

# Ecological And Feministic Concern In The Poetry Of AK Ramanujan

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**Abstract:** : A.K.Ramanujan, one of the leading Indo-Anglian poets, was born and brought-up in India, in the traditional milieu. He migrated to Chicago in search of a job and wrote poetry as an expatriate in American culture. Ramanujan's cross-cultural poetry is adjudged by many as social, cultural and metaphysical in nature with love and reverence for womanhood and their liberation. Sentimental love for mother, grandmother, wife, and sister and the attachment to non-human world like birds, hens, insects, snakes, cows and dogs, along with the sanskritized Hindu faiths of birth, death and rebirth dominate the themes of his poems. The alluring poetry of Ramanujan naturally invites different analytical methods for arriving at the final picture. The expert opinion, in consensus, notes the essential point of 'kinship with nature' in Ramanujan's poems like "The Striders, Snakes, Breaded Fish, A river, Chess under the tree, ecology.....etc'. The present work searches for ecological references in the feministic mode, resulting in an ecofeministic approach in the poetic gamut of Ramanujan.

**Keywords:** nature, ecology, ecofeminism, non-human life, concern for women, love for nature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

A.K.Ramanujan(1929-93) was born to Tamil Brahmin parents, who lived in Kannada- speaking Mysore. He worked for some time as an English teacher in Kerala. During his stay in Kerala, he fell in love and married a Syrian Christian, who familiarized him with Malayalam. Ramanujan, a polyglot, not only translated many classics of Kannada and Tamil into English, but also expatriated himself to America, and joined as a professor in South-Asian studies in the University of Chicago. He became a leading Indo-American poet in English and developed a complex trait of Western material-oriented nature and Indian humanistic – related temperament. Bemused by the situation, Ramanujan himself remarked once in a mock ironic tone in the poem 'Conventions of Despair', "...I cannot unlearn/ conventions of despair./ They have their pride./ I must seek and will find/ my particular hell only in my hindu mind". The newly acquired reason quarreled with the sentiments; he had inherited from his familial traditions, giving rise to a cross-cultural configuration of his poetry. As Sachitanandan (1994) pointed out, 'his exile in Chicago only strengthened his sense of the Indian past'. Sentimental love for mother, grandmother, wife, and sister and the attachment to the non-human world like birds, hens, insects, snakes, cows and dogs, along with the sanskritized Hindu faiths of birth, death and rebirth dominate the themes of his poems.

Let "he be blamed as an orthodox Indian in Chicago, his themes do not eulogize the traditional past but look with a critical eye and even ridicule some of the issues taken up for poetic treatment" Sachitanandan remarks. On the other side, the expatriate wrote poems on modern ecology, environment, love for non-human nature, feminism, sexual relations and androcentric themes. No wonder, critics evaluated Ramanujan in a wide range as a poet from metaphysical moorings to post-colonial deconstruction, with no political agenda. Ramakrishna(2011), came closer to the point when he assessed that "A.K.Ramanujan is different from other expatriates like V.S.Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, for his rootedness in Indian culture and involvement with American culture. He is part of the American-Indian feminism of 1980s and represents the cross-cultural studies". Due to the intrinsic values carefully balanced by Ramanujan, in spite of the spectral divergence of extrinsic ideas, William Walsh (1973) rated the poet as one of the six Indo-Anglian authorities in fiction along with Mulkraj, R.K.Narayan, Rajarao, Nissim Ezekiel and R. Parthasarathy. In 1976 he was awarded with 'Padma Sri' and in 1983 he won the Mac Arthur Prize Fellowship. He remained in the U.S until his death in July 13, 1993. An attempt is made by the present study here to affirm the ecofeministic evidences from the oeuvre of poetry of A.K.Ramanujan, with over 150 poems, analysed. It is generally said that Ramanujan's love for nature is one of the aspects of his internal 'struggle and tension'. A thinker, a polyglot and a cross-cultural poet like Ramanujan does not write poem after poem with mere 'love' for nature. It is too primitive an emotion to be dealt with for his stature. The poems dealing with nature, love or pure depiction of nature also do not testify his 'innocent' or aesthetic reactions for parts of nature and non-human life. The titles like The Striders, Snakes, Breaded Fish, Chess Under Trees, Still Life, A River, Epitaph on a Street Dog, Hindoo- he does not hurt a fly or a spider either, Army Ants, Cow's Horn can do it, Elements of Composition, Ecology, In the Zoo, Snakes and Ladders, Zoo gardens revisited, Love poem for a wife or her trees, The Black Hen, Foundlings in the Yukon, Salamanders, On Not Learning from Animals, That Trees, Bulls, and Butcher's Tao....bear strong signs of Ramanujan's serious view of nature's role in human life. It will not be out of reason, if we categorise A.K.Ramanujan as an ecopoet. His love for ecological aspects like trees,

