

Exploring Ancient Indian Ecosystem through the Aesthetic Framework of *Kuruntokai*, *Gathasaptasati*, and *Terigatha*

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ABSTRACT

Ancient Indian societal establishments viewed 'nature' as a part of the human lifestyle and linked it to everyday life events at many levels. Nature follows the simple yet universal law of cause and effect. The law of nature applies to any situation within an ecosphere. This is the principle behind using elements of 'nature' to portray an aesthetic situation in ancient poetic works. Literature does not float in some aesthetic ether, but, rather plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact. This paper explores the role of ancient Indian ecosystem within an aesthetic framework through a comparative analysis of select poems from the ancient Tamil, Prakrit and Pali literatures. The Tamil and Prakrit poems – *Kuruntokai* and *Gathasaptasati* analysed in this paper are from the ancient literary texts belonging to the early Sangam period. The Pali text, *Terigatha*, was written around 600 BC by Buddhist nuns. Even though these poems belong to different cultural and historical contexts, they have many similarities in terms of the use of the ecological environment as an aesthetic tool to document the personal and the public.

KEYWORDS

Ecocriticism; Ancient Indian Poetry; *Kuruntokai*; *Gathasaptasati*; *Terigatha*

Ecocriticism, according to Greg Garrard, "is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Garrard 1). Ecocriticism, the literary arm of environmentalism, has evolved into a multidisciplinary approach to all environmental literature. This form of criticism has gained more attention since 2000 because of its higher social emphasizes on environmental destruction due to increased industrialization. Ecocriticism addresses how human relate to non-human nature and it emphasizes a revaluation of the relationship

between man and environment. This paper explores the role of ancient Indian ecosystem within an aesthetic framework through a comparative analysis of select poems from ancient Tamil, Prakrit and Pali literatures. The Tamil and Prakrit poems - *Kuruntokai* and *Gathasaptasati* analysed in this paper are from ancient literary texts belonging to the early Sangam period, second century A.D respectively. The Pali text, *Terigatha* was written around 600 BC by Buddhist nuns. Even though these poems belong to different cultural and historical contexts, they have

many similarities in terms of the use of the ecological environment as an aesthetic tool to document the personal and the public. An ecological study of a text attempts to observe and analyse the system of relationship between “the organisms to one another and to their surroundings” (Glotfelty 3). This paper compares and studies the role of landscape and its connection to the mindscape of poems belonging to ancient literary texts.

Landscape and physical environment affect our aesthetic perceptions in every way. “Even comparatively minor differences of landscape as between two contiguous districts of the same country, say Tuscany and Umbria, are manifest in the different artistic outlook of painters who come from these districts” (Thani Nayagam 10). The ecological environment can influence ideas and perception for both an individual and his/her community. Considering the physical geography of the Indian sub-continent, which is vastly varied and diverse, it is likely that literatures from every specific region may vary from each other greatly. The landscape of South India is observed to be in striking contrast with that of the Northern part of India’s physical feature, which consists of the low river valleys for an ‘unending monotonous feature’ (Thani Nayagam 9). Understanding this difference helps in the aesthetic perception of the landscape itself which is so unique and distinct even with the Indian sub-continent. The landscape is responsible for a difference of outlook regarding the concept and interpretation of a text that is a product of a specific culture and ethos. Kalidasa’s poems on Nature in comparison with the Poetry of the Tamil Sangam period helps in understanding the differences in geographical features and climatic conditions within the Indian sub-continent itself.

The Tamil Sangam poetry, mostly those referring to the ‘akam’ (Interior landscape) is built on the Tinai convention. The Tinai

convention describes Landscape as a ‘five-fold division’. This concept is unique to the Tamil Sangam poetry and according to this convention; the landscape is divided into five regions which are aesthetically perceived as the environment which represents five basic types of cultures. Since a different way of life was conditioned for each of these types of environment, different types of poetic form also correspond to each of these different regions. Ancient Indian societal establishments viewed ‘nature’ as a part of the human lifestyle and linked it to everyday life events at many levels. These poems capture the philosophy of Nature and its cycle. Nature follows the simple yet universal law of cause and effect. The law of nature applies to any situation within an ecosphere. This is the principle behind using elements of ‘nature’ to portray an aesthetic situation in ancient poetic works.

Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology states, “Everything is connected to everything else.” He argues, “Literature does not float in some aesthetic ether, but, rather plays a part in an immensely complex global system in which energy, matter, and ideas interact” (Taylor 11). Nature and ecological environment is the basic unit of any culture. In the poems belonging to ancient Indian literary tradition, elements of nature and human-nature interact within an ecosystem and are used to convey the principles of natural order. They also indicate the limits that can be breached and limits that cannot be breached in an aesthetically parallel manner. The artist’s consciousness that human life is only a part of nature comes out clearly in the poems that were written during the Sangam period. Many scholars such as Worster, an Ecological Historian, are attempting to write environmental histories, studying the reciprocal relationships between human beings and land. “They trace the origin of factors affecting environmental conditions,

escape into an alternate world. Nature is not even personified or described in great detail. The landscape is described as it appears to the poet and sometimes even the meaning intended is only expressed through a metonym or a metaphor. For example:

Fore-legs positioned on the bank,
Hinders agitating in the ripples,
A she-frog strokes her own reflection.
(*Gathasapthasati* 391)

'Nature' comprises of not just ordered divisions, but also has transitional areas where codes and conventions are defied to accommodate the wild and also the 'unlikely'. The image of the bee attempting to drink the nectar from a bud or a partially blossomed flower is common to poems from all the three different poetic conventions analysed in this paper. Although the *Terigatha* text views it only from the psychological point of view, in Sangam poetry and *Gathasaptasati* it deals with the experience of consummation from the point of view of a woman. By borrowing an aesthetically equivalent image a woman is able to convert her experience into a universal one through the use of a metonymy. The following poetic lines are from *Terigatha*:

Glossy and black as the down of the bee
my curls once clustered.
They with the waste of the years are a
liker to hempen or bark cloth...
Fragrant as the casket of perfume, as
full of sweet blossoms the hair of
mine.
All with the waste of the years now
rank as the odour of the hare's fur...
Dense as a grove well planted, and
comely with comb, pin, and
parting...
All with the waste of the years
dishevelled the fair plaits and
fallen...
Glittered the swarthy plaits in head-
dresses jewelled and golden.

All with the waste of the years broken,
and shorn are the tresses. (Rhys
121)

Nature is not a place to escape into, to leave behind the pains in the world. It exists in life and occasionally inspires one to identify with an experience, an intensification of one's own state of mind associated with the experience that one might be going through. In *Kuruntokai*, the heroine says to her confidante that she will bear the pangs of separation with the hope her lover will certainly return soon.

Friend!

This is eventide; now the house-
dwelling sparrows,
Their feathers resembling
The faded petals of water lily flowers
After eating to their fill, the grains
drying in the foreyards,
And delightfully bathing in the minute
dusts of cow dung,
Abide with their fledglings
In the eaves of the homes!
Are not this dismal hour
And the loneliness associated with it
In the place of his stay?
(*Kuruntokai* 6)

By observing these poems from *Kuruntokai*, *Gathasaptasati*, and *Terigatha*, the relationship between human communities and their understanding of nature can be inferred clearly. Detailed descriptions of Flora and Fauna are recorded in the poems. Therefore, these poems can be treated as ecological treatises that represent a specific time and space in a historical record. Nature used as a medium for communicating personal emotions and societal views. Common features dealing with Nature and ecology found in the texts (despite the difference in linguistic and cultural codes) regarding themes, literary devices, aesthetic and poetic conventions. Laying out the parallels between the conventional portrayal of connection between Nature and Human societies, there are a

parallel between human developmental activities and their ecological environment. Ecocriticism focuses on the broad range of cultural processes and products in which and through which the complex negotiations of nature and culture take place.

How was I once puff'd up, incensed
with the bloom of my beauty,
Vain of my perfect form, my fame and
success midst the people,
Filled with the pride of my youth,
unknowing the truth and
unheeding..
Today with shaven head, wrapt in my
robe,
I go forth on my daily round for food;
And 'neath the spreading boughs of
forest tree
I sit, and second-Jhana's rapture wins,
Where reasoning cease, and joy and
ease remain (Rhys 52-53)

The above poetic lines from *Terigatha* prove that Nature is always in some way culturally constructed. However, shaping networks of nature and culture are complex. Environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflexion. Deep ecology is an important concept to be considered while studying an ecosystem. Deep ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only toward all members of the ecosphere but even towards all identifiable entities or forms in the ecosphere. It demands recognition of intrinsic value in nature. Thus, this attitude is extended to entities or forms such as rivers, landscapes and even species and social systems considered in their own right. Elements of nature are only personified to acknowledge their living presence.

While the bhikshu
Views her navel

And she
His handsome face,
Crows lick clean
Both ladle and alms bowl.
(*Gathasapthasati* 162)

Here the crows take advantage of the distractedness of maid and the monk. This simple incident can generate several layers of meanings that challenge the boundary between human desires and social representations of them. This holistic understanding of the environment is unique to ancient Indian aesthetics. The kind of cultural and environmental space that most modern mainstream environmentalists and ecocritics validate is pastoral and the wild. Wilderness is described as the pristine, natural antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover our true selves that we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. The myth of the "uninhabited wilderness" describes a vision that has a "pernicious consequence for our conceptions of nature and ourselves" since it suggests that nature is only authentic if we are entirely absent from it (Fromm 15). Anything is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community.

