

Ecocriticism in Nature-Human interface in the Select Short Stories of Lakshmi Kannan: ‘Muniyakka’ ‘Nandanvan’ and ‘Islander’

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Abstract

The word Eco- Criticism was first coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his work essay entitled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Eco- Criticism. Ecocriticism asks us to examine ourselves and the world around us, critiquing how we represent and construct the environment both “natural” and manmade. At the heart Eco- Criticism, many maintain is “a commitment to environmentalism from whatever critical vantage point” (Buell II). Eco-criticism and Ecology are significant ones in the literary world. Many authors have become environmentally conscious in their writings. Nature has always been considered feminine because of her tenderness, fertility and motherly hood. The paper aims to bring out the importance of nature and its significance in healing the sorrows of human beings. Lakshmi Kannan’s achievement as a short story writer rests mainly on her simplicity and directness of expression. Her short stories present a unique combination of the writer’s sincerity of feelings. The themes of these short stories have been various and came from a very wide field. Lakshmi saw innumerable types of people and situations in life, and all seemed worth seeing. She could sympathize with these innumerable situations and thus comprehend their inner being.

Keywords: Nature, Sufferings, Relationship with Environment, Eco-Criticism.

INTRODUCTION

Michael P. Branch refers to ecocriticism as a:

‘call for cultural change’, which is not merely an exercise in analyzing nature in literature, but a ‘move towards a more biocentric world-view, an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans’ conception of the global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment’ (Reading the Earth xiii)

Paul Shepard bridges the gap between nature and the ‘nature’ of the text when he defines literature that attends to ecology. According to him, essays on nature are:

‘natural objects like bird nests’ since they are ‘as real a part of the community — in both the

one-species sociological and the many-species ecological senses — as are the songs of choirs and crickets’ (64). William Rueckert applies ecological concepts to the study of literature, arguing the need for poems to be studied as ‘models for energy flow, community building and ecosystems’ (110).

He refers to poems as verbal equivalents of fossil fuels, which, however, are a renewable source of energy since they come from the inexhaustible reserves of language and imagination.

Ecocriticism may be considered a continuum that accommodates a wide spectrum of perspectives ranging from the political to the sacred.

Interdisciplinary is an essential aspect of its nature: 'although ecocriticism can touch virtually any discipline, when it translates into action, it generally comes back to its home ground — the human relationship with the earth' (Dean 4).

The stories of Lakshmi Kannan are more sensitive and thought inducing for the readers' minds. Her works are inspiring on eco concerns. Literature has given broad for the natural expression and feelings of the human love towards nature.

One of the main goals in Eco- Criticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react to nature and ecological aspects. Eco-Criticism encourages us to think seriously about the nature of the relationship between humans towards nature. It deals with ethical and aesthetical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis towards human language and literature.

Lakshmi Kannan is a popular Indian writer with adulthood novels, poems and short stories in Tamil and English. She has translated her drifting from Tamil to English. She has scholarly knowledge of both English and Tamil. She wrote six collections of short stories in Tamil under the pseudonym Kaaveri. This paper analyses the ecocriticism concern in dealing with personal life and feelings about the environment they live in from various perspectives. In her short stories from her book Nandanvan and other stories, Lakshmi Kannan emphasizes the importance of nature and its splendour and beauty. Nature plays a very calming, soothing, nurturing element in the protagonist's personal life in these stories. The article aims to emphasize the environmental connection (Physical World) with the world of emotions of the protagonists. Hence we declare the interdisciplinary ecocriticism, which analyses environment concerns and the various ways connected to criticism.

In the short story "Muniyakka", Muniyakka is an old servant woman who has lost her husband and was deserted by her three sons. She likes to be alone and enjoys the company of nature. She lives in a hut built in the garden of Ram Rao's

family. As she has one in her life, she tries to cope with solitude by indulging in soliloquy dialogue with herself by cursing her dead husband Bairappa and her useless uncaring sons.

Muniyakka is very active in her work despite the chilling cold winters of Bangalore. Age is just a number. She works tirelessly in three different places and earns herself for her living. She concludes her days of hard work and enjoys her solace with nature. She is an emotional eater. She wolf's food helpings; she swallows ragi mounds while fully scolding her husband and children. She likes to take a piece of jaggery, sit on nature's lap, and start enjoying nature.

Muniyakka dissents her thoughts into some distance point of darkness. In that still moment, she feels evacuated, and her mind is clean, purged of all disturbing thoughts and stilled to a moot point. She lives in Rao's bungalow, surrounded by a large garden. Segregated on one side are a group of coconut trees and a large jack fruit tree. Muniyakka's house lies under the shade of this beautiful garden and groves.