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animals, insects and human cruelty shows his concern for ecological balance and not just the pity, kindness and non-violence of the general kind, nor are they just metaphors drawn from his cultural expositions. Rajagopalachary and Ravinder(2012) call it 'Kinship with nature', but it is more than that. The burning thought process of reason, romance, material and environmentalism, which four were called 'nature' by nature-writers and romanticist poets, resulted in the poetry of A.K.Ramanujan. He became an ecosensitive, true to the scientific and technological temperament of the times, he lived in. His opinion about the 'oneness of all life on earth' is enough to label him an ecocritic. The ecocriticism of poets and writers need not express the commitment to nature-human relationship, where it will be enough to represent the facts sincerely. But in the case of Ramanujan, it is commitment, faith and campaign also, when the poet repeatedly asserts the same theme. In his poem Birthdays A.K. Ramanujan's concern for the Hindu traditions is brought out in many poems. He exhorted that his body after death shall not be cremated but buried to repay the little nutrition back into nature. The poem thus goes.....

.....but death? Is it a dispersal      Of  
gathered energies back into their elements,      earth,  
air, water and fire,      a reworking into other moulds,  
grass, worm and bacterial glow lights,      and  
mother matter for other off-spring with names and  
forms clocked into seasons?

### III. Literary Review

Ramanujan in his short story 'A Flowering Tree' shows a strong connection between woman and nature. The story tells us a tale of a young woman who turns into a tree. The young woman's elder sister plucks flowers from the transformed tree, making sure that she doesn't damage any other part of the tree. She then converts her younger sister to human form. Together they weave the fragrant flowers into garlands and sell them at the King's palace. Ramanujan in his own words says, "It is a story of woman's ecology and vulnerability of her emerging sexuality". In a way, people began to treat her as a commodity, asking her "to make a spectacle of herself" by displaying her secret gift. Even the first time when she herself becomes a tree to sell her flowers, she makes herself a product. Each time she becomes a tree, she begs the one who is pouring water to be careful not to hurt her. Yet, paradoxically, when she is mutilated, she cannot be healed directly. She can be made whole only by becoming the tree again, becoming vulnerable, and trusting her husband to graft and heal her broken branches. According to Mary Vidya Porselvi(2012), " 'A Flowering Tree' can be read as a parable that challenges the consumerist society which exploits both women and nature in the name of development. The fourth time when the woman becomes an incomplete being, half a tree and half a human being signifies 'maldevelopment' ". According to Vandana Shiva , "Maldevelopment is the violation of the integrity of organic, interconnected and interdependent systems, that sets in motion a process of exploitation, inequality, injustice and violence. It is blind to the fact that recognition of nature's harmony and action to maintain it are preconditions for distributive justice" (Staying Alive 5-6). Vandana Shiva in her book 'Staying Alive' quotes Mahatma Gandhi's words, "There is enough

in the world for everyone's need, but not for some people's greed". As discussed earlier, dominance of nature by man and dominance of woman by 'male' are similar and syntactically same, the study of which is ecofeminism as a philosophical category. While 'feminism' is a universally understood movement with categories like black feminism, white feminism, Marxian feminism, radical feminism and sexual feminism, 'ecofeminism', the daughter of ecocriticism, came into existence in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, originating from the Western American Universities.

