

## Ramanujan's "A River" an envoy of nature

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**Abstract:** A.K.Ramanujan is well-known as a sensitive Indo-Anglian writer voicing important issues in the various forms of literature that he writes in, namely, poetry, short stories and essays. Though he lived for a major part of his life in Chicago, he is known for his excellent and special depiction of Indian sensibilities drawn from Indian life and culture. He also raises several issues through his writings for the readers to think on and uses his art as a medium to create awareness of conserving nature. 'A River' is one such poem which can be analyzed using the theory of Eco-criticism. He has used criticism in contrast to celebration of nature which is his usual style. The inter-dependent relation of man and nature and the more important issue of contamination of nature will be analyzed in this paper. The paper also highlights the art of the artist to weave so many concerns together

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### I. INTRODUCTION

It is well said that there is no life without Nature and hence joining hands for its safety and security is of utmost importance. Hence, defining what Eco-criticism means. "It is fundamentally an ethical criticism and pedagogy that investigates and helps make possible the connections among self, society, nature and text."<sup>1</sup> Of the various definitions enlisted in the books, this definition suits my purpose. Every word in this definition is unique and appropriate to what I endeavour to express. Eco-criticism can be termed as an ethical criticism, a criticism in its truest sense as it has ethics at its core. As Zala Mikeln<sup>2</sup> writes, "it makes ethical judgments about literary works". It believes that literature and morality cannot be separated. So eco criticism has morality and human good in its view when it analyses any text. Next the definition states that it is a pedagogy, which means that it is a theory of teaching, well modulated. It has scientific approach and not random speculations leading us nowhere. When we move further, eco-criticism investigates. This is a very important area as there are no pre-decided notions. It is dynamic in nature, constantly updating and growing. And the most important part is that it establishes and fosters wholesome relation between the major components of civilization. Self, individuals; society, individuals taken collectively; nature, the sustaining entity and text, on which we survive and grow. It represents our culture and sets guideline for the generations to come.

Since time immemorial human beings have vacillated between their inner self and their immediate surroundings and has finally accepted that the real meaning of their existence can be found in society. But sometimes society is unable to give meaning to issues like postmodern disillusionment, solitude and alienation. Disenchanted with this lapse, eco-critics have turned to nature as an alternative source of meaning. Actually the modern environmentalist movement emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. But it is only recently that the eco-criticism, as an independent critical theory and movement, has come up. It includes a rich array of fictional and nonfictional writings concerned with humans' changing relationship with nature.

"Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern—can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of eco-degradation that afflict planet Earth today."<sup>3</sup>

In India, the Vedic age reflects the great importance ancient people gave to nature and conservation of the various ecological elements. The inclusion of all aspects of the natural order in the mantras, puranas and ayurveda exhibits the awareness amongst those people of the importance of nature. The animal world was also not harmed, on the contrary, they were associated with gods and goddesses like the tiger with Goddess Durga, the mouse with Lord Ganesha, the peacock as the vehicle of Kartikeya and the elephant 'Airavat' with Lord Indra. This association elevated these animals to a higher level. With time, however, this harmony was adversely affected due to increasing population, avarice of mankind and loosening of moral standards. Literature could not remain away from this depletion of human values and so has pitched in through the writings of sensitive souls like Ruskin Bond, Vikram Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, A.K. Ramanujan and many more. It is the concern of every country, at all times to replenish the diminishing factors of ecology which threatens human beings the most. Survival is the basic instinct of every animal.

A.K. Ramanujan is an expatriate writer steeped in the nostalgia of his past Indian life. The problem of these post colonial writers living abroad in foreign land is how to incorporate and express the diverse cultural influences on a writer in other ways than being merely thematic. He is an example of a more polished, sophisticated and profound multiculturalism. His nostalgia for his Indian past gets conveyed to the readers through the adroit handling of images as an expressive device. The general impact of Ramanujan's poetry is centripetal. Out of his vast repertoire of writing, I have chosen the poem 'A River' as an epitome of his Indianness. The poem can also be analysed through the tenets of eco-criticism.

Considering the work of Ramanujan, we can say that his concern borders round the psyche of the individual in contrast to the world that he inhabits. He uses symbols from the world of nature to make his point to the world of humans. His collection of poems 'The Striders', short story named 'The flowering tree' based on folktale from South India and the poem like 'A River' reveal the different facets of eco-critical theories. In 'The Striders'<sup>4</sup>, a small water-bug is made the central character. Striders are better than prophets, teachers and religions. They are celebrated as preservers of aquatic life since they clear the muddy waters and give way to sedimentation. In 'The flowering tree' also, there is a myth wherein a maiden gets transformed into a tree at night after performing a ritual. The tale resonates with our present day concern with ecology and conservation. The girl urges people to water her tenderly and pluck flowers delicately without harming the tree. As she is in the flowering stage, she is extra cautious about people handling her. This is a great message for us as inhabitants of this earth to stop deforestation and pollution as it would backfire against us. But the poem 'A River' is the most vociferous revolt against man's ill-handling of nature.