"To Muniyakka's eyes, the coconut trees seemed to sway around with their 'hair' flying, loose in the breeze, dancing the devil's dance in the darkness of the night" (Nandanvan and other stories 78,79).

Muniyakka, despite being lonely and alone, was betrayed by her sons and a cruel dead husband who only thought of his pleasure and happiness till his death, and her children's thoughts only on the lustful pleasure of their wives. Muniyakka diverts her thoughts to appreciation and enjoying nature; her motherly love is now directed to the garden trees, plants and flowers.

"Collectively, the tree and plants looked like children who had been brought up with care and affection. Muniyakka was very fond of the garden and lavished her affection on it". (Nandanvan and other stories 79).

The play emphasizes the beauty of nature from the viewpoint of Muniyakka; though there is no

special emphasis or implications, the writer tells the beauty of the wonders of nature; she sees the beauty of nature from the emotional aspects Muniyakka's character. She sees the foolish women worshipping the stone snake and begging for favours to give them sun. She ridicules them, saying that she had done the same thing at her younger age, but her sons betrayed her as natural anarchy. This leads her to relinquish, rejuvenate, relish, and revive her love of nature. The story determines that nature is the best teacher, companion, and guide which could free her from her turmoil and confusion.

In this story, 'Muniyakka', the protagonist, lives in a storm in her heart, but her pain is reduced while she is in the lap of nature. Muniyakka's troubled psyche is calmed by the enthralling calmness she feels when she is present in nature, nurturing her and treating all her wounds and pain by its beauty. Man, a social animal, is always interrelated with one another and nature. In this story, Muniyakka is also part of a large ecosystem which cares for her, protects her, feeds her and helps her overcome the turmoil of loneliness.

In the play's first scene (Nandhanvan) itself, the narrator brings the importance of nature and its elements. The writer aptly introduces the idea that though a human being is a social animal and co-exists with nature but tries to evade it from nature. This is clearly shown in the first paragraph of the story itself.

"It is a frontage that seems to allow no place for trees, plants, flowers, grass or creepers. But what a stark contrast over her, wondered the sparrow amazed at the sight as it flew on circling the rear part of the house". (Nandanvan 41).

These lines indicate directly that though the human brain does not appreciate nature like the house's frontage, the human heart appreciates nature like the rear part of the house is filled with nature. "Great God, what a different sight!". (Nandanvan 41). Like the sparrow who appreciates nature.

In the short story Nandanvan, we see a helpless old man who his sons and daughter in-law betray. We can see the writer describing the old

man as a lover of nature and birds, trees, and plants.

"Dense, luxuriant trees, healthy plants and so many varieties of flowers! Roses, petunias, pansies, jasmines, balsam salvia with honeybees. Dahlias big as a human face, hibiscus and many more" (Nandanvan 43)

The writer Lakshmi Kannan has rightly coined the story Nandanvan because his garden is heavenly legendary as c for the old man. Now we see the old man observing his fast he never forgets to feed grains to the birds (Sparrows, Crows, Cuckoo, Woodpecker). This shows his love for nature and its creatures. Thus the author established the connections between human behaviour toward the environment.

"Thatha, the protagonist of this story, lives in his mystical world, where he has a fond relationship with sparrows, crows, cuckoos, woodpeckers, plants and trees; he is a brilliant gardener who by himself created this (garden) ecological paradise. We see a newcomer (Sparrow) coming to Thatha's garden to preach and have some gains, though the three sons quarrel for Thatha's house and properties by the sparrows share the feed equally and live in harmony with nature.

"Some sparrows moved aside to make room for the newcomer" (Nandanvan 42)

Different birds coming to the garden live peacefully among themselves, sharing food, water and space equally; in contrast to it, the son belonging to the same father quarrel among themselves for their father's property, leaving the older man without any peace at his old age. He is left heartbroken regarding his family situation and dies suddenly, not in peace, with a troubled heart. The three sons are not willing to perform the last rituals of their deceased father peacefully without any fight. Even relatives, friends and priests are unhappy about their behaviour.