### IV. Analysis of Eco-feminist Literary Criticism

Karen. J Warren, in her edited volume "Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature(1997)" explains ecofeminism from a variety of cross-cultural perspectives dealing with how one treats women and the non-human natural environment. Though a women – initiated movement around the globe, it received considerable male support also from Robert Sessions and Joseph Loer in addition to women scholars. Gretchen T. Legler exhorted the critics to reinterpret the human relationships with the natural world, considering the latter as a woman, molested by avaricious males. Ecofeminists like Holyn Wilson opposed Kant's theory of 'women and animals' as 'inferior' ecological beings. Ecofeminists claim that the moral claims about human-treatment of nature should not be grounded in traditional objectionist notions of intrinsic value. Rather, values focusing on chosen communities, races, regions and personal experiences have to build an ecofeminist theory of nature for which expressions of poets like A.K.Ramanujan, from an exclusive cross-cultural orientation are necessary evidences of reasoning. Warren suggested that stories of empirical evidences (both by fact and fiction) are important to assess the intricate relationships between constructions of nature and constructions of knowledge, desire, power, sexuality, language, race and gender. She further suggested a merger of ecofeminist theory and ecofeminist literary criticism, which will enable critics and theorists to speak from a position of virtue and veracity.

Gretchen mentioned that ecofeminist literary criticism is a hybrid form, a combination of environmental criticism and feminist literary criticism, originated from 1980 onwards. The environmental literary feminism undertakes the task of countering the patriarchal environmental ethic that has conceptualized land as 'woman', and hence can be ploughed for fertilisation. Unmasking the metaphorical links of representing nature in literature as feminine and exploitation of nature as masculine, is one of the major objectives. One of the main tasks is to redefine nature-writing from the old non-fictional, pseudo-scientific method into a humanistic-body representative, with a cultural viewpoint, without the model of romanticism, which continued for centuries. Canonized expressions like 'virgin landscapes' and 'manly-penetrations' are not just flowery expressions and metaphors, but direct to conceptual frameworks, leading to categorise women as indifferent, passive and masochistic souls. Alice Walker (1988) summarises this realization against the old notions like "beasts cannot feel grief, women cannot think, black women are lazy, they want sex in excess, slaves belong to an established institution and children are easily frightened to be 'oppressed'."

## V. Result of Eco-expressions

Ramanujan, having lived up to the fag end of the last century, was quite at home with 'feminism' and rules of the game. Enormous love and sympathy for the other gender might have pushed him deep into 'hatred' for male-dominance. In his poem *The Opposable Thumb*, he describes the oppression and subjugation of women by their husbands. The granny's four fingers were lost to her husband's knifing temper. The hegemony and cruelty of men is implied:

Said my granny.....

.....on her paw  
just one finger left of five: a real  
thumb,

....after her husband's  
Knifing temper one Sunday  
morning.....

We can understand the sympathy  
for woman's helplessness and vulnerability  
in the hands of beastly manhood, from the  
above lines.

In the poem *The Breaded Fish*, the poet, instead of swallowing the fish in the sandwich, recollects the death of a poor woman on the beach in a yard of cloth, dry rolled by the ebb, breaded by the grained indifference of sand. Rajagopalachary and Ravinder(2012) considered it as a 'social concern in Ramanujan's poetry, of highest value. They noted the metaphor dealing with a dead fish and dead woman. In the poem *Epitaph on a Street Dog*, the poet describes the selflessness of a street dog which litters twelve pups and dies feeding them. He capitalizes the word 'She' to ascribe dignity to the dog, the female in nature. Analysing the *Love Poem for a wife -2*, Armstrong.S (2011) points out the poetic sensibility in the lines

My wife's face still fast  
asleep, blessed as by  
butterfly, snake, shiprope,  
by my only love's only  
insatiable envy.

