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Politics on Aesthetics of the Himalayan Heritages in Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*

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Abstract

In Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya, Jamaica Kincaid describes the feelings and emotions that she experienced in the aesthetics of the Himalayas and their warmth with Sherpa hospitality. In contrast to this delightful expression, she politicizes the terrific activities of the Maoists who capture the forests and the Himalayan areas. She misrepresents the Oriental values ironically comparing them with the leeches that they find in the forest. This paper subjectivises the mixed match of memoirs that she collected in other countries and travel journals she prepares in Nepal. Kincaid brings nature quests in search of plants and seeds mesmerizing the glorious views that she collects. The objective of this paper is to show the relationships among ecological-environmental things, excavate on traveler's interests, and X-ray on Kincaid's politics in her writing about Nepali forests, the Himalayas, and leeches' bites. Major objective of this study is to show why and how Kincaid is travelling to the Himalayas of Nepal. It questions on the research gap that why and how our travelers and early researchers fail to address the issues. The methodological implication in this study compares imperial and anti-imperial views politicized over the Himalayan aesthetics. Conceptual framework is prepared on the basis of theoretical views of Michael Foucault, Edward Said, Ahmad Aijaz, Arun Gupto and Peter Widdowson. This study meets its bordering point based on the principle of travel writing theory to conclude with counter argument.

Keywords

Gardening, Idyllic pleasure, Seeds collection, Oriental values.

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Politics on Aesthetics of the Himalayan Heritages in Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*

1. Introduction

This study undergoes to the causes and consequences of Jamaica Kincaid's travelling to the Himalayas of Nepal and writing about her experiences. Kincaid's aims and objectives in the travelling with her friends, botanists and nurseryman help to investigate upon different kinds of flowers and medicinal herbs. This article is prepared on the basis of the textual evidences and the critical reviews made by the previous researchers and the reviewers. It aims to meet the gap and add an additional information within the territory of travelling and collecting an information. The context of this study is about the flower seeds that we can find in the Himalayas of Nepal. The author of *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*, Kincaid along with Dan, Sue, and Bleddyn starts a journey to the eastern Himalayas of Nepal. She collects seeds with her friends to carry to their hometown. They collect some seeds and enjoy the natural beauty for which they travel to "Milke Danda, Jaljale Himal, Khadbari, Num, Chichila, Uwa, Topke Gola, Sampun, Chepuwa, Chymtang, Suketar, Taplejung" and so on to collect seeds to take them to their gardens in Wales [for Bleddyn and Sue], Kingston, Washington [for Dan], and North Bennington, Vermont [for the author] (*Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* 2-3). Kincaid interestingly observes the major rural tourist attraction centers of eastern Nepal. She talks about people, their activities, culture as well as the socio-economic condition and impact of the then Maoist activities. Dan, Sue and Bleddyn are busy to collect seeds but Kincaid is collecting some information from Sherpa about Maoist activities, terror created to the travelers, local people and destructions of the natural heritages.

The novel describes the three week's activities of Kincaid group and other travelers there in the territory whom they meet during the trek. She mentions her memory and experiences of travelling in this way, "the road then, sometimes as wide as a dirt driveway in Vermont, sometimes no bigger than a quarter of that, was red clay

unfolding upward; the top of each climb was the bottom of another. By midmorning, my senses were added. It took me many days to realize, to accept . . . many days to understand” (12). She writes about road, seeds, and gardening since she has left her hometown, Vermont till she returns from the trek of eastern Nepal Suketar to Kathmandu “blending the reality with her personal imagination” (Achebe 12). In the novel Kincaid focuses on mysterious feature of natural beauty of Nepal and compares it with the magical power in “cultural practices” (Appadurai 12). Her presentation seems like a colonial writer’s description of Nepal. This novel does not truly represent eastern Nepal that Jamaica Kincaid, the author and narrator, of the novel and her friends visit during their trek in 2001. Due to the influence of the Western hegemony, she misrepresents Nepal and the Nepalese suffering during the Civil War through her book *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*.

