

Ramanujan's "A River" Epitomizes "inter-being" for Sustainability in the Present Global Ecological Scenario

Dr. Jolly K. V., Asst. Professor, Kerala

Abstract: A. K. Ramanujan, one of the most sophisticated writers of Indian English Poetry incorporates diverse cultural elements in his literary creations. Depicting Indian sensibilities, Ramanujan urges readers to treasure and strengthen the oriental culture and value system. Even if not acclaimed as a great eco-poet, he successfully portrays aesthetic elements of Nature which motivates one towards "ecological conversion." In the present era of skyrocketing pace of development, ecological crisis becomes the most challenging issue in spite of all Earth summits and conferences. Environmental hazards like drought and deluge provoke human psyche compelling to take up sustainability in thought and action. Key tenets of ecocriticism, especially the notion of "inter-being" are explicitly portrayed in the poem "A River."

Key words: A.K.Ramanujan, ecocriticism, A River, inter-being.

Introduction

We live in an era of environmental threats and catastrophes which prompts us to reorient our attitude and approach towards nature and natural resources. Among the global ecological issues, climate change, environment degradation, rain forest devastation, and water scarcity invite our somber intervention. Ecocriticism, the study of the relationship between literature and the environment becomes decisive in this regard. "The coming together of the cognitive and sensuous models in understanding life spaces is one of the great contributions of ecocritical methodology," says Swarnalatha Rangarajan, the famous professor critic in IIT Madras. Quite contrary to the Romantic literature where passionate celebration of Nature alone occurs, ecocritics explore ecological issues which the literary work represents. A.K. Ramanujan, the renowned Indian poet urges his contemporary as well as the post modern poets to be spokespersons of environmental crisis, rather than being meager copy writers of their predecessors.

"Inter-being" for Sustainability

Attippatt Krishnaswami Ramanujan was born in Mysore in 1929 and was educated at D. Bhanumaiah's High School and Maharaja's College, Mysore. Since 1962 he has been at the University of Chicago as Professor of Dravidian Studies and Linguistics till his demise in 1993. His momentous works include *Fifteen Tamil Poems* (1965), *The Striders* (1966), *The Interior Landscape* (1967), *No Lotus in the Navel* (1969) *Selected Poems* (1976) and *Second Sight* (1986). Ramanujan is one of the few Indian English poets who leave an indelible impression on readers through miscellaneous themes such as love, life, family, relations, ecology, and culture. Moreover, Ramanujan stoutly criticizes the lethargic attitude of society towards the environment which faces drastic threats due to myopic developmental projects.

Ecocriticism is an umbrella term under which many approaches fall thus making it difficult to define. To put it simply, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the external environment. Ecocriticism, the theoretical approach and its practical implications incorporating green literature, ecological philosophy, ecospirituality, deep ecology, and environmentalism are tremendously laudable and pertinent today. These heterogeneous components lay emphasis on safeguarding the environment, retaining it greener and healthier. Ernst Heinrich Haeckel, (1834-1919) a German biologist and philosopher used the term ecology for the first time in 1876. The word eco has its origin from Greek *oikos* which means household or earth and *logos* with the meaning logical discourse. Thus the term ecology gets the meaning of the logical study of Earth. The Oxford English Dictionary cites the German *oecologic* as the first appearance of a branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living

The term ecocriticism was first coined by William Rueckert in his 1978 essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." He observes:

Specifically, I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world, we live in of anything that I have studied in recent years.... I could say that I am going to try to discover something about the ecology of literature, or try to develop an ecological poetics applying ecological concepts to the reading, teaching, and writing about literature. (107)

Rueckert encourages his fellowmen to become "responsible planet stewards," (114) where care, protection, and empathy are firmly affiliated terms. Cheryl Glotfelty, the reputed founder of ecocriticism in the United States remarks:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (Introduction xviii)

Most of the ecocritical works share a common motivation based on the troubling awareness that human society has reached at an era of environmental limits. What makes this theory unique is that ecocriticism expands the notion of the world to include the entire ecosphere. Glotfelty's strong viewpoint on the fundamental premise of ecological criticism is that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.

Ramanujan in "A River" attempts to exhibit the transformation of the erstwhile meaning prototypes with changing times. The river was once immaculate and a source of life and energy but has today become impure and destructive, stimulating complete havoc and annihilation. The poets who once found a source of inspiration in the river's serenity and harmony encounter now its ugliness and brutality. The river wipes away lives and livelihood or alternatively, it dries up leaving the flora and fauna grappling for life and sustenance on the parched land. Ramanujan speaks of river *Vaikai* Madurai, the hub of Tamil culture and civilization. He salutes the affluent and bountiful soil of Madurai, the sweet land as the name implies, and pays his tribute to the sacred and religious territory. He begins the poem referring to the poets who eulogize the land: "In Madurai / city of temples and poets / who sang of cities and temples" (p.98).

Rivers are affluent with indigenous fish resources and biodiversity. The inland fishers and rural community depends them for their livelihood and food security. But unfortunately, due to sand quarrying, bank erosion occurs far and wide and ground water level falls considerably down. Moreover, rivers are highly polluted due to the inflow of untreated domestic and industrial waste. Modern building construction strategies demand land filling which blocks unhindered existence of canals and lakes. Ramanujan changes the topic to the harsh realities of the village, especially under extreme climate conditions, and their effect upon the people's life. During the summer, the "river dries to a trickle / in the sand / baring the sand-ribs / straw and women's hair" (p.98). Signs of "patch of repair" on the bridge indicate people's interest in material transactions, merchandise, and profit. In Indian mythology, rivers have always performed the function of purification by washing away the contaminated and the filthy. But now they have renounced their role of cleansing and absolute purity consequently resulting in pollution and defilement. This wretched condition of the river with "stones glistening like sleepy crocodiles" has not become a crucial issue for his fellow poets. Ramanujan condemns this: "The poets sang only of the floods" (p.98).