In this parable, the birds carried the pyre and flies. We do not know whether the last rituals were held or not, but the birds' love shows that he is at last peacefully mingled with nature. Nature shows its power and might in the short

story islander, where a flood causes chaos. Pankajam, the protagonist, is an upper-middle-class housewife, loving mother, devoted wife and an obedient daughter-in-law. Lakshmi Kannan's defines women and nature in her short stories *Islanders*

"There were screaming mothers, swirling waters, old people, sick people, just about everybody who perished along with their huts, children cried out in hunger, their cheeks sucked in. when they got tired of crying, their faces bore the vast hunger of the whole world eloquently in the empty depths of their eyes"(*Islanders* 17).

She carries the full household activities on her shoulder, but her main focus is in the kitchen. Her duty involves taking care of her husband Raghu, her daughter Chitra and her mother – in Law Seetha Lakshmi. She is a saviour who fills her house pantry with all food items for nearly fifteen days.

Nature is not an easy term to define as it incorporates most of the visible manifestations of geography. Raymond Williams defines nature as 'the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings.' Tracing the term's history, he suggests that 'nature' has often been used to describe the 'countryside', the 'unspoiled places', as also 'plants and creatures other than a man.' (Keywords, 1976, Fontana, pp.184-189).

In the short stories of Lakshmi Kannan *Islanders*, flood is used as a symbol of destruction which creates huge losses to life, property and livelihood. In Lakshmi Kannan's *Islanders*, the writer defines nature as "thirsty children furtively drank up the dirty water when their mothers were not looking. Thirty-two people from the district vanished without a trace; many were mothers of children, some were fathers, and others were the elderly ones, their sons, daughters and other relations. They all fell victim to the predatory floods, preying upon the people. Everything succumbed to the enormous appetite of the floods- cattle, men, women, huts, houses, and children" (17). Consequently, human demonstrations were viewed as socially built, and the man got

situated at the focal point of creation. Accordingly, the connection among nature and man was re-imagined. The breakdown of the 'organic system' prompted a dramatic development in the human populace. Beginning interest for work by the early modern upheaval and relative food security supported this development. Simultaneously, logical information and mechanical improvement gave a world vision where innovation was depicted as an answer for every human issue, particularly yearning and neediness.

We hear from the radio transmission that the flood has caused in the normal life of people. Pankajam, on hearing this destructive news, feels guilty that she had stored more items in a pantry that was necessary and could have fed many people, including orphaned children and older adults.

"She had cautiously gathered – wheat, rice, lentil, jaggery, sugar, milk powder, coffee – powder, tea leaves, biscuits, cooking oil and blended in a unified confusion".(Rhythms: A Collection of short fiction 33)

Nature plays as a destructive and protective mother; though nature shows its furious face in the form of a flood, it does not wipe out the entire humanity. But as its anger cools down, normalcy returns and lives are saved compared to nature with Pankajam. She is also a woman who cares for other people who are suffering without food, milk, & shelter. She argues with her husband Raghu and tries to convince him to help the strangled people who have been facing great suffering in this situation.

Lakshmi Kannan makes a vivid connection with Mother Nature and the human nature of Pankajam. How nature protects and destroys and cares for her family and others affected. In conclusion, Pankajam, like nature, is helpless to resolve the current situation as nature cannot self-care itself like ozone layer depletion, global warming, earthquake, floods and famine. Thus Pankajam and nature, both the human and environmental connection, are established in this story.

Nature being mute teaches us everything. Like Wordsworth, Tagore also believes that man's

mind and spirit of nature are interlinked with peace and harmony. When a man opens his heart fully to Nature, Mother Nature communicates her essence in the presence of the state of mind, thus creating harmony and peace between the mind and the man. Nature is the moral teacher who guides man towards perfection.

The more one departs from nature, the more degraded one becomes. Every stage of a man's life changes like the seasons. Life is like Spring which is like the initial stage of a man's life, filled with joy. Summer is like the youth, full of fun, with activities and challenges, the rainy season is blooming and painful, and Winter is like the final stage of a man's life, which is plain and dry. Life is like a book. Every chapter may not have happiness, but it is full of challenges. How one tackles them is what one becomes. With laziness and ignorance, one becomes a burden to himself and society. Tagore writes: "Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection..." (XXXV, Gitanjal 36).

Human relationships in the twenty-first century account and witness the drastic outcome of changes. The dawn of the new century commenced encountering and critiquing the various changes that human articulates in terms of their relationships. The advent of modern, postmodern and technological advancement played a vital role in shaping and changing human thoughts in contemporary times. From the first dawn of civilization until today, human relationships have changed their outlook and content in various ways and different aspects.

Conclusion:

The changes created by the aforementioned forces are visible in every sphere of life, starting from the workplace to an individual's everyday life. With the changes around the world, emotions, feelings, desires and