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Nature, Culture, and Environmental Ethics: An Ecocritical Reading of A. K. Ramanujan's A River

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the relationship between literature and the natural environment. Emerging prominently in the late twentieth century, ecocritical theory focuses on how literary texts represent nature, environmental degradation, and human interaction with ecological systems. A. K. Ramanujan's poem A River presents a subtle yet powerful critique of traditional poetic representations of nature and highlights the complex interaction between humans and the environment. Set in the South Indian city of Madurai, the poem explores the cyclical nature of drought and flood while exposing the indifference of poets and society toward human suffering and ecological imbalance.

This research paper examines the poem through an ecocritical lens, arguing that Ramanujan exposes the limitations of classical poetic traditions that romanticize nature without acknowledging its destructive potential or its impact on marginalized communities. By juxtaposing ancient and modern poets, the poem critiques anthropocentric attitudes and reveals the ethical responsibilities of literature toward environmental awareness. The paper explores themes such as ecological indifference, human suffering during natural disasters, environmental ethics, and the politics of representation in nature poetry. Through close textual analysis and theoretical insights from ecocriticism, the study demonstrates how Ramanujan's poem anticipates contemporary environmental concerns and encourages readers to rethink their relationship with nature.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; River; Poet; Nature and Culture; Anthropocentrism; Ecological Consciousness; Flood and Ecological Disaster.

Introduction

The growing ecological crisis of the modern world has significantly influenced literary criticism and cultural studies. Environmental issues such as climate change, deforestation, and ecological imbalance have prompted scholars to revisit literary texts from new perspectives. One of the most important theoretical frameworks emerging from this intellectual shift is Ecocriticism, which studies the representation of nature and environmental relationships in literature. Ecocriticism seeks to examine how literature reflects environmental values, challenges anthropocentric worldviews, and promotes ecological consciousness. As scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell argue, literature not only mirrors cultural attitudes toward nature but also shapes how societies perceive and interact with the environment. Through narrative and poetic imagination, literary works can reveal the complex dynamics between humans and the natural world.

Among modern Indian poets writing in English, A. K. Ramanujan occupies a unique position for his ability to combine cultural memory, social critique, and philosophical insight. His poem *A River* is widely recognized as one of his most significant works. The poem reflects on the river that flows through the ancient temple city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu and examines how poets have historically celebrated the river without acknowledging the suffering caused by its floods. The poem also contrasts the celebratory descriptions of the river by ancient poets with the detached observations of modern poets. Both groups, however, fail to address the human tragedy that accompanies the river's annual floods. Ramanujan's ironic tone exposes the insensitivity of poetic tradition and invites readers to reconsider how nature is represented in literature.

From an ecocritical perspective, *A River* is particularly significant because it challenges the romanticization of nature often found in classical poetry. Instead of depicting nature as purely beautiful or harmonious, Ramanujan presents it as a powerful and unpredictable force that profoundly affects human lives. The poem therefore raises important questions about environmental ethics, representation, and responsibility.

This research paper aims to analyze *A River* from an ecocritical perspective. It explores how the poem critiques traditional nature poetry, reveals the consequences of ecological events such as floods, and calls for a more ethical and empathetic engagement with the natural world.

Ecocriticism: Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism emerged as a distinct field of literary studies in the 1990s, although its intellectual roots can be traced to earlier environmental movements. Scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty define ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Similarly, Lawrence Buell argues that ecocritical analysis examines how literary texts portray ecological relationships and environmental values. One of the central concerns of ecocriticism is the critique of anthropocentrism—the belief that human beings are the most important entities in the universe. Anthropocentric thinking often leads to the exploitation and degradation of natural environments. Ecocritics therefore seek to promote an ecocentric perspective that recognizes the intrinsic value of nature. In literature, ecocriticism investigates several key themes such as representation of nature and landscapes, human interaction with ecological systems, environmental degradation and natural disasters, ethical responsibility toward the environment, cultural and historical attitudes toward nature.