Kincaid tries to present the Nepalese society in her fiction from an Orientalist perspective which is neither true nor reliable. Walk of Maoists in the Himalayas and bargain for money with the seed collectors present isolated views at unfamiliar places that make her afraid at the same time because, “they are killing people, so we mustn’t go” (19). The line refers to the Maoist activities and the terror that they created. Even in this time of disharmony Dan, Sue and Bleddyn start their journey to the Himalayas accompanying Nepalese, Sherpas. They have to face the challenges not only in climbing the high mountains and Himalayas but also to pass the time under Maoists’s threats. She writes, “.....the head Maoist either couldn’t or wouldn’t give us permission to spend the night. There were many consultations. Finally, we had to give them four thousand rupees” (23). She highlights on the threatening of Maoists who bargain and even threaten to the people for money and sometimes they kill the people if they are dissatisfied. Kincaid writes about hard time that she had to face in Tumlingtar. The place lacks electricity, it is lagging in development, and lives of the people there is “very difficult always and it is difficult for the tourists to pass the night there” (Alchoff 54). It is hard to stay long in Tumlingtar where there is neither electricity nor the hospitality. The group decides to go to Khadbari from Tumlingtar through the route of Jaljale Himal and the Milke Danda.

They climb the mountains of 3,570 feet altitude and meet Uwa, the place where also they have to spend the night under complete

Maoist control. The problems given to the group by the leeches and the Maoists are similar to them and therefore, she compares the Nepalese Maoists with the leeches. "The Maoist's lecture lasted all through the afternoon into the setting sun they mentioned over and over again the indignity of being called mere terrorists" (53). The author, her friends, and the Sherpas like to lessen their tension so Sunam, the guide, goes to the village to bring some Chang, an alcohol made from local millet. They spent the night with innumerable difficulties. Now, it is time to fly to Kathmandu but they have to wait for a long time in the airport because of the clash between the Maoists and the Nepal army.

Jamaica Kincaid's travel text, *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*, based on her travel experience to the Himalayas of Nepal is "her quest for idyllic pleasure" (Ashcroft 73). Seeds collection in the Himalayas of Nepal brings additional support for Vermont gardening to Kincaid in her hometown. Kincaid and her team collect nearly 500 packets seeds there in the Himalayas that helps in fulfilling the dreams and desires to the team of Vermont gardening. In addition to the aesthetic pleasure, it is her arduous journey to the Eastern Himalayan landscape in the ranges of Annapurna Valley, high Himalayas of Nepal for the "quest of gardening" (Sen 13). Kincaid group's study on flowers and seeds collection is praiseworthy. It helps to grow up the flowers of different species in Nepal and export in abroad.

2. Methods and Materials

This study is prepared in comparative method on the basis of travelers' remarks, critical reviews and the textual analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*. Kincaid is observing the Himalayas of Nepal from the Westerner's eyes but this researcher is applying the different tools and techniques in a comparative way to analyze the things and events. The study method applied in this article is thus a critique on Oriental and Occidental values of the East and the West. Edward Said observes the activities and evaluates the things in an authoritative way. Said's description in the Oriental subject is vague and it does not represent the present practices of cultural liberalism connecting with European critiques and commands of such authoritative voices. Foucault's concept of power as a literary tool is applied in this study to understand the psyche nature of the West to explore the nature, culture and activities

of the non-West countries like Nepal to balance between the power and the Oriental values of cultural connectivity. Ahmad finds the weaknesses in Foucauldian discourses on power and Said's politics in the concept of Orientalism.

Kincaid's beautiful memory of traveling to the nature gifted Himalayas create emotions triggered by the beauty of the region with flora and fauna principle and its warm hospitality in the Sherpa community. Kincaid's style is most engaging and includes wonderful description, humor, and great sensitivity on political disharmony. Viewing the beauty of the forest with flora and fauna and engaging in seeds collection for gardening is politicized referring to the Maoist activities. Kincaid herself as the main character and narrator presents the Nepalese identity by using Western eyes and describes the then ongoing Maoist War of Nepal. This study analyzes the author's conflicting views in creating Nepalese identities through travelers, Sherpas and Maoists discourses. Thus, this study is prepared applying the mixed method approaches which helps to understand the Western concept prepared to think about the East.

