



Ecological Imperialism: A Study of Erased Tribal Ecologies in Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills*

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Abstract

Sarita Mandanna's Tiger Hills (2011), set in colonial and early twentieth-century Coorg (Kodagu), narrates the ecological and socio-cultural transformation of the region and its tribal inhabitants under British rule. This paper studies the role of British in changing the indigenous tribal communities' relationships to their land and nature through the lens of Alfred W. Crosby's concept of ecological imperialism. It analyses how the introduction of a foreign species like coffee to Coorg soils, Western education, and colonial land tenure systems alters the sustainable tribal lifestyle and ecologies and replaced them with commercial and anthropocentric practices. While the land-owning Kodavas gradually adopted a Western lifestyle and commercial attitude towards their land, the landless Poley and forest-dwelling Korama tribes retain deeper ecological knowledge and remain rooted to their land. The novel illustrates how colonial domination operated through the systematic replacement of indigenous knowledge systems with European ones, producing what Crosby terms as "Neo-Europes" in the tropical countries. The paper also examines the complicity of local elites in ecological dispossession which eventually led to changing the natural landscape of Coorg and Kodava's nature centered lifestyle in the light of anthropocentrism.

Keywords: Coorg, Colonialism, Ecological Imperialism, Land, Kodava

Introduction

The novel *Tiger Hills*, authored by Sarita Mandanna, Kodagu by birth is situated in Coorg and can thus be classified as a Coorg novel. The narrative of the text extends from 1878 to 1936, centring on Kodava life and recounting the experiences of four generations. The novel, with the triangular love tale of characters Devi, Devanna, and Machu, fictionalises the historical reality of coffee plantations as its backdrop. Mandanna illustrates how the introduction of coffee plantations by the British, together with Western education, collectively alters the Kodava perspective on the land. The issues of ecological imperialism and sociocultural transformations in

Coorg during the colonial era are prominent in the narrative. The novel chronicles the lives of the main characters Devi, Devanna, and Machu set against the backdrop of Coorg. It depicts Devi's transformations towards the land following her acquisition of the coffee estates. The reverence for the land is replaced by a commercial mindset within her. In the subsequent period, Nanju (son of Devi and Devanna) and Appu (son of Machu) emerge as the representatives of the modern generation of Coorg. The work addresses the ecological threats confronting Coorg, while the author consistently maintains hope for future generations. Appu epitomises the disconnected and entirely unanchored



generation of Coorg, whereas Nanju symbolises hope for the subsequent generation of Coorg. Other characters such as Tayi (Devi's grandmother), Thimayya (Devi's father), Tukra (a poleya servant), and Korama (a marginalized tribe) are significant in the narrative, contributing to its realistic appeal. Mandanna also fictionalises Reverend G. Ritcher, a German missionary who established a mission school in Mercara, Coorg, as Reverend Gundert in the narrative who has authored the Gazetteer of Coorg, regarded as one of the most authoritative manuals on Coorg. This paper argues that *Tiger Hills* can be studied as a literary archive of ecological imperialism in Coorg, since it details about the ways in which British colonial interventions reshaped both the landscape and the socio-cultural fabric of the region. The novel traces the environmental transformation in Coorg, revealing how the colonial project was not limited to political domination but extended into the very soil, forests, and rivers of Coorg. Mandanna's narrative illustrates how the intentional introduction of coffee to Coorg, along with the enforcement of Western scientific education, disrupted indigenous tribal connections to the land. Drawing on Alfred W. Crosby's seminal text *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, the paper situates *Tiger Hills* within the broader discourse of ecological conquest. Crosby's notion of the "portmanteau biota" (145)-the assemblage of plants, animals, and microorganisms transported by Europeans-illuminates how the colonisers engineered a new ecological order that displaced native flora, fauna, and knowledge systems. It is evident in the text that the biotic invasion of Coorg also played an important role in restructuring its economic and social hierarchies.

Tiger Hills also reveals the uneven distribution of colonial benefits. While European settlers accumulate wealth through coffee plantations, certain land-owning Kodava elites themselves start coffee plantations and adopt a western elite lifestyle. This shift in the lifestyle of Kodavas deepens the marginalisation of landless Poleya and forest-dwelling Korama communities.

Their exclusion from both land and knowledge systems highlights how colonial double standards, assimilating elites into its fold while eliminating subaltern groups invisible.