Ecocriticism also challenges the romantic tradition of nature writing that portrays nature as idyllic and harmonious. Instead, ecocritical scholars emphasize the need to acknowledge ecological complexity, including the destructive aspects of natural forces. Ramanujan's *A River* can be understood within this theoretical framework because the poem questions traditional literary representations of nature. By highlighting the gap between poetic description and human suffering, the poem exposes the limitations of anthropocentric and romanticized depictions of the natural world.

Overview of the Poem

A River is set in the historic city of Madurai, which is famous for its temples, cultural heritage, and classical Tamil literature. The poem begins with a description of the river that runs through the city. During the dry season, the riverbed becomes almost empty, exposing sandbanks and rocks. However, during the monsoon season, the river floods and causes significant damage to surrounding areas. Ramanujan describes how both ancient and modern poets have written about the river. Ancient poets celebrated the beauty and grandeur of the river in flood, comparing it to mythological events and divine power. Modern poets, on the other hand, observe the river with a more detached perspective. Despite their differences, both groups of poets share a common flaw: they focus on aesthetic and symbolic aspects of the river while ignoring the human suffering caused by floods. Ramanujan points out that during one flood, a pregnant woman and a pair of cows were swept away by the river. Yet poets continue to write about the beauty of the river without acknowledging such tragedies. The poem's ironic tone exposes the moral blindness of poetic tradition. By highlighting the absence of empathy in literary representation, Ramanujan challenges readers to rethink how nature and human experience are portrayed in poetry.

Close Reading of A. K. Ramanujan's A River

The ecocritical significance of A River by A. K. Ramanujan becomes clearer through a close textual analysis of the poem. Ramanujan structures the poem in a way that gradually reveals the gap between poetic imagination and ecological reality. By examining the poem line by line, the reader can understand how the poet critiques literary tradition and exposes the ethical limitations of nature poetry.

The poem begins with the lines:

“In Madurai,
city of temples and poets,
who sang of cities and temples.”

These opening lines immediately establish the cultural and historical context of the poem. The city of Madurai is portrayed as a place deeply rooted in literary and religious traditions. By emphasizing that the city is famous for both temples and poets, Ramanujan suggests that poetry has long been an integral part of its cultural identity. However, the phrase “who sang of cities and temples” also hints at the limitations of these poets, as they appear more interested in glorifying cultural monuments than in examining the lived realities of the people who inhabit the city.

The poem then introduces the river that flows through Madurai:

“every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand”

These lines depict the river during the dry season. Instead of presenting the river as a symbol of eternal beauty or fertility, Ramanujan portrays it as a nearly lifeless stream reduced to a trickle. The image of a dry riverbed emphasizes the ecological realities of seasonal rivers in South India. From an ecocritical perspective, this description highlights the dependence of human communities on natural water sources and the vulnerability of those communities during periods of drought.

Ramanujan continues the description by noting the visible features of the riverbed:

“straw and women's hair
clogged the watergates

at the rusty bars”

These lines introduce a more realistic and almost unpleasant image of the river. Instead of romantic imagery, the poet describes debris such as straw and tangled hair blocking the watergates. This image suggests neglect and decay, challenging the idealized representation of rivers often found in classical poetry. The presence of everyday materials like straw and hair also indicates the interaction between human life and the river, showing that the river is not merely a natural object but part of a broader ecological and social system.

The poem then describes the river during the monsoon season when it floods:

“Then it floods.

a river in spate

with a flood of stones”

The sudden transition from drought to flood reflects the cyclical nature of monsoon-driven rivers in India. The phrase “a river in spate” conveys the overwhelming force of the floodwaters. Unlike the dry river described earlier, the river now becomes a powerful natural force capable of reshaping the landscape.

However, Ramanujan quickly shifts the focus from the river itself to the poets who describe it:

“The poets sang only

of the floods.”

This line introduces the central irony of the poem. While the poets celebrate the dramatic beauty of the flood, they fail to acknowledge its destructive impact. From an ecocritical standpoint, this selective representation reveals the anthropocentric tendency of literary traditions to prioritize aesthetic experience over environmental and social realities.

The poem contrasts ancient poets with modern poets:

“The old poets sang

of the floods.”