Broadly, the poem is a commentary on the callousness of the 'old' and the 'new' poets to suffering. He refers to the city of Madurai on the banks of the Vaigai River and the ironical references to the natural world playing havoc with the life of the common people. The poem at once is full of irony and impassivity as the writer just comments on the condition of the people without giving a solution to the problem.

In short, the summary of the poem goes this way.

“In the poem, we get a picture of the summer season and rainy season as well. In the summer season, the river is dry and only a very small and thin stream flows. The stream is so thin that the ribs of sand made by the flowing water are clearly visible. Every summer a lot of straw and women’s hair stick to the sand on the outlets in the causeway and obstruct the free flow of water. The rusty bars under the bridge have patches of repair all over them. Some of the stones on the bed of the river are dry and some of them are wet. All are clearly visible in summer, because the river is dry. When there is flood, in the river, the people everywhere talk about the inch-by-inch rising of water and the number of stone steps submerged at the bathing place. They talk about the three village houses being washed away by the flood. They also talk about how a pregnant woman and two cows were carried away by the strong current of the river. They know that the names of the two cows were Gopi and Brinda. But no one knew the home of the woman who was crying and carried off. This means that everyone was indifferent to the suffering of this woman. Even the poets did not mention her name in their poems. They wrote about the flood”<sup>5</sup> ([www.preservearticles.com](http://www.preservearticles.com))

Apparently, it is an irony on the one hand on the old and the new poets. And, on the other hand, it is a commentary on the condition of cities and villages where hygiene, government system unable to tackle natural calamity and the recurrent theme of suffering and apathy.

“The world of literature throngs with works dealing with beauty and power of nature. However, the concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses on humanity has only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Eco-criticism.”<sup>6</sup> (Kumari Shikha, Eco criticism in Indian fiction)

## **II. CONCLUSION**

The poem operates on different levels. It is a debate over the contribution of the old and the new poets to our literature. It is the condition of majority of urban and rural places in India. It is the failure of government in times of crisis such as floods and droughts, relegating us to the line of developing countries. It is a comment on the poverty and low status of women who are not recognised as humans. At least the cows are known by their names as they are useful to man. But the woman who was pregnant with perhaps twins in her womb has no identity. The gender discrimination also is a form of corruption of human values.

Ramanujan is most affected by the socio-economic condition of his India. So this poem is not a cold-hearted ironical comment. A remarkable cultural conflict is depicted in the poem which is simultaneously a study in contrast as well as the poet’s manifesto defining genuine poetry and its legitimate function. He complains against the new poets who are apathetic to suffering which is so obvious, unavoidable and inherent in the human situation.<sup>7</sup> The poem shows concern for ecology and the threat that the continuous misuse of our environment poses for humanity. People in India lack the awareness of cleanliness and their duty towards conserving the natural resources. Straw and women’s hair clog the watergates of the river. The bridge also needs

to be reconstructed. Its bars are rusty, the result of long use without maintenance. Government negligence and common people's apathy reduces the bridge to a mere caricature of its real grandeur. The 'sleepy crocodiles' and 'water-buffaloes lounging in the sun' are images that convey the lazy, indolent attitude of the people. This basic inertia that stops people from acting is the target of Ramanujan. If that is changed nature can and will be saved from monstrous hands.

To pull out people from this inactive stage and open their eyes, Ramanujan has made use of wonderful images. He talks of a pregnant woman with perhaps twins in her womb, with no moles on their bodies, with different-coloured diapers to tell them apart. Such minute details are deliberately used by him to help conjure up an image of a woman and the beautiful life that throbbed in her. If this cannot open our eyes then nothing can! We can take the concept of procreation as synonymous to creation of nature and the nurturing attitude required for trees and animals to thrive. The process of creation has aboriginal value dating back to the birth of the first living being. The woman here symbolises our mother earth and the twins in her womb can be equated to natural resources and life that inhabits this earth. She is shown drowned in the flood due to the negligence of people. If we are able to save her we would be successful in saving nature thereby benefitting in the process. The representation shown in Ramanujan's poem reveals his sensitive nature and his zeal in making his beloved India a better place to live in.

To conclude, we can say that the ecological concerns depicted in A.K. Ramanujan's poem 'A River' can be a documentary on the present day crisis we face. The tenets of Eco-criticism can be applied to this poem and it can be treated as a plea for conserving nature.

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