Seeing the bangle
Fall on it
And taking it for a snare,
The crow distrusts
The morsel she puts out.
(*Gathasapthasati* 205)

"It is not an individual organism that attracts the moral consideration, but as a whole, the community in which human beings are neither more nor less than 'citizens'" (Fromm 15). Environmental ethics, on the other hand, places far less emphasis on the individual organisms but demands moral consideration for inanimate things such as rivers and

mountains assuming pain and suffering to be a necessary part of Nature.

The rains end
High clouds like young breasts
Are blown away
Like a strand of white hair
On earth's ageing head
The first kans flower appears
(*Gathasapthasati* 434)

The play of likeness and difference in the relationship between humans and animals, in general, may be analysed in terms of the distinct use of metonymy and metaphors. The distinctive peculiarity of animals is that, being at once close to man and strange to him, both akin to him and unalterably not-man, they are able to alternate, as objects of human thought, between the "contiguity of the metonymic mode and the distanced, analogical mode of the metaphor" (Taylor 4).

...much of our understanding of human identity and our thinking about the living animal reflects and may even be the rather result of the diverse uses to which the concept of the animal is put in popular culture, regardless of how bizarre or banal some of those uses may seem... Culture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of our culture.
(Warder128)

The animal is usually used to control rather than to confuse the human-nature; by associating all our 'lowlier' characteristics and bodily functions with animality, we asset the importance of sustaining those higher or more spiritual attributes that grant us human sovereignty over the 'beast'. In each exercise of dominion, the antithetical position emerges: humans become the animals they attempt to dominate. According to Shaprio, "To disassociate themselves from Androids, humans must associate themselves with animals" (Hart 56).

Returning home

From her father's village
And seeing ichor stains
On Karanja-branches
The hunter's wife
Knows her husband is dead.
(*Gathasapthasati* 121)

Nature is no longer observed as a process embedded in space and time expressing itself in natural living species through the process of evolution taking place over time, within "the spatially delineated ecosystems" (Taylor 5). The component parts of nature can be disembodied and their relationship to space and time appear likely to be overcome.

According to A.K. Ramanujan, there are two types of literary devices namely "Ullurai Uvamai" (implied simile) and "Enai Uvamai" (the other simile) that "are inescapable in identifying the Tinai". These 'insets' according to A.K. Ramanujan "is essentially a 'metonymy', an in presentia relationship where both terms are present, where the signifier and the signified belong to the same universe and share the same 'landscape'. Both are parts of one scene. Such a metonymy, rather than metaphor, is the favourite poetic figure of the classical Tamil" (Ramanujan 23).

Eyes hast though like the gazelles like
an elf's in
the heart of the mountains-
'Tis those eyes of thee, sight of which
feedeth
the depth of my passion.
Shrined in thy dazzling, immaculate
face as in
calyx of lotus,
'Tis those eyes of thee, the sight of
which feedeth
the strength of my passion.
(Rhys 152)

Many of these poems can be described as 'landscape in verse'. While human passions in these poems are suggested in a few lines, it is the description of the landscapes and the natural setting appropriate to these passions

are described in detail. In the Tamil verse and the 'gatha' (Prakrit poetic form), the varying degrees of absence of explicit erotic elements lead the reader towards a certain type of literary participation. "Prakrit verse seduces us right along with the woman to whom it is addressed. With its very first word, 'ua', it invites us to 'look' from the sky to the ground and to enter into participation with it" (Ganesh 32). A 'gatha' compresses a lot of meaning into a very brief poem. Dhvani is very important for a reader to appreciate and enjoy reading gatha poetry.

O Mahua
 Blossomed
 On Godavari's
 Arboured bank
 Shed your flowers
 One
 After
 One. (*Gathasapthasati* 103)

"The past lives on, in art and memory, but it is not static: it shifts and changes as the present throw its shadow backwards. The landscape also changes, but far more slowly; it is a living link between what we were and

what we have become" (Taylor 4). The landscape of the past, therefore, can be seen as an ecological and cultural record. Franz Boas a noted contemporary ecologist has championed the idea that "different cultures adjusted to similar environments and taught the historicist mode of conceptualising environment" (Taylor 9). Boas argues that it is important to understand cultural traits of societies. According to him, it is also important to understand their behaviours, beliefs, and symbols and so is the necessity of examining them in their local context. He argues that when people migrate from one place to another and as the cultural context changes over time, the elements of a culture, and their meanings, will also change. This led him to emphasise the importance of local histories for an analysis of cultures. He believed that 'landscape is a clue to culture'. Studying the landscape within an aesthetic framework helps in studying the culture itself; thereby leading to an understanding of the evolution of ecological links that connects human societies to the ecosphere from a specific point in history to the present.

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