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Ecological Imbalances in A.K. Ramanujan's *A River* and R. Parthasarathy's *River, Once*

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Indian verse in English emerged in the mid- twentieth century from the mainstream of English literature and made its appearance as part of Indian literature—Indian in sensibility and content, and English in language. Post-Independence era is qualitatively different from that produced during the first half of the twenty-first century. The verse produced in the latter half of the century offers a striking contrast in theme, language and poetic technique.

The Post-Independence Indian poetry in English began in an atmosphere of changes, and challenges, modernity and experimentation. During this period, there started a new creative urge for awareness, a new faith and a pledge of sharp departure from the established and accepted themes and techniques. The Post-Independence poets while experimenting with new techniques and themes have tried to maintain the harmonious relationship with nature and environment. They are more concerned for natural and environmental influences and inflexions. M.K.Naik is of the view that “The proper subject matter and the right technique for poetry have evidently been codified and no deviations from it, is permissible, even if it means shutting one’s eyes to the dark realities of life” (218).

The Geo-environmental conditions which influenced the poets include landscapes, rivers, seas, mountains, forests and dust and also hazardous nature including floods and earthquakes. “The environment designed to be used exclusively by humans, to serve the needs of humanity, is in the profoundest sense humanity's source and support: its ingenious, inventive life-giving matrix” (Rowe 106). Nature is necessary to man. Still, the natural architecture one finds in the river has a grandeur which humbles and ennobles him and stimulates him to emulate it. The river is an integral companion to man, necessary for his emotional, spiritual and physical wellbeing in the face of pressures from sophisticated and artificial urban living. It fails to satisfy man due to natural calamity.

It is a known fact that ecological imbalances and their impact on flora and fauna and humans have become a matter of great concern for people of all walks of life. Creative writers and critics are no exception to this. Many Indian English poets have written poems on and about rivers. The glories of river Vaigai were nourished by the Tamil poets of the past and the present, far and above, its usefulness and relationship to man.

This paper analyses the presentation of the river Vaigai in ancient Tamil Literature and also by two modern Indian poets A.K. Ramanujan in “A River” and R. Parthasarathy in “River, Once” in the light of ecocriticism. The paper investigates the relation between humans and the river in the present world. It shows how this river, hailed as the one that originated from the waters of the Ganges, has today lost all its divine nature and qualities hailed in mythology and has become symbolic of environmental and cultural degradation in the two modern poems. The paper is also an assessment of the poets’ understanding of the environment while creating their poems.

Ramanujan in his themes as well as poetic strategies displays the international modernist attitude. He is right there with other modernists in writing about the existential issues, about the

tension between being and world, about duality in relation to past, about scrutinising the self. His poems deploy the poetic trappings such as tension, irony, obscurity, fragmentation, ambivalence, etc. of a modernist. Bruce King states that “Ramanujan’s poems had a highly accomplished, understated symbol and narrative” (21).

Ramanujan brings out the truth about the river, which floods and the destruction it causes henceforth. The river is garbed in mythology and spirituality and is considered holy. Running through Madurai, the capital of the erstwhile Pandya Kingdom, the river has historical importance too. As a matter of fact, Madurai is a Tamil word which is the centre of Tamil culture and learning. River Vaikai has been mentioned in the poems of many poets, both past and present. It is intimately associated with the life and culture of the Tamil people. In Tamil literature, the river is mentioned in several writings, and Ilangovan who adores the river as perennial in *Silappatikaram* attributes even human sentiments to it. Seeing this river, Kannagi and Kovalan shouted in immeasurable glee “This is not a river but a stream in blossom.”

The peculiar thing, which appeals to the poet, is that the river presents two different spectacles in two different seasons. It is completely dry in summer and flooded in full in the rainy season. During summer, only a very thin stream of water flows. "Vaikai" is dried to nearly a trickle and so the sand ribs on the bed of the river are visible with “straw and women’s hair clogging the water gates at the rusty bars under the bridges.” The stones that lie on the bed of the river are exposed to view. The wet stones look like resting crocodiles and the dry ones are like shaven buffaloes resting lazily in the sun. The portion of the river under the bridge has also been visible. Hence, a vivid picture of the river in the summer season is described.

Instead of being a river embracing humans, the river attracts poets only during its devastating flood. The speaker-persona of the poem sees the impoverishment during summer and the damage it causes during flood. Ramanujan has compared and contrasted the attitudes of the old poets and those of the new poets to human suffering. The old poets have composed songs and poems in praise of the city. River Vaikai which flows through the city of Madurai means a “sweet city,” full of temples.