3. Text, Context and Reviews

This study plods observing on the entire journey of Kincaid in the Himalayas of Nepal. Kincaid writes, "I was hoping for plant descriptions, but apart from a glorious description of a rhododendron forest, all the plants could not grow in Vermont garden" (Among Flowers, 21). Kincaid in this remark seems reflective on researching the plants. She is strangely unreflective about the geographical location, climate changes and cultural practices. She writes, "The lists of botanical names of plants that I don't know, or the listing of the time and temperature, didn't do much to flesh otherworldly experiences" (23). She delves in seeds collection and trekking in the Himalayas enjoying the nature as written by Frank Smythe as she writes :

I did not see Kanchenjunga, but I enjoyed all the same the novelty of seeing a way I had come going in the other direction. On my journey, there was no coming and going, I was always going somewhere and everything I saw, I saw only from one direction, which was going forward, going forward, and then I was going away. So often I read in Frank Smythe's *The Kanchenjunga Adventure*, of him going from a camp at one altitude to the other, and I came to see how comforting this back

and forth in a strange place could be. It seems to me a natural impulse to begin to think of every place in which you find yourself for longer than a day as home, and make it familiar (*Among Flowers.....*33).

Kincaid finds each mountain and plant new as she turns to the road. She observes each new turn in the weather, from cold to hot and then back again, each new set of boulders so absorbing newness, "from colonial perspectives" (Boehmer, 4). She explains each thing often clearly even in the time of difficult journey and Maoist threat questioning about food, drinks and safety issues. Kincaid asserts :

We were desperate to renew ourselves and water always offers the illusion of that renewal. And so, we walked through the stench and tried to clean ourselves. We were not clean and we felt it. We ate a supper of noodles, the exact concoction that my son, Harold, likes to eat all the times, ramen noodles, only it was made by some company in India, not Japan, the way his is. Strangely, this Maoist-controlled village was not at all frightening. Beer and cigarettes were forbidden here, and perhaps that was what reassured us. All the passions were under control. Right then, calm strangers were a blessing to me (*Among Flowers.....*54).

Kincaid politicizes the beauty of nature and seeds collecting for gardening "mixing with physical tiredness and mental suffering for water and food as they have to travel only eating some quality less noodles" (Loomba 23). Her desire and dreams of collecting seeds for Vermont gardening inform to the inevitable boundaries of walking through the forest. She exposes the political boundaries, especially when Maoists make restrictions and admonitions to the travelers.

She writes about "vertiginous slopes, isolated villages, herds of yaks, and beautiful rhododendrons in the high mountains" (Seldon and Widdowson 17). The flora and fauna in the landscape of the Himalaya attract them. Fruit bats, colorful Buddhist prayer flags and the hated leeches plague make much of the trip critical as they are new to her, and she approaches it all with an acute sense of wonder and a deft eye for detail in oriental ways. Kincaid intertwines the harrowing politics of Maoists and their encounters with exciting botanical discoveries, fascinating daily details, and lyrical musings on gardens, nature, home, and family. Kincaid and her close friend, Dan Hinckley, a distinguished botanist, make the trip amusing as

they travel together and collect the seeds. Edward Said claims that the Orient writers write against the East due to the influence of the West. In this regard he writes “.....its global authority is in fact inseparable from the authority of those in the dominant sectors of the metropolitan intelligentsia who first bestowed.....minorities” (*Orientalism* 27). Ahmad complains against Said’s Orientalism and writes, “.....is that it examines the history of Western textualities about the non-West quite isolation without paying attention to how these textualities might have received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown or reproduced by the intelligentsias of the colonized countries” (*In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* 14). Said’s description in the Oriental subject is vague and it does not represent the present practices of cultural liberalism connecting with European critiques and commands of such authoritative voices.

Unlike Said and Ahmad, Foucault believes on power that is essential to create knowledge and the knowledge which is created through power is accepted as the truth by the people. The narratives in Kincaid’s *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* analyzed from Foucauldian perspective expose knowledge and power relationship as he states, “No power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge”, that “power produces knowledge” and that “power and knowledge directly imply one another” (Foucault 27). Ahmad finds the weaknesses in Foucauldian discourses on power and Said’s politics in the concept of Orientalism. Foucault’s concept of power as a literary tool is applied in this study to understand the psyche nature of the West to explore the non-West countries like Nepal to balance between the power and the Oriental values of cultural connectivity. Kincaid’s beautiful memory of traveling to the nature gifted Himalayas create emotions triggered by the beauty of the region with flora and fauna principle and its warm hospitality in the Sherpa community. Kincaid’s style is most engaging and includes wonderful description, humor, and great sensitivity on political disharmony as, “.....the Maoist had told him that we would not be allowed to pass on through the village. The four thousand rupees were only for spending the night” (*Among Flowers.....*23). Viewing the beauty of the forest with flora and fauna and engaging in seeds collection for gardening is politicized referring to the Maoist activities. “Kincaid herself as the main character and narrator presents the Nepalese identity by using Western eyes and describes the then ongoing Maoist War of Nepal” (Mongia 43). Kincaid