Ancient Tamil poets often celebrated rivers as symbols of fertility, divine power, and prosperity. Their poetry frequently associated natural phenomena with mythological narratives and heroic imagery. Ramanujan suggests that these poets focused primarily on the grandeur of the river in flood, ignoring the damage it caused.

Later in the poem, Ramanujan introduces modern poets:

“The new poets still quoted

the old poets”

This line indicates that modern poets continue to imitate the themes and perspectives of earlier literary traditions. Although they live in a different historical context, they remain influenced by the same aesthetic conventions. As a result, they repeat the same patterns of representation without questioning their ethical implications.

Ramanujan further describes how modern poets observe the river:

“but no one spoke

of the pregnant woman

drowned”

These lines represent the emotional and ethical climax of the poem. The reference to a pregnant woman who dies in the flood introduces a deeply human dimension to the narrative. Her death symbolizes the vulnerability of marginalized individuals who are often ignored in literary representations of nature. By emphasizing that no poet mentions her tragedy, Ramanujan exposes the moral blindness of poetic tradition.

The significance of the pregnant woman extends beyond the immediate event of her death. In symbolic terms, pregnancy represents the continuity of life and the promise of future generations. The loss of the unborn child therefore signifies a double tragedy—the death of both the mother and the life she carried. From an ecocritical perspective, this moment highlights the ethical responsibility of literature to acknowledge the human consequences of environmental events.

The poem also mentions another overlooked detail:

“and the couple of cows

named Gopi and Brinda”

The inclusion of the cows adds another layer to Ramanujan’s critique. In Indian culture, cows are often regarded as sacred animals and symbols of rural livelihood. Their deaths during the flood emphasize the broader ecological impact of natural disasters, affecting both humans and animals. Yet even these losses fail to attract the attention of poets who remain preoccupied with aesthetic descriptions of the river.

The poem concludes with a reflection on the persistence of poetic tradition. Despite the tragedies caused by the flood, poets continue to write about the river in ways that ignore its destructive power. The irony of the poem lies in the contrast between the poets’ celebratory language and the harsh realities experienced by the people of Madurai.

From an ecocritical perspective, Ramanujan’s poem challenges readers to reconsider how nature is represented in literature. Rather than portraying nature as purely beautiful or harmonious, *A River* emphasizes its complexity and unpredictability. The poem also calls attention to the ethical responsibilities of writers and artists. By highlighting the gap between poetic imagination and environmental reality, Ramanujan encourages a more socially and ecologically conscious approach to literature.

Ultimately, the close textual analysis of the poem reveals that Ramanujan’s critique extends beyond the specific context of Madurai or classical Tamil poetry. The poem raises universal questions about the relationship between art, ethics, and environmental awareness. Through subtle irony and careful observation, Ramanujan demonstrates how literary traditions can both reflect and shape cultural attitudes toward nature.

Nature and Environmental Reality

One of the most important ecocritical aspects of *A River* is its realistic portrayal of nature. Unlike romantic poetry that idealizes natural landscapes, Ramanujan presents the river as a complex ecological force capable of both sustaining and destroying life. During the dry season, the river becomes nearly empty, revealing the harsh reality of drought. This description emphasizes the fragile balance of ecological systems and the dependence of human communities on natural resources. Water scarcity is a recurring environmental issue in many parts of India, and the dry riverbed symbolizes the vulnerability of human life in the face of environmental change. In contrast, the monsoon season transforms the river into a powerful and uncontrollable force. Floods bring both fertility and destruction, illustrating the dual nature of ecological processes. From an ecocritical perspective, this duality challenges simplistic notions of nature as either benevolent or hostile. Ramanujan’s depiction of the river reflects an ecological understanding of nature as dynamic and interconnected. The poem acknowledges that natural phenomena such as floods are part of larger environmental cycles, but it also emphasizes their impact on human communities.