Ramanujan criticises the poets who do not see the problems of drought as well as flood. The river has enough water to attract the poets only once in a year when it flooded during the monsoons. The poet picturises the cruelty of the flooded river in Madurai City as

He was there for a day
when they had the floods.
People everywhere talked
of the inches rising,
of the precise number of cobbled steps
run over by the water, rising
on the bathing places,
and the way it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi and Brinda, as usual (“A River”).

During the rainy season, people observe it very anxiously and they remember the rising of the river inch by inch from time to time. They remember how the stone steps of the bathing place are submerged one by one. They see how three village houses were damaged and carried off by the floods. They know how the two cows Brinda and Gopi were carried away. They also know how a pregnant woman was drowned in the river during the flood. Both the old and the

new poets have mentioned these things in their poems. The way they have described these things in their poems shows that they were not much alive to or sympathetic with human suffering. Vijayakumar is of the view that “The reality of the floods doesn’t seem to bother anyone. An oblique reference to the sterility of contemporary Tamil poetry is seen clearly in the line ‘The new poets still quoted the old poets.’”

The name of the pregnant woman who was carrying twins was not mentioned by the old poets. Before birth, she was drowned in the flooded river. The poet feels sorry that no one has written about the destruction caused by the floods. “One of the recurrent concerns in his poetry as a whole is the nature of the human body and its relation to the natural world” (Ramanujan xvii).

The poet uses irony to express the callousness of the old and the new poets who romanticize the floods and ignore the human aspect of loss and suffering caused by the floods. They are not sympathetic with the sufferings of human beings and they are totally callous and indifferent. The poem invokes binary structures: “new poets” and “old poets”, city of “temples and poets”, songs of “cities and temples”, the flood in the poem and the “people” who saw it, a “couple of cows”, pregnant woman with “identical twins”, etc.

R. Parthasarathy’s poem “River, Once” which is a soliloquy of Vaikai, sings of the “river, once of this sweet city” the capital of the Pandyan kings. With eaglewood and stale flowers decking its hair, the river witnesses the river bed being used as toilet even as the bells of the temples ring. He laments

. . . no one
has any use for Vaikai
river, once
of this sweet city (“River, Once”).

The poet uses a powerful mother image, thus making the river lament “Kingfishers and egrets whom I fed have flown my paps.” The river which was once loved by kings and poets, even the “emperors and poets who slept in my arms,” are no longer there showing love. Man, who has been cruel to nature, is brutal even toward Vaikai and hence it laments “I am become a sewer now.”

The river is conscious of its ugliness and dirt, bemoans, as man has neglected and abandoned it and even misused and abused it. The poet bewails the degradation to which the sacred river of the sweet city has been turned. It has become a storehouse of junk, a place for unhealthy and unholy activities. The city of ancient grace has lost its use as the river for the people.

Man is put within nature, as part of natural ecosystems. Consequently, anything which man does, affects the rest of the global system in one way or the other. So, for his own sake, he should not plunder, exploit and destroy natural ecosystems--because in doing so, he is destroying the biological foundation of his own life. It is necessary for man to contribute to the stability and mutual harmony of the ecosystems of which he is a part.

As environmental educators, both the poets seek fundamental changes in the values, attitudes and behaviour of individuals and social institutions through example and enlightenment, not by revolution or chaos. The impact of the river on the poets’ lives fascinated them so much that their poetic images are drawn mostly from the various aspects of the river.

The poems taken up for discussion abound in sarcasm and irony, presenting the poets who represent mankind in general, as thinking of the havoc created by this river, that too consequent to man’s selfish use of the river, obstructing its natural flow with dams. Both the

poems attempt to evoke the river historically, and as it is today, by deploying contrast ironically so that it becomes almost a mode of perception.

Thus the poets attack the poets of the past and the present for their callousness to suffering, when it is so obvious as the result of the floods as in the poem "A River" and also in "River, Once" the same river is used as toilet, which was once an abode for the emperors and poets. River Vaikai which is the water resource for the people of Madurai was placed in the revered position, and honoured and respected by the poets of the past and the present in Tamil literature. Later the poet portrays how the river is dried to nearly a trickle and the destruction it causes during floods, and also how it has become a sewer of the city.

Ramanujan and Parthasarathy are concerned with the individual's attempt to reconcile contrasting cultural heritage. The poems are the products of a specific culture but what make the poems individualistic is the poets' ability to translate a specific cultural experience into the terms of another culture. They show how literature can be used as a powerful vehicle to take to the world messages on ecology. In order to communicate philosophical truths, the writers are "more concerned with the practical aspects of life reflecting their impatience with cluttering conventions and their desire for straight, forthright, laconic and hard-hitting expressions" (Sivadasan 121).

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