Ramanujan accuses the poets who do not see or pretend that they do not perceive the predicament of ecological hazards. Poets and artists should be visionaries who retain an intuitive wisdom and insight to rectify social discrepancies. Besides enjoying the dazzling vista of the river, they should have foresight into the rapid decline in water levels and should raise voice for the preservation of water bodies. River *Vaigai* has subdued due to human over indulgence such as illegal sand mining, river bed encroachment, dam construction, and water source depletion. It means is

According to Parthasarathy, the poem ironically contrasts "the relative attitude of the old and new Tamil poets, both of whom are exposed for their callousness to suffering, when it is so obvious, as a result of the flood" (95). People's curiosity on "the inches rising / of the precise number of cobbled steps / run over by the water, rising / on the bathing places" (p.98) is absolutely shallow and superficial. The poets neither become advocates of river rejuvenation nor warriors for water conservation, but are "poetic" at the beauty of water. While flood and drought are frightening realities for ordinary folk, they are trivial themes for the poets.

The second stanza of the poem introduces an observer who "was there for a day / when they had the floods" (p.98) and may be an assistant to the poet. People talk of "the inches rising / of the precise number of cobbled steps / run over by the water" which shows their anxious curiosity on the aftermath of downpour. All on a sudden the situation changes to one of alarm as people recall how a water rises on the bathing places.

And the way it carried off three village houses,

One pregnant woman

And a couple of cows

Named Gopi and Brinda, as usual. (p.98)

According to Sumana, "The poet narrates the poem through the mouth of a visitor to make it effective. The greatness of the poem lies in the fact that the traditional praise for the river has been contrasted with what is actually experienced by the people in the floods" (qtd. in Hema. S et al. 286). Ramanujan visualizes the dreadful effects of deluge and uses the poem as a mighty weapon to fight the environmental causes. The reference "in the first half-hour" throws light into the dilemma caused by the flood. While the "water covenant is broken," as Sara Joseph reminds, the entire village gets wiped away instantly. Nature and her resources stay beneficial to the extent that human beings remain as care takers; unless and otherwise they become furious and revengeful. The water currents lift off village dwellings, animals, life and livelihood ruthlessly. The poem draws our attention to the contribution of the river that it takes away "one pregnant woman / expecting identical twins" (p.99).

The poet harshly criticizes the apathetic and lethargic disposition of his fellow poets. His anguish remark, "The poets sang only of the floods" (p.98) underlines their obligation to go deeper into the ecological issues and their consequences so that the readers can be made aware regarding the profundity of the issue. It is quite heartrending to Ramanujan that "the new poets still quoted / the old poets, but no one spoke / in verse" about the dreadful impact of water current upon the landscape. Eco-poets play a significant role in "consciousness raising" and thereby facilitating ecological balance. They muse on the "interdependent nature," the notion of "inter-being," and the need for sustainability." Ramanujan implicitly speaks on these pertinent topics and invites the poets, critics, and readers to be more eco-centric and sustainable.

Conclusion

There occur numerous natural calamities where scientific and technological advancements remain helpless. But environmental hazards such as hurricanes, flood, and drought are undeniably man-made and their consequences are far-reaching in human life. It is quite contrary that the victims are the marginalized and subaltern sectors who never taste the benefits of progress. The infrastructural development favoring the rich and powerful and traumatizing the less privileged, especially the voiceless ecosystem should be prone to further criticism. The utilitarian perspective that considers environment as instrumental should be challenged. A drastic change in perception that acknowledges the principle of "inter-being" should be the norm of development. Qualitative developmental measures which considers the requirements of the needy and oppressed fellow beings-and of course, that of the environment should be prioritized.

Works Cited

- Gauri Shankar Jha. *Indian English Poetry-Recent Explanations*. Authors Press 2008.
- Chaffelty, Cheryl. "Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis." Introduction.
- The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996. pp. xv-xxxvii.

- Hema S., et al. "Rivers in Deluge: Degradation and Ecological Restoration in the Poems of A.K. Ramanujan and Keki N. Daruwalla" *IJELS*. Vol.6, Issue 3 May-June, 2021 pp. 284-87.
- Joseph, Sara. *Gift in Green*. Trans. Valsan Thampu. Harper Perennial, 2011.
- Kaushik, M.K. "A.K.Ramanujan: Indian Heart, Western Mind"
- Parthasarathy, R. "A.K.Ramanujan" *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. OUP, 1976.
- Ramanujan, A.K. "A River" *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*. OUP, 1976. pp.98-99
- Rangarajan, Swarnalatha. *Ecocriticism: Big Ideas and Practical Strategies*. Orient Blackswan, 2018.
- Rueckert, William. "Literature and Ecology: an Experiment in Ecocriticism."
- The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 105-23.
- Sarang, Vilas (Ed). "A.K.Ramanujan: the Family Man Faces His Darkness." *Indian English Poetry since 1950: an Anthology*. Disha Books, 2007.

Author X

Dr. Jolly K

Assistant Profes

Department of English, Pavanatma College, Murickas

P.O.: Idukki, Dist. : Ker

Contact No: 7510291

E-mail: srjollypcm@gmail.c