Kodavas' Nature-Centered Life

The population of Coorg primarily comprises of various tribal clans. The tribal communities acquire a distinct regional culture, worldview, and traditions (Vidhyarthi and Rai 72). The text indicates that Coorgs possess substantial information about their place. They possess intimate knowledge of their soil, the appropriate timing for ploughing, and the suitable crops for cultivation on their farm. Kodavas' nature-centered lifestyle aligns with Kirkpatrick Sale's argument in his book *Dwellers of Land: The Bioregional Vision*, he writes, "Fully knowing the character of the natural world and being connected to it in a daily and physical way provides that sense of oneness, of rootedness...(47)" This is exemplified in the text through the description of Kodava lifestyle and their intimate knowledge about their environment. Mandanna describes the fertile land of Coorg and how Kodava houses extend to the nature effortlessly:

A velvet patchwork of jungle soil, moist, fertile and dark as the night sky where the forest had been hacked away. Peridot swathes of paddy fields lining the wetlands by the streams. The sprawling, golden thatched homes of the Coorg, each with its designated wetlands and grazing pastures and the tell-tale wisps of smoke that rose from their hearths into the trees. (5)

Mandanna's descriptions of Coorg and its inhabitants become exemplary of Lutwack's observation of place and things that, "vegetation has a most important influence in the quality of places. Vegetation is life and its degree of density indicates the amount of life a place harbours" (48). Non-human entities in the novel like the forest, hills, herons, river Kaveri, crabs, malabar squirrel, laburnums, and the bamboo flower also play an important role in shaping of the characters. The characters in the narrative embody the essence of Coorg. The text showcases the sustainable lifestyle of Kodavas and how it is



practiced right from their childhood. Sustainable living, knowledge about the resources of their land, and making use of those resources are either taught or acquired by a Kodava during his or her childhood days. Their childhood games involved catching crabs, swimming through streams, hunting and collecting honey (19).

“One is borne first a Coorg, and only then an Indian or even a Hindu” (26) This statement indicates that a Kodava’s identity of his or her place is foregrounded more than their religious identity or national identity. This sentence also conveys the strong ties a Coorg has with his land . It is also seen in the text that Coorg’s culture is highly rooted in nature. Coorg cuisine is sustainable as they depend on the natural resources for food. They adapt to their changing seasons by changing their food habits as well. For instance, Mandanna writes, providing a glimpse of how Kodavas changed their cuisine according to seasons, “Rains came. Tayi simmered mutton bones seasoned with onions and pepper cones for hours for the fire to make warming bowls of broth” (19).

Coorgs also have their own water management and traditional purification system. For example, a banana plant would be grown until bananas ripen over an impure filled-in well then, the plant would be chopped down and the well re-opened, with its waters now deemed “purified and once more fit for human consumption. (22) which again indicates their indigenous knowledge.

Coorgs being an agriculture dependent population, constructed their houses close to their paddy fields on a sheltering slope and surrounded by fruit-bearing trees. They made sacks from the bark of the mulberry tree for carrying rice and other items, further demonstrating their sustainable use of natural materials (128).

Poleyas and Koramas

The text also indicates the tribal communities who lives in reclusive geographical regions such as deep forests such as Koramas and Poleyas who do not own land has deeper knowledge of their land more

than Coorgs who owned land and lived close to mainstream society.

The Poleyas are a tribe who traditionally served the high-caste tribes. The text indicates Poleya children, living deeper in the forest, possessed a better and more intimate knowledge of the land than other children. Mandanna writes about their intimate knowledge about the land:

Poleyas taught them to craft slingshots from fibrous bark of the Bairi tree and darts from porcupine quills; they led them to the secret places where the juiciest mulberries grew. They showed them the sticky honeycombs in the hollows of the kabba trees and sun-swept rocks where fantastic jewel-hooded king cobras mated at night, or so it was said. They taught them to find the grassy burrows where wild hares lived and to catch using loops of chicken gut for bait (19).

Despite their deep knowledge of the land, the Poleyas do not own the land, as selling and buying property was likely beyond their imagination. They remain a marginal group throughout the text, shifting their labor from paddy fields to coffee plantations without changing their class status.

The Koramas are described as a reclusive tribe residing deep within the jungle, with a distaste for civilisation. Owing to their deep forest dwellings, they are regarded as the most remote group depicted in the novel. They are typically regarded with caution because of their uncertain temper and their possession of poison-tipped arrows.

The Koramas are shown to possess a deeper knowledge and secrets about Nature. For instance, A Korama finds a rare specimen of a flower which Reverend Gundert has been searching for a long time. When the Korama leaves the flower at his doorstep, Gundert is surprised at the fact that a Korama had kept his promise.

The Poleyas and Koramas are the true embodiment of Kodavas as they remain rooted to the land despite the ecological and social changes. Although Mandanna includes characters from marginalized tribal communities in her narrative, she fails to represent them with complete justice,



especially the Koramas as they are not mentioned in the text after the bamboo flower incident, leaving their situation in the transformed Coorg questionable.

