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**A STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN JANICE PARIAT'S
NOVEL *EVERYTHING THE LIGHT TOUCHES***

Mr. Arfat I. Saiyad

Research Scholar,

Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University,

Junagadh

Email: arfatqadri92@gmail.com

Prof. (Dr.) Firoz A. Shaikh

Professor and Head,

Department of English,

Bhakta Kavi Narsinh Mehta University, Junagadh

Email: firozjunagadh@bknmu.edu.in



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Abstract:

During contemporary era in Indian English Literature the focus of the research study is mainly related to the recent social issues. For Indian society environment related issues are very important. Janice Pariat's novel *Everything the Light Touches*, released in 2022, is a modern piece of Indian English Literature that explores different environmental concerns prevalent in Indian society. The research scholar has chosen this novel as the subject of his study, and has analysed how the author portrays the story of the present and the past through the lens of environmental concerns. The novel depicts the consequences of forest fires, air pollution, loss of biodiversity, save flora and uranium mining on different regions of India. The research scholar has analysed the novel's depiction of these issues and how they relate to the specific geographical and historical contexts of India.

Key Words: Contemporary literature, Novel, Environment related issues, Forest fires, Air pollution, Save flora, and Uranium mining.

• Objectives:

1. To study environmental issues in *Everything the Light Touches*.
2. To make people aware about recent environment related issues.

• Introduction:

English literature is a vast and rich field of study that can help us gain insights into the world and its society. Through literary works, we can explore the past, the present and even the future of different cultures and contexts. Literature encompasses various genres, such as poetry, drama, novels and others, that convey knowledge and perspectives from different authors and eras. Novels are a specific genre of literature that emerged in the sixteenth century. They consist of written narratives that can be based on real or fictional events and characters. Many novels reflect on the social issues and challenges of the society in which they were written. The authors use various ideas and settings to create engaging and meaningful stories. One of the major issues that affects human society in the modern era is environmental degradation. Problems such as global warming, natural disasters, pollution and others pose serious threats to our planet and our well-being.



One of the emerging trends in Indian English literature is the exploration of environmental themes and issues by contemporary authors such as Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy Amitav Ghosh, Shubhangi Swarup and others. These writers have depicted the complex and often contradictory relationship between humans and nature in their works, highlighting the ecological challenges and crises facing India and the world. Janice Pariat is a contemporary Indian English author who belongs to this category of eco-conscious writers. She was born in Assam and grew up in Shillong, a place rich in natural beauty and diversity. Her novel *Everything the Light Touches*, published in 2022, is a remarkable example of her environmental sensibility and creativity. The novel tells the story of a young woman who embarks on a journey across India to discover her roots and identity, while also witnessing the impact of climate change, pollution, deforestation and urbanization on the land and its people. The novel is a valuable source of study for research scholars who are interested in analysing the representation of environmental issues in Indian English literature.

- **Shai, Evelyn, Johann and Carl:**

The content of the novel *Everything the Light Touches* is about Shai, Evelyn, Johann and Carl. The story of the novel begins with Shai. In it, a young girl named Shai left her job in Delhi and returned to Shillong at her parents' house. There she reconnected with her old friends. She was reminiscing her childhood caretaker Oin. Oin was not in Shillong but she was living in her village Mawmalang that was far from Shillong. Shai wanted to meet Oin. She went for Mawmalang to meet Oin. She reached there and stayed there with Oin's family for long time. The first part of the novel ends here when Shai was living with Oin's family.

The title of the second part of the novel is Evelyn. In this part the story begins in colonial era. A young English girl named Evelyn who travelled by ship from England to India. She completed her study in Botany. After finishing her study, she was travelling to India with her aunty and cousin. She has interested in Goethe's ideology related to plants and trees. She has visited gardens, famous plants and eldest tree in India. At the end of this part of the novel she was going to Assam with Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler.

Third part of the novel begins with the late 18th century. The story of a traveller Goethe disguised as Johann Philipp Moller. He was travelling Rome from Italy. Title of this part of the novel is Johann. The traveller Johann has visited many villages of Italy and Rome. He has stayed in Venice for some months. He



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was a writer and true nature lover. He has interested to discover new plants and try to understand trees and their natural environment. Goethe (Johann) has left Rome at the end of this part.

The next part of the novel is titled as Carl. In this part, Janice has collected famous poems written by Goethe related to his travelling journey of Italy and Rome.

From the next part of the novel, the stories are reversed. The novel begins with the story of Shai, then the story of Evelyn, and then the story of Johann. From present to colonial past then to 18th century story of Johann. Carl is the central part of the novel. After Carl the next part is again the story of Johann, then the story of Evelyn, and at last the story of Shai. As this the whole round is completed.