Lakshmi Raghunandan(1990), comments on the poem "Man and Woman in Camera and out". She remarked that the poet's love for woman is more than the 'man-woman' dual affair. The tree in the poem symbolizes the love and the man as nature, inside the black box of camera". 'Trees dropping flowers' symbolizes the love of man and woman in the danger of imminent disintegration. Distorted lens focusing 'half man – half tree' represents 'ardhanariswara'( half man –half woman of God Shiva of Hindu religion) bringing out the close affinity of 'purusha' and 'prakrithi'( the man and nature). Starting with the love for a woman, the poet landed himself in an ecofeministic air-base. The poet had a smooth landing as he piloted the craft with caution. Ramanujan's love for womanhood and love for nature with an ecosensitive attitude are revealed in the poem "Leaky tap after a sister's wedding" too. When the sister leaves after the marriage, the poet metaphorically speaks of the pain caused to a tree by a wood pecker. After all,

My sister and I have always wished  
a tree  
could shriek or at least writhe  
like that other snake  
we saw

under the beak  
of the crow

The poet's metaphor comes closer to the point that a woman and tree are closer to one another. In his poem titled *Ecology*, A.K.Ramanujan brings out the benevolent view of a woman towards nature. The poet is clearly against the man, the author of anthropocentrism.

After the first rain,  
for years, I would come home  
in a rage,  
for I could see from a mile away...  
our three Red Champak trees...  
had burst into flower and given

Mother

her first blinding migraine....  
with their street-long heavy –hung  
yellow pollen fog....  
no wind could sift  
no door could shut.....  
but mother, flashing her temper  
would not let us cut down  
a flowering tree

The mother is allergic to Champak's pollen, but she's prepared to endure the migraine pain and does not allow her son (the poet) to cut down the trees. The trees, thus saved will give her daughters and grandchildren basketful of flowers to offer to Gods. That is the feminine reaction to an ecological damage, attempted by man. Molly Daniels (1995) is not far from the truth when she summarized her review on *Black Hen*, collection of poems, thus..... "A.K.Ramanujan prayed for double vision and found it in the interconnectedness of vegetable and mineral, man and animal....above all, he found life in art....and art in life". The 'interconnectedness' is the soul of the cultured nature of women in dealing with 'nature' and its 'culture". The presence of trees, flowers, mountains, snakes, birds, storks, ants, bees and flies in Ramanujan's poetry is not just the making of another nature-poet. The vulgarity about the process of fertilizing the cow with a bull in 'public arrangement' is seen by young girls through holes in windows in the rural Indian scenario. The poet suggests that the whole show is only to make young girls learn to accept their role as future mothers in cryptic manner ( Chittaranjan Misra, 2011). Misra remarks that "the expatriate and local dichotomy' in the poet disappears and discovers the same unchanging motherhood among opposing cultural contexts and in the non-human animal world". The poet feels that the snakes are like 'terrible aunts'. The poet as a child does not get rest till they are killed, but his mother gives them milk and father gives the snake-charmer tips to play with them. Writing about the treatment of snakes in Indian context is intentional to confirm a feminine attitude towards animal life. In the poem *Of Mothers*, among other things, the poet identifies his mother with an eagle....

her hands are a wet eagle's  
two black pink - crippled feet,  
..her sarees  
do not clin: they hang, loose  
feather of a onetime wing.

Obviously, he loved the bird as much as his  
mother or vice-versa.

Vinay Dharwadker(2012 ) explained Ramanujan's philosophical line of double cultured textuality as... " human body and its relation to natural world are guided by unique powers of reasons; of reasons gyring with reasons." When he said..... 'from the soil we come and finally go into the soil.....' the poet is caught between the conflicting secular environmentalism of the west and the Hindu position of the east. He resolves the issue in Death and the Good Citizen as "the body's waste matter should be collected as 'night soil' and used to fertilise the orange trees in a municipal gardens...".Charles Spretnak(1997) remarks that 'ecofeminism allows a consideration of the cross-cultural and experiential evidence for unitive dimensions of the being, stands as a witness for Vinay Dharwadkar's attributes to Ramanujan.

In his poem One More on a Deathless Theme, Ramanujan's fantastic account of the body-nature nexus is brought out.