Sociocultural and Ecological Changes in Coorg

The British colonizers, upon occupying Coorg, transforms it with socio-political and ecological innovations. They become successful in manipulating the Kodavas way of life and their relationship with the land. Altering of Coorg's natural terrain of land and introducing foreign crops such as coffee. This can be viewed through the lense of an ecological imperialism.

Alfred W. Crosby defines ecological imperialism as “the replacement of the destroyed indigenes and biota of distant continents by the plants, animals, and people of Europe” (Crosby 7). Mandanna narration exemplifies this when she writes, “They had taken the measure of the little province, looked appraisingly at its mist-laden hills and salubrious climes so well suited to the planting of coffee” (6). They felled mass number of trees for coffee plantation altering the natural habitat of land forever. “Their traditional attachment to land was not respected by anthropocentric European colonizers” (Subarna De 116).

Mandanna portrays the introduction of coffee plantation as an injury done to pure land. Mandanna uses the term “virgin soil” to mention the soil of the Coorg before introducing coffee to it implying that coffee plantation exploited the soils of Coorg. She brings out the change in the Coorg's inhabitants through the character Devi. After the inheritance of coffee plantation and subsequent good yields from it, Devi's becomes obsessed with coffee plantation. The text also mentions how continuous plantation of coffee eroded land's fertility and made it unfit for their staple crop paddy (227).

Rev. G. Richter's description of Coorg – “in vain, however the eye searches for towns and villages, churches, castles or other indications of civilized life” (5), through a western standpoint indicates that Coorg lacked institutions of civilization as well as a civilized lifestyle. So, educational institutions are established by the British aimed to

“civilize” the Kodavas in the traditions of the Western world. It can be seen as an epistemic violence detaching students like Devanna from indigenous – ancestral knowledge. The education imparts scientific knowledge about natural species but detaches individuals from indigenous knowledge. Crossby notes “the Europeans not only brought their own plants and animals; they brought their own way of looking at the natural world” (140). Gundert's teaching of Devanna explaining all the scientific names of plants and the usage of flora and fauna is also a way of making learn the nest generation the possibility the land can offer. Devanna, is an example of western educated who despite being a nature lover, uses his scientific knowledge to increase the yield of the non-native crop, coffee, an action that makes him complicit in eroding his own land's fertility.

One of the major change that happened in between world war I and II is the modernization of Coorg. During the world war, Coorg was one of the major places in South India where army necessities were met. Many Coorg men served in the army. Mandanna writes about this- “the Coorg planters rallied amongst themselves organizing raffles and tombolas to raise funds, and sending anonymous donations to the local mission” (299).

As Coorg became exposed to the mainstream world and Mandanna writes about this, These were progeny of some of the most respected local families, boasting ancestral histories as long and deep as the Kaveri in flood”. They built European style houses and “modernized themselves and danced tango. They rechristened themselves with mixed results (301).

The exposure to western education, culture and alien crops change the sustainable nature centered lifestyle of Coorgs. Kodavas start to prioritize commercial benefit from the land. Their attitude of land change from a sacred provider into a commodity or property. This shift leads to the detachment of people from the place, resulting in a “completely rootless generation.



Conclusion

Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills* functions as a critical documentation of ecological imperialism, archiving how colonialism in Coorg was enacted through environmental transformation, epistemic violence and societal changes. Here's a more elaborated and layered expansion of your passage, keeping the academic rigor and literary-theoretical depth intact: Through Alfred Crosby's lens, it is evident, British colonialism succeeded through introducing "portmanteau biota" (foreign crops) (Crosby 145) which resulted in the displacement both native ecosystems and the tribal knowledge system that had sustained them for generations. It is also seen that ecological imperialism was not accidental but a deliberate strategy of colonialism, one that altered natural landscapes into monocultural plantations and commercialized natural ecosystems. The Kodava elite, initially rooted in reverence for land and forest, gradually adopts the western attitude of commercial profit. Their complicity in coffee plantation illustrates success of colonialism in making local elites stakeholders in their own dispossession. Devi's obsession with coffee yields exemplifies the extent of colonial infiltration among kodavas. The novel reveals how colonialism penetrated the soil and the Kodava psyche alike, transforming forests into plantations and indigenous communities into rootless. By portraying a narrative style centering a marginalized and less documented region like Coorg, *Tiger Hills* not only memorialises Coorg's colonial history but also sheds light on colonial legacies of ecological transformation and cultural marginalisation in postcolonial landscapes.

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