Critique of Traditional Nature Poetry

A central theme of *A River* is the critique of traditional poetic representations of nature. Ramanujan contrasts ancient poets with modern poets to reveal how literary traditions often ignore social and environmental realities. Ancient Tamil poets celebrated the river as a symbol of fertility, prosperity, and divine power. Their poems focused on aesthetic beauty and mythological associations, portraying the river as a majestic and life-giving force. However, Ramanujan suggests that these poetic descriptions are incomplete because they overlook the destructive consequences of floods. By focusing only on beauty and grandeur, traditional poetry fails to acknowledge the suffering of ordinary people. Modern poets, although more observant, are not entirely different. They notice details such as sandbags, erosion, and damage caused by floods, but they still fail to express genuine empathy for the victims. This critique reflects a broader ecocritical concern about the politics of representation in literature. Ecocriticism argues that literary texts should not merely aestheticize nature but also address the ethical and social dimensions of environmental events.

Human Suffering and Environmental Ethics

One of the most striking moments in *A River* occurs when Ramanujan describes the death of a pregnant woman during a flood. This tragic incident exposes the gap between poetic imagination and lived reality. The poets who write about the river focus on descriptive details such as rising water levels, floating objects, and natural scenery. However, they ignore the human tragedy unfolding before them. From an ecocritical perspective, this moment highlights the ethical responsibility of literature. Environmental events such as floods are not merely aesthetic spectacles; they have profound consequences for human life and social structures. Ramanujan's emphasis on the pregnant woman is particularly significant because it symbolizes both vulnerability and continuity of life. Her death represents the loss of future generations and underscores the human cost of natural disasters. By drawing attention to this overlooked tragedy, the poem challenges readers to adopt a more compassionate and ethically aware perspective toward environmental issues.

Anthropocentrism and the Politics of Representation

Ecocriticism often critiques anthropocentrism, which places human interests at the center of all environmental discourse. In *A River*, Ramanujan reveals another dimension of anthropocentrism: the tendency of writers to prioritize aesthetic expression over ethical responsibility. The poets described in the poem treat the river primarily as a source of poetic inspiration. They observe its beauty and power but fail to engage with its social and ecological implications. This attitude reflects a broader cultural pattern in which nature is viewed as a backdrop for human creativity rather than as an active participant in ecological systems. Ramanujan's poem therefore calls for a shift toward a more ecocentric perspective that recognizes the interconnectedness of human and natural worlds.

Irony and Satire as Ecocritical Tools

Ramanujan employs irony and satire to expose the shortcomings of poetic tradition. The poem's tone is subtly critical, highlighting the contrast between poetic descriptions and real-life consequences. For example, the repeated reference to poets who write about the river suggests that literary traditions can become detached from social realities. The irony lies in the fact that poets claim to celebrate nature while ignoring its impact on human lives. This use of irony aligns with ecocritical strategies that challenge dominant narratives about nature and environmental issues. By questioning established literary conventions, Ramanujan encourages readers to adopt a more critical and reflective perspective.

Ecological Consciousness in Modern Indian Poetry

Ramanujan's *A River* is an important example of ecological awareness in modern Indian English poetry. Although the poem was written before the widespread emergence of environmental movements in India, it anticipates many concerns that are central to contemporary ecocritical discourse. The poem highlights the vulnerability of human communities to environmental forces, the ethical responsibilities of writers, and the

need for greater awareness of ecological realities. In this sense, Ramanujan's work contributes to the development of environmentally conscious literature that challenges anthropocentric and romanticized views of nature.

Conclusion

An ecocritical reading of *A River* reveals the depth and complexity of A. K. Ramanujan's poetic vision. The poem critiques traditional representations of nature that prioritize aesthetic beauty over social and environmental realities. By juxtaposing ancient and modern poets, Ramanujan exposes the limitations of literary traditions that ignore human suffering caused by natural events. The poem's portrayal of the river in Madurai highlights the dynamic and unpredictable nature of ecological systems. Floods and droughts illustrate the delicate balance between human communities and the environment, reminding readers of their dependence on natural resources. Through irony and subtle satire, Ramanujan challenges readers to reconsider how nature is represented in literature. The poem calls for a more ethical and compassionate approach to environmental issues, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging both the beauty and the destructive power of nature. Ultimately, *A River* demonstrates how literature can contribute to ecological awareness by exposing the gap between poetic imagination and environmental reality. By drawing attention to overlooked human tragedies, Ramanujan invites readers to develop a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between human life and the natural world.

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Bio-note

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