The fifth part of the novel is the story of Johann. Here Goethe's story of Rome once again. He has come back to Rome and continued his experiments of plants and trees. He has enjoyed with older and new friends in Rome. Because of political reasons at the end of this part, he finally left Rome.

The next part of the novel is again the continuing the story of Evelyn. In the end of the second part, we knew that Evelyn was going to Assam. The story of this part begins with Evelyn having reached Assam. They have reached Shillong and adored nature in Shillong. From Shillong, they have travelled towards Cherrapunjee. In Cherrapunjee, Evelyn was trying to search for a mysterious plant Diengiei. She was searching for this plant after reaching India. She went to see the plant with Deng's two cousins in the jungle. At the end of this part of the novel, they have reached at the plant.

Final part of the novel: the continuation of the present story of Shai. Shai has an encounter with his friend Dajied in Mawmalang. Dajied has come here for a project related to environment and construction with his friend. In Mawmalang, they have inquired about the construction projects and environmental issues. At the end of the novel, Shai and Dajied have united and wanted to start a new life together.

The novel's story is like a circle. It begins with the story of Shai and ends with the story of Shai. In this circular story line, the research scholar wants to study issues pertaining to the environment.

- **Issues Pertaining to Environment in the novel:**

Janice Pariat has portrayed nature and natural elements often in the novel *Everything the Light Touches*. The story of the novel is threaded with present and past combination. This combination is connected with botany



and natural elements. Some of these issues are related to the present environment. The issues pertaining to the environment are:

○ **Forest Fire:**

In the first part of the novel, Shai has decided to return her home town Shillong. In the airport she has noticed news:

“Across from me, on a silent news screen, a fire rages through the forests of, I think, South America. The president of somewhere insists it’s not. “The media is lying,” read the subtitles under his pink, belligerent face. He’s saying something about how it’s a fallacy that the Amazon is the heritage of humankind.” (Pariat 5)

Forest fire is a major environmental issue for the world. In the beginning of the novel, the author indicated to us the forest fire. Because of various environmental elements like global warming, increasing carbon dioxide, damage to the ozone layer etc. are major reason for increasing fire in the forests of the world.

○ **Air Pollution in Delhi:**

Shai was talking to her mother on the mobile phone at the airport while waiting for her flight to Shillong. They were talking about Shai’s unusual trip to Shillong.

“Of course not. I’m only asking because you usually come around Christmas.”

This is true. I shrug. “It’s the air, Mei. Four seventy-seven AQI and counting.” About this, I’m not lying. Delhi hovers a very close second to Bishkek in the World Air Quality Index list. Bishkek-this, too, I have googled- is the capital of Kyrgyzstan.” (Pariat 6)

Air pollution is increasing with the passing of time because of other environmental issues as well. Here in the novel, Shai has given the reason to her mother that because of air pollution in Delhi, she was coming to Shillong. This indicates the present situation of Delhi’s air. Frequently we are hearing about the worst AQI in Delhi for some years, mostly from December to March. The author leads to the air pollution in our country with this situation of Shai’s life.



○ Save Flora:

In Shillong, close to Shai's residence, lies a pine forest that stretches across the hills at the colony's edge. Despite being designated as a protected area to avoid any housing or commercial encroachment, Shai's father told Shai:

Instead, he tells me, someone has decided to build a wall.

“What exactly it would be keeping out or in, I'm not sure,” he adds, “but it means cutting down trees to make way for it.”

“How many?”

“At least a dozen.”

The way my father says it, one would think the Amazon's burning. (Pariat 12)

Shai's father's action to save these pine trees was successfully accomplished. As Shai says:

“Already we've had some happy news – the local TV station would like to interview Papa, and all is abuzz. Kong Nuramon has been quick to capitalize on the publicity- she's started a petition for colony members to sign, and who wouldn't want in at this point, including those initially indifferent to the plight of the pines. This will be moved to Bah Kyn's contact at the Forest Department, which now, Papa says, cannot afford to “look bad.” The trees might be saved after all. (Pariat 28)

○ Diengiei plant and Nongiaid tribe:

Evelyn (Evie), an Edwardian scholar studied from Cambridge, finds inspiration in Goethe's botanical writings and sets off on an expedition in search of a scarce plant named Diengiei. Her journey to India in quest of the plant, under the guise of husband hunting, holds the enthralling tale of the mysterious flower Nongiaid and the reclusive tribe, Diengiei. The Diengiei plant derives its name from the tribe residing in the densely wooded mountains situated beyond Shillong in India. She went into the jungle with Deng and her two cousins Phyrnai and Iada. Phyrnai and Iada were aware of the exact location of the Diengiei plant in the jungle. After walking for several days, they finally arrived at the location where the Diengiei plant grew.



