



ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS IN THE POETRY OF A. K. RAMANUJAN

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ABSTRACT

According to New Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "The word Nature denotes all the plants, animals and things that exist in the universe that are not made by people or the way that things happen in the physical world when it is not controlled by people (1016)." The proposed study is all about the physical world, its relevance and its contribution to living organism. The word 'Environment' is usually associated with nature which is, according to New Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "The environment means, "the natural world in which people, animals and plants live (511)." In this way, nature and physical environment are the same things.

INTRODUCTION

Human being is regarded as a product of nature as his body consists of air, water, fire, earth and sky, and all these things are natural objects. This is how man grows and lives in the lap of nature, hence nature is everything for him, and without nature he cannot survive even for a single minute. But man at times begins to harm nature for his small projects. He builds dams and restricts the flow of a river for agriculture and electricity. He cuts down trees for business and destroys the greenery of the mountains for his selfish ends. Even man becomes harmful for animals, birds and many other non human living organisms. Consequently, he has to face several problems like tsunami, earthquakes, global warming, ozone layer depletion, scanty rain, poor harvest etc. By and by, some scholars come to realize the natural degradation around and its effects on human beings. Many environmentalists begin to cherish the idea of 'a return to nature' because "nature never did betray / The heart that loved her" as



Wordsworth has put it. This consciousness is known as 'ecocriticism' in the field of literary theory.

Ecocriticism got currency in the later decades of the 20th century. William Rueckert is regarded as the first being to have used this term, but the consciousness towards environment is apparent in Richard Carson's book, *Silent Spring* (1962). After him, Raymond Williams' seminal book, *The Country and the City* (1973), created a landmark in the history of environmental study. William Rueckert used the term 'ecocriticism' in 1978 in his essay entitled "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism".

Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm define 'ecocriticism' in their collaborative edited book, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* thus, "it is the study of the relationship between literature and the environment"(19). Prof. Promod K. Nayar remarks about this new brand of criticism in his book *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*:

Ecocriticism is a critical mode that looks at the representation of nature and landscape in cultural texts, paying particular attention to attitudes towards 'nature' and the rhetoric employed when speaking about it. It aligns itself with ecological activism and social theory with the assumption that the rhetoric of cultural texts reflect and inform material practices towards the environment, while seeking to increase awareness about it and linking itself (and literary texts) with other ecological sciences and approaches. (242)

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan was born in Mysore on 16 March 1929 in a Srivaishnava Brahmin family. His father, Attipat Asuri Krisnaswami, was an astronomer and a distinguished Professor of Mathematics at the Mysore University, and he was known for his interest in Sanskrit, English and Tamil languages. Ramanujan's mother read novels in Tamil and Kannad and his grandmother made him listen to folk-tales. A.K. Ramanujan was well-versed a master in English, Tamil and Kannad languages. His creative works have been written in English, while Tamil and Kannad became the sources of his translation, though he also wrote some creative works in Kannad too.

A. K. Ramanujan was a versatile scholar, poet, and translator whose poetic voice tends to be vigorous and occupies a prominent place in 'new' Indian English poetry. His poetry collections are: *The Striders* (1966), *Relations* (1971), *Selected Poems* (1976), *Second Sight* (1986) and *The Black Hen* in his posthumously published *Collected Poems* (1994).

The environmental awareness is quite evident in the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan. Sometimes he deals symbolically with physical environment and pays a considerable attention to the



conservation of nature. He seems to be against the concept of anthropocentrism. In the very introduction of Ramanujan's *Collected Poems*, Vinay Dharwadker asserts, "One of the recurrent concerns in Ramanujan's poetry as a whole is the nature of the human body and its relation to the natural world" (XVII-XVIII).

'The strider' is a poem in which Ramanujan depicts a water insect and reveals his 'deep ecological sensibility'. The poem is all about the strider which lives on the surface of water. The poem 'Snakes' also refutes the idea of anthropocentrism and reflects the poet's awareness of physical environment. Here, poet's mother adores 'Snakes'. The poem ends with the Poet's longing for walking in woods as he writes, "and I can walk through the words".

In the poem 'Chess Under Trees with an ex-maharajah', the poet paints a beautiful natural picture:

*The mountain skies
were preoccupied by dynasties
of the mountain pine,
while their tattered banners
harped at the drizzling string of rain.
(C. P., 27)*

The poem 'Anxiety' depicts the four necessary elements of the human body which are fire, water, earth, air and these are all the natural objects Vinay Dharwadker is right when he writes that, "From a modern and secular environmentalist viewpoint, the human body appears to be entirely natural is contained in nature, and returns after death, or ought to return, to nature" (viii). The poet deals with this theme thus:

*Flames have only lungs, water is all eyes.
The earth has bone for muscle and
is a flock of invisible the air pigeons.
But anxiety
can find no metaphor to end it.
(C. P., 29)*

Ramanujan's poem "Christmas" resembles, probably, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", and W. B. Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli", because all these poets paint some pictures which have been inscribed on window frame or on an almirah of a museum or on a lapis lazuli. The environmental imagination of these poets is quite praiseworthy. Though Ramanujan, in this poem, draws the picture of a tree and co-relates it to his real life, his elaboration and nature-consciousness deserve specific mention. The poet writes a follows:



