has lost its ground water level as well the balance of natural environment. Hence the poet mourns over the environmental plight of Hyderabad:

Some evidence of stolen property  
From their planet where suspicion  
Worms into everyone’s brain  
Like a malignant tumour.  
[...]  
And dust, caters spilling over  
With ennui,



They withdrew  
Into their guilt. But not  
Without carrying away a baby-rock,  
As if it were the Kohinoor  
From Golconda, to justify their invasion  
Of a neighbour's territory (4-19)

Such sound, air and water pollution lead the city into permanent decay. The poet prophesies.

I prophesy that you too will fall  
like Nineveh and Babylon,  
and no new Indraprastha will rise  
from your barren ashes. (WDS, 76)

In 'Broken Columns', Kumar shows his nostalgic feelings about India when he was in Jordan. At the same time he does not forget his relationship with the plant and tree around his home.

The letter home to Mother  
still breathes nostalgia:  
'Do the mauve bougainvilleas  
over the rear gate still bite  
into the Ashoka tree? (WDS, 97)

The poem 'Crematorium in Adikmet, Hyderabad' reveals how human action that goes against natural cycle and makes damage to animate and inanimate elements around.

Perched on the wall a vulture cogitates  
upon human avidity—flesh offered  
to the flames, bones and ashes  
to the Ganges. No leavings

for the living. (WDS, 103)

The unburned bones and ashes of human dead bodies cause water pollution instead of becoming food for the scavenger birds.

Thus Shiv K. Kumar's most of the poems reveal environmental concerns in terms of poet's instinct towards insects, birds and animals and the effects of modernization, urbanization and industrialization.

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