highlights to the natural beauties, seeds collections and political disharmony that she observes and experiences in the Himalayas of Nepal. The reviewers make critical remarks analyzing on the author's conflicting views in creating Nepalese identities through multiple perspectives.

4. Result and Discussions

Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* is an odd book in a way; part travel narratives, part nature quest in a search for plants and seeds. It is also a part of personal crisis in capturing political identity and Maoist activities. Narratives concerned with the high Himalayas and "gardening are mesmerizing" (Barker 34). Nights in tents are memorable with the glorious sleeping around seeds packets on the one hand and painful leech's bites on the other, but so much of the writing is full of repetition, not accidental or in error but stylistic that she references to the Himalayan sites. She and her three companions are guided by sherpas and supported by a team of porters that reflects to the Oriental values.

Jamaica Kincaid gives us a lucid picture of Maoists, trekkers, and porters as straight travelogue and the idea of a garden acts as a metaphor. An intimate, meditative account of a three-week trek through the Himalayan foothills in Nepal is adversely "affectionate, realistic and dreamy, straightforward and lyrical" (Chasin 45). Kincaid perfectly captures the emotions in her writing that accompany international travel as it is reviewed in United States, US Magazine:

Kincaid's style is most engaging and includes wonderful description, humor, and great sensitivity. The focus of the trek is the collection of seeds for propagating Himalayan plant life in North America. The passion of the participants for gathering the seeds of rare species is engaging to gardeners and non-gardeners alike. All who have journeyed to this special part of the world, or intend to, will enjoy this charming book (December 10, 2012).

The goal in Kincaid's narratives is to collect seeds of the plants that will survive and thrive in a Vermont garden. The reader feels the author's "delight in seeing the flowery Himalayas that humdrum at home and abroad to capture the full enormous village" (Sharma 7). Her interest in gardening plummets after sniffs basil to understand the "author's tremendous joy" (Ashcroft 43). Such remarks expose the strengths and weakness of Kincaid's narratives.

Nepal's Himalayas, mountains, valleys and political situation in *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* ".....expose the people and places which is not exact and reliable" (Coetzee 42). Her description is based on the Orientalist perspective about which Said defines, "Orientalism is the generic term I have been employing to describe the Western approach to the Orient, Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery and practice" (73). Aijaz Ahmad in his book *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literature* charges Edward Said and claims that even the Orient writers write against the East due to the influence of the West. He asserts:

Its global authority is in fact inseparable from the authority of those in the dominant sectors of the metropolitan intelligentsia who first bestowed it the status of a modern classic; while, perhaps paradoxically, its most passionate following in the metropolitan countries is within those sectors of the university intelligentsia which either originate in the ethnic minorities or affiliate themselves ideologically with the academic sections of those minorities. Ahmad's other complain against Said's Orientalism is that it examines the history of Western textualities about the non-West quite isolation without paying attention to how these textualities might have received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown or reproduced by the intelligentsias of the colonized countries. Said's self-description as 'the Oriental subject', is something hazardous, for anyone whose own cultural apparatus is overwhelmingly European and who commands such authoritative presence in American university. (20)

Ahmad critiques on Said's weaknesses and explores the non-West perspectives. Kincaid as the writer, narrator and also a main character of the novel presents the Nepalese identity as Oriental by using "Western eyes" and describes the then ongoing Maoist War of Nepal (Brantlinger 23). In this research, it analyses the conflicting state of author's mind and its role of creating identities of Nepalese characters and effects of the "Orientalist documents" (Chasin 21). The reviews made on differences between Eastern and Western values force the readers to rethink about the nature, literature and politics.