*For a moment, I no
longer know
leaf from parrot
or branch from root
nor, for that matter,
that tree
from you or me.*

(C. P., 33)

“A River” is a poem which describes the destruction or deluge of the river Vaikai. The poem conveys the suggestion that the harmful attitude of mankind towards natural objects is the main cause of human degradation:

*Every summer
a river drives to a trickle
in the sand
baring the sand-ribs,*

(C. P., 38)

Now, the poor condition of the river in the summer season is due to lakes, dams and the harmful depredatory attitude of man against nature. The poet, perhaps, presents this picture because he harbours the anxiety about how to conserve nature in the midst of the conservation of nature ravages and disasters. In the same breath the poet criticizes some poets of Madurai as they did not pay heed to the destruction of a pregnant woman and two cows, namely Gopi and Brinda.

'A Hindu to his Body' is a poem dealing with nature-oriented theme. The poet again makes natural objects his focal point:

*... to rise in the sap of trees
let met go with you and feel the weight
of honey-hives in my branching
and the burlap weave of weaver-birds
in my hair.*

(C. P., 40)

In the poem “The Hindoo”: he does not hurt a fly or a spider either’, the poet again refutes anthropocentric norm as an ardent supporter of non-violence. The poet does not want to kill any living organism and thereby proves himself to be a deep ‘ecologist’. He writes as follows:

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*It's time told you why
I'm so gentle, do not hurt a fly.
Why, I cannot hurt a spider
either, not ever a black window.
(C. P., 62)*

“Love poem for a wife, 2” is a poem in which the poet describes his wife through the examples of natural objects. Ramanujan writes here thus:

*chosen of all faces,
a pouting difficult child's
Changing in the chameleon
emerald
wilderness of Kerala,
(C. P., 83)*

Spirituality sometimes adds to the creation of proper environment; for example 'Yagya' purifies air. The adoration of Peepal, Banyan, Neem, Vindhya mountain, Kamad Giri (mountain) offers a spiritual-cum-religious touch in the life of a hindu. “Prayers to Lord Murugan” is a poem which contains an admirable amalgamation of spirituality and environment. Lord Murugan is as quoted in Ramanujan's *Collected Poems*, “an Ancient Dravidian god of fertility, joy, youth, beauty, war and love. He is represented as a six-faced god with twelve hands”. Murugan is Kartikeya who is the elder son of Lord Shiva. The poet adores him as a god of nature and writes thus:

*Lord of green
growing things, give us
a hand
in our fight
with the fruit fly.
Tell us,
will the red flower ever
come to the branches
of the blueprint
city ?
(C. P., 114)*

In Ecocriticism, there is a term ‘ecofeminist spirituality’ in which an ecocritic concentrates on pre-modern culture where a certain kind of respect for nature is evident. In pre-modern age



people adored natural objects, like the river Ganga in India and the river Nile in Egypt. Hence, the poem "Prayers for Lord Murugan" is quite relevant in the light of Ecocriticism.

The Poem "Elements of Composition" manifests Ramanujan's ecological prudence to a large extent. First of all, he describes the four essential elements of human body- earth, air, fire and water and these are all natural objects. The poet writes as follows:

*father's seed and mother's egg
gathering earth, air, fire mostly
water, in to a mulberry mass,
moulding calcium.*

(C. P., 121)

The poet concludes the poem with a minute observation of a small insect called caterpillar which is also a part of nature. This clearly shows the poet's 'deep ecological' sensibility.

In the poem 'Ecology' the poet manifests his serious preoccupation with nature. Here, the poet also expresses his ecological sensibility through the common metaphor of family. Ramanujan presents anti-anthropocentric outlook in this poem through his mother who does not allow to cut down 'the three Red Champak trees'. Prof. A.N. Dwivedi remarks on this poem in his book *The Poetic Art of A. K. Ramanujan* thus:

'Ecology' deals with the change of season and atmosphere and therewith the flowing of the three Red Champak trees, giving the poet's mother "her first blinding migraine of the season" and rendering the poet furious. The poet actually wants to cut down those trees, but his mother does not permit him to do so. After all, the trees were the source of supplying sweet-smelling flowers to her gods and her daughters and her daughters' daughters, but for cousins they also necessitated "a dower of migraines in season" (p.15). The 'season' referred to here is the rainy season. (110)

Ramanujan, in this way, does not allow the trees to be cut down and reveals his strong ecological concern as he writes thus:

*... but mother, flashing her temper
like her mother's twisted silver,
grand children's knickers
wet as the cold pack on her head
would not let us cut down
a flowering tree.*

(C. P., 124)

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In the poem “Connect” the poet wants to connect all his dispersed things such as family and relations. But the depiction of the mango grove is noteworthy here:

... and search.
the mango grove unfolding leaf and twig
living for the zebra-striped caterpillar
in the middle of it.
waiting for a change of season.

In this way, the poetry of A.K. Ramanujan has an explicit relationship with the physical environment, with the abnegation of the idea of anthropocentrism. Even though the family plays a crucial role in his poetry, he manifests his environmental awareness and pays considerable heed to the conservation of natural objects. Hence, his poetry can be interpreted in the light of eco-criticism.

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