...just as this dog...  
all day ...moan at the gate  
for that female in the street....  
will turn cold  
like her and her nuzzling suitors

The poem implies that the phases of life are same for a man or an animal. The sequence of links from birth, to copulation, to death are common and then beyond, in case of a human wishing for a rebirth. The man runs to universal God who is in the kitchens of the houses now and offers his prayer to the great androgynous God whose 'One Half is woman'. From normal to sublime, the poet stretches the metaphor and finally brings down God and calls him 'androgynous'. He calls God deliberately 'androgynous' but ironically, His another half is a woman( Lord Shiva...). The poet wishes to state that God is the author of the masculine treatment of nature, though His other half is woman. The poetry of A.K. Ramanujan presents a synchronized blend of tradition and modernity. He is in essence a modernist with his sensibility rooted in tradition. Like Mulkraj Anand, A.K. Ramanujan's anger is born out of the value of human dignity. From a modern secular view point of an environmentalist, the human body originates from nature....sustained by nature....and after death returns to nature....this returns to nature is a principle of conservation, according to which everything in the environment should be recycled to prove the nutrition of soil and improve the quality of plants....Ramanujan in his poems Death and the good citizen and Swastik proves that he is essentially a modernist. In the poem Ecology, the poet Ramanujan shows his stubborn indignation with traditional look and wants the champak trees to be cut, which is opposed by his mother suffering from migraine.... In the poem Guru Ramanujan comes out more clearly about his disdain for self proclaimed god men and love for womankind. "As a modernist A.K. Ramanujan works on contraries that make the poet distinguish between body and nature, nature and man, nature and culture, tradition and modernity" Rawat (2012) analysed thoroughly the poet's obsession with nature. The poet asserts the oneness of all life on earth-human, animal and vegetable. Ramanujan seems to be stressing the identity between human beings and nature. In Snakes, he describes the human-animal relationship in vivid terms. He makes a reference to snakes, flies and frogs. He describes the majesty of snake :

The twirls of their hisses  
Rise like the tiny dust- cones on  
slow noon roads  
....of every moon

In striders, Ramanujan describes the movement, the habits and the physiognomy of the insect precisely. Although Ramanujan attempts to mock the supernatural powers of the prophets, his awareness of man-nature relationship is very evident.

No not only prophets  
Walk on water. This bug sits  
On a landslide of lights  
...of sky

The poet wants to emphasise the fact that miracles are not limited to prophets alone, they take place even in nature and are worthy of our attention. In the poem Poona Train Window, the poet portrays picturesquely the beauty of nature, through the window of a passing train. While in the train the poet sees a man defecating between two rocks. He points out how man besmirches the beauty of nature. The poet is preoccupied with the thoughts of preservation of wild life. He is aware that God has created so many things, great and small, to maintain balance in nature. But man in his own greed for material possessions and benefits has opened the pandora's box and endangered the earth with his actions, which are limitless and thoughtless.

The tree is a recurring symbol in his poetry. In Chass Under Trees. The tree symbolizes the ups and downs of life.

Jha Rama(1981) observed the same thing about the poet. A.K. Ramanujan once expressed regarding his own poetry ".....one writes what one feels and not what he wants to.....it may be true that I ought to be writing about pollution, ecology and rest of it...if you truly feel, it will be there somewhere...as one cannot write according to doctrines...". The Poet's confession about 'Pollution ecology and the rest of it' is the final evidence of his environmentalism.

## VI. Conclusion

An overall picture, Ramanujan is generally considered as a poet of mixed philosophies of the West and East. Most of the critics compared his Hindu view of life, with that of the West and narrated his metamorphosis when he migrated to America. They feel at home to categorise him as a philosophical poet, at best with a humanistic philosophy, without much concern for the other world. Strangely his love for non-human species is taken as part of the humanistic trend. His love for women is interpreted as part of the spiritual Hindu tenet, where woman is considered as half of man. The references in his poetry to trees, cows, birds, insects and snakes are also categorised as his love for nature, which is normal to any poet, as a poet is a nature lover. His aberration with small life is deemed to be part of human kindness, which exactly is negated in the environmentalist view point of the recent scenario. The science of ecology claims, and art of literature depicts environmentalism as a human duty to understand, and not as part of beauty to enjoy. As such, the attempt to see Ramanujan in the new light is supported by the evidences given above and in spite of

the cross-cultural background of Ramanujan's poetry; there is a clear orientation towards the modern scientific view point of nature's ecology and it being equated to feministic overtures.

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