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Ecoconsciousness in A. K. Ramanujan's Poetry

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Abstract:

The present study is an attempt to examine A. K. Ramanujan's ecoconsciousness reflected in his poetry. Ramanujan, who believes in man's communion with nature, explores the warmth of relationship between the traditional rural family and the natural resources around. The environment plays a significant role in Ramanujan's poetry. "The memories of places, people and incidents in India occupy a significant space in the mind" of Ramanujan (Chindhade 2001: 81). "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing" and "Ecology" are the classical examples of the mingling of Ramanujan's concerns for both the human and the non-human world. He hints at the subtle connection between deforestation and dehumanization, desertification and the decline of human civilization. For Ramanujan, the origin of human sorrow is unmistakably linked with the destruction of habitats, loss of biodiversity and depletion of natural resources. In "Ecology", his mother's reverential attitude to the flowering red champak trees in the yard of his house urges him to be more ecocentric and less anthropocentric. In his "Looking for a Cousin on a Swing", Ramanujan's feelings of disinheritance and unrelatedness have their origin in his dissociation with the innocent rural habitat which he enjoyed with his cousin in a leafy tree during his childhood. Ramanujan bewails water pollution and degradation of humanity in the context of water flow in the river Vaikai ("River"). He also expresses concern over harmful and cruel treatment given to innocent birds and animals in Calcutta, Madurai, Madras, Delhi and Mysore zoos ("Zoo Gardens Revisited" and "In a Zoo"). The paper is a modest attempt to explore ecoconsciousness in Ramanujan's poetry.

Key words: Ecoconsciousness, Deforestation, Dehumanization, Desertification, Habitat, Pollution

Cheryll Burgess Glotfelty, the first American Professor of Literature and the Environment, defined Ecocriticism as 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment'. According to her, the fundamental premise of ecological criticism is: "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (Glotfelty 1996: xix). The subject of Ecocriticism is therefore the relationships between human culture and the physical world. Andrew Stables identifies five different ecocritical approaches to texts of which "the study of texts specifically concerned with the environment" (Stables, 2003) is applied here to examine A. K. Ramanujan's poetry. The present paper is an attempt to study Ramanujan's ecoconsciousness reflected in his poetry in terms of Stable's ecocritical approach.

Traditionally, Indian culture used to see a divine presence in every spring, every stream, every hill, every tree, every crop, etc. But with the advent of western culture, the earth's natural resources started to be regarded as exploitable commodities. Christianity and western culture deny any inherent value, of a being, a spirit, a presence, or sacredness to nature. Indians, by following the western model of development, made nature vulnerable to human exploitation.

A sensitive poet like A. K. Ramanujan, who believes in man's communion with nature, explores the warmth of relationship between the traditional rural family and the natural resources around. For example

A basketful of ritual cobras
comes into the tame little house,
their brown-wheat glisten ringed with ripples.
They lick the room with their bodies, curves
uncurling, ...on my floor. ('Snake', 4)

and

I smell upon this twisted
blackbone tree the silk and white
petals of my mother's youth
(*'Of Mothers, among other things', 61*)



After observing the miserable condition of the environment in India in general and many rivers like Viakai in Madurai in particular, Ramanujan bewails:

every summer
a river dries to trickle
in the sand
baring the sand ribs (‘A River’, 38)

The flood caused by the environmental hazards and environmental changes affected cattle and people.

...it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows (Ibid, 38)

“Ecology” is a classic example of the mingling of Ramanujan’s concerns for both the human and the non-human world. The poet observes three Champak trees “burst into flower and given mother/her first blinding migraine of the season” (124).

with their street-long heavy-hung
yellow pollen fog of a fragrance (‘Ecology’, 124)

His mother’s reverential attitude to the flowering red champak trees in the yard of his house urges Ramanujan to be more ecocentric and less anthropocentric.

but Mother, flashing her temper

would not let us cut down
a flowering tree (Ibid, 124)

She further says that the tree is shelter for birds and gives “her gods and her daughters/and daughter’s daughters basketfuls/of annual flower.” (Ibid, 124)

In the poem ‘In the Zoo’, Ramanujan highlights the relationship between the human and non-human world by comparing the actions of the scavenger birds with the role of human beings:

faded black
Like Madras lawyers, a grey
a dirty white
like grandmother’s maggoty curds.
The birds
flap themselves into air
like father into the rain (‘In the Zoo’, 128)