However, they were not alone. Some other people had followed them and reached the same spot. A fierce battle erupted over the possession of the plant Diengiei. The two siblings decided to stay away from the conflict.

“I am sorry about the Diengiei...”

The siblings’ glance at each other.

“That was not the Diengiei.”

Evie looks up in disbelief. “What do you mean?” she manages to stutter.

Phyrnai sits beside her. “There are a few things we need to explain...” (Pariat 398)

The following day, the siblings told her about the truth of the plant Diengiei. They say:

“We cannot say no to anyone who wishes to see the Diengiei. The Nongiaid are its keepers, but we are ... we are also bound by this agreement...”

“But Why?”

Phyrnai hesitates. “Because it does not belong to us. It does not belong to anyone. We are only its caretakers.”

Evie blinks. “So, you must agree to everyone who asks?”

“There are not many... But still, because we cannot say no, our people have made up some... tests. If anyone asks us to take them to the Diengiei, we say first we will not, to see how they react... If they insist, we show them something like what we showed you, a beautiful orchid.” (Pariat 401)

Phyrnai explained their test to Shai. It involved taking a person to a beautiful orchid and telling him that it is the Diengiei plant. If the person tries to take or destroy it, He failed the test. If the person didn’t harm or take the orchid plant, then he would be able to see the true Diengiei plant. But before that, he must join Nongiaid tribe, and then he would be taken to the true Diengiei tree. This is the story of Diengiei tree and the Nongiaid tribe in the novel. Janice portrayed Nongiaid tribe as the protector of Diengiei plant, which has



mythical history as well.

○ Uranium Mining:

Uranium mining is also a majorly important environmental issue in the novel *Everything the Light Touches*. In the novel, when Shai was in Mawmalang village.

Of course. I kick myself. I'm in uranium country.

It had died down by now, as far as I knew, the "uranium issue"- although my knowledge on the subject, I'm ashamed to say, is patchy at best. There had been a tussle for years, between the central government, I think, and NGOs and environmentalists in Meghalaya, as well as the people living here. To mine or not to mine. (Pariat 51)

Explorations began there all the way back in the 1950s, and uranium was discovered in 1984. For years, they dug into these hills, taking samples, making minute calculations. One day, there were some visitors in Mawmalang, When Shai was in the village. A dozen young men from Khasi Students' Union (KSU) visited Mawmalang for the Uranium mining issue. In the meeting, they were discussing about the past and present situation related to Uranium mining and other things. One of the members from KSU told the villagers that there was a proposal for highway to be built between Shillong and Wakhaji, and a road down to Mawmalang. He added that the proposal was from the Uranium Corporation of India (UCIL). They couldn't allow UCIL, the organization that's looking to extract the uranium, to build the road that will be used to transport it away. When KSU left, then the conflict was created among villagers. Some people believed that the construction of the road is necessary for the village because it hasn't had proper road for any kind, even for the ill person of the village also. The facility of school, hospital and bus station is far away from Mawmalang village, they could reach there by walking only. If proper highway is prepared, so anyone can access these facilities of school, hospital etc. easily. Some villagers are against this project because of the project proposed by UCIL. They are believing that Uranium mining is continued again. Some of the Neighbouring villages are favouring this project.

Dajied and Shai have visited a village called Domiasiat. They met an old woman named Kong Spelity. Her husband has passed away, and so has her son, at fifty-four, of throat cancer. Suddenly, so fast.



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“Since they started digging,” she says, “we’ve lost many members of our clan, to mysterious illness, and even now we suffer. There are some who can tell you of skin diseases, epilepsy, and ulcers, and other illnesses that have no name. Many women are barren, unable to conceive.” (Pariat 455)

Here Kong Spelity was suggesting the illness was caused by the Uranium digging. Because of Uranium mining, her village suffered a lot. The villagers were dying at very young age from cancers and other mysterious diseases. Uranium mining is major environmental issue presented in the novel *Everything the Light Touches*.

- **Conclusion:**

Set in the scenic landscape of Meghalaya, India, the book draws inspiration from the author’s own love for the natural world. Written during the lockdown, the author’s contemplation on humanity’s role in the pandemic sparked her exploration of our relationship with the environment. The novel delves into the contrasting perspectives of viewing nature, whether to tame it or marvel at its wonder, arriving at a time of pressing importance with climate change and the quest for survival at the forefront. The research scholar has effectively identified the environmental concerns depicted in the novel *Everything the Light Touches*. Through the portrayal of these issues, the author endeavours to raise awareness among readers about the current environmental challenges in India. The novel serves as a platform to sensitize people to the contemporary environmental issues affecting the country.



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