Brilliant Scholar and a theorist of Nepal Dr. Arun Gupto in his book *Discourse on: Literature and Culture* takes Orientalism as a

falsehood representation of the dialects and presents his idea on the tendency of misrepresentation of the East. He writes, “.....European sense of superiority, but resisting and rejecting their definition of the eastern cultures from the location of superiority, as if they have some predetermined authority to do such things” (52). Gupto critiques on European superiority. He takes it as a hegemony of the power politics. Kincaid’s reflection on Oriental superiority over the land of Nepal is complex with dual meanings of the Oriental and Occidental. Fake information and misrepresentation of the Orientalists presents Western tradition and politics on geography. Dr. Gupto further writes, “What I define you is you and the real you do not exist beyond my definition: this is Orientalist perspective to dictate the other” (52). Gupto’s definition of Orientalism suggests to review on Said’s concept on Orientalist values with self-created information that defines what exactly the East is? Said and Foucault’s arguments are continuing the debates from Western perspectives.

Said exposes how the Westerners distort the Non-Western realities. In the novel *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*, Kincaid represents the Nepalese with Anglo words to show Occidental superiority. The Occident is proud of “European identity and culture rather than the non-European people and culture” (Barker 37). For Said, “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European people and cultures” (7). Jamaica Kincaid presents a relationship between Occidental and Oriental values mismatching the Eastern values with Western hegemonies. Said critiques the non-West people as powerless, dominating, and inferior as, “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (5). Kincaid presents “Nepalese as poor people working for money with an example of a porter carrying her luggage from the baggage area to the taxi station in 40 dollars” (Mudumbe 32). She is proud to be a citizen of an economically rich country and boasts as if she provides a grant to the Nepalese as a whole.

She states her Orientalist attitude in the novel from multiple perspectives. Kincaid expresses her manifest Orientalism that refers to state views about the Orient and the Orientals as Edward Said defines it as, “.....and the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literature, history, sociology, and so forth which I shall call manifest Orientalism” (204). She exposes the relation of the Occident

and the Orient through Sunam Sherpa who engaged with the head Maoist. The head Maoist's command is taken here as an authoritative voice. She mentions that the people belonging to Uwa, the village under complete Maoist control are involved in the cultivation of marijuana. She memorizes the activities of the people belonging to the village and describes them, ".....we saw much marijuana growing wild, we saw people smoking the marijuana." (72). She dominates the Nepalese presenting them as drunkards, producers, workers, laborers working for dollars, and consumers of hashish.

5. Conclusion

Kincaid compares Vermont gardening of the West with an aesthetic pleasure to the Eastern Himalayan forests of Nepal and seeds plantation. She takes the Nepali flowers as the beauties of Eden Garden, though she has not seen the Eden Garden in reality and so *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* is a mythical reality to her. She asserts the Maoists activities and leech's bites to be viruses in gardening. She also talks about Sherpa hospitalities referring to the Oriental values and explores the Occidental values as Maoists capture the villages. Her interest of exploring the high Himalayas and forests with flowers of Nepal and creating a discourse about Nepal is the reconstructing of the Orient. Considering the activities of the Orientalists in the Oriental land, Said argues it as reconstruct of Orientalist values, in the precisely actual in which the modern Oriental values are questionable mismatching the narratives of the East and the West. Geographical space of the Vermont is explained as Oriental and penetrates over the high hill's perceptions of the East.

Kincaid describes the natural beauty of Nepal which is representative of Eden Garden because it is insufficient to reflect the reality and what she presents is also based on her own preconception rather than analyzing the reality of the country and its physical environment. In her interpretations about Nepal and Nepalese Himalayas, it looks like an emotional description of the places of Eastern Nepal and the religious beauties of the capital city, Kathmandu respectively. Kincaid finds the pitiable condition of the school located in Tumlingtar which is shown to her by a school teacher in Oriental way. She remembers the school where she sent her children to observe and study while staying in Tumlingtar in tent as she describes about school building of the village. She finds Nepal and Vermont, her home town, very distinct place and she compares

these places from aesthetic perspectives. She takes Kathmandu as a city in crowd of aimless people. She observes the night activities in Thamel that reminds Occidental values. Therefore, Kincaid's *Among Flowers : A Walk in the Himalaya* is about nature, aesthetics, literature and politics of the Himalayan Heritages.

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