The origin of human sorrow, for Ramanujan, is unmistakably linked with the destruction of habitats, loss of biodiversity and depletion of natural resources.

outside our town hyenas
and civet cats live

too weak to finish what’s begun.
(‘Prayers To Lord Murugan’, 113)

In the poem ‘Zoo Gardens Revisited’, the condition of the animals kept in Delhi and Mysore zoos hurts the sensitive mind of the poet. Therefore, the poet prays to Murugan god for the safety of these animals:

save them in the zoo garden ark of your belly
(‘Zoo Gardens Revisited’, 153)

The poet expresses concern over harmful and cruel treatment given to innocent birds and animals in the zoos of Calcutta, Madurai, Madras, Delhi and Mysore. The poet is shocked to find cruelties being inflicted on such innocent birds and animals like flamingoes, monkeys, orangutans,



giraffes, ostriches, tigers, tigresses and chimps. Dwivedi rightly points out in this regard “animals deserve a more careful attention than humans” (Dwivedi 1995: 54).

In the poem ‘A River’, the poet shows the decay of the river by describing bare stones in it as “dry ones” and “lounging in the sun” (CP:38). Along with the degradation of land, the rivers have been exposed to hazardous pollution: “straws and women’s hair/clogging the watergates” (CP: 38). Thus, Ramanujan establishes the connection between human suffering and the destruction of trees and natural habitats and resources in his poetry.

In Ramanujan, the decision of the cutting of the red champak trees “almost as old as her, seeded” (CP: 124) has been associated with the loss of older sacred ecological values. His mother’s conserving attitude continues to exist in the mind of the poet:

we climbed a tree...
not very tall, but full of leaves
.....
And we were innocent about it.

(‘Looking for a Cousin on a Swing’, 19)

There is no wonder then that this eco-conscious poet found it difficult to cope with the life in the overcrowded cities where ecosystems have been disastrously transformed through human actions.

Now she looks for the swing
in cities with fifteen suburbs
and tries to be innocent about it (Ibid, 19)

“His *Collected Poems* creates a haunting effect because he is a sensitive expatriate who has not forgotten his own soil” (Karnani 2001: 53). The poem “Still Another for Mother” shows how emptiness started creeping in the life of Ramanujan due to the memory of his mother’s house:

--- the heavy door
of my mother’s black-pillared, nineteenth-century
silent house, given on her marriage day
to my father, for a dowery. (‘Still Another for Mother’, 15)

In comparison with the childhood life under the shelter of the ancestral home and in the company of the trees providing a shelter to insects and birds, the life in cities and in Chicago makes Ramanujan experience a painful sense of rootlessness during his encounter with the corrupt and polluted life in big cities as well as with the mysterious and dubious ways of city-life in Chicago.

I wonder if in Chicago too
love indifference and hate
in some devious way relate
at all to deaths by fire. (‘One More After Reading Homer’, 73)

Therefore, “‘ancestral houses’, ‘village roads’, ‘papaya trees’, ‘banana leaves’, ‘Ganges’ etc. “emerge from within the poet’s psychiac obsession with his cultural roots deeply embedded in his forgettable Indian past” (Pandey 1999: 24).

Most of today’s expatriate writers, due to the importance of mobility and communications, have become alienated from place. Place has been removed by movement as a significant fact of their lives. As they remain in travel, place has lost its significance for them. In comparison with such people, who suffer from ‘modern malaise called placelessness’, A. K. Ramanujan reveals an exceptional awareness about the significance of the

land in human culture. Chindhade puts it as “the memories of places, people and incidents in India occupy a significant space in the mind” of Ramanujan (Chindhade 2001:81).

Majority poems in A. K. Ramanujan’s *Collected Poems* (1995) express his sense of the expatriate *angst* and nagging place-consciousness. As Mehrotra points out “Ramanujan shuttles between ‘Small town, South India’ and The Traffic light turns orange/ on 57th and Dorchester---” (Mehrotra 2004: 35). He falls “into a vision of forest fires/ enter a fronting Himalayan river” (‘Chicago Zen’, 186). The rootlessness of the self which results



from the break with the cultural past does not allow the poet to enjoy Chicago the way the Americans do.

The poet's both expatriate *angst* and nagging place-consciousness in his poetry have the

source of feelings of disinheritedness, alienation and unrelatedness. These feelings have their origin in his association with social and natural life which he enjoyed in his ancestral house located in South India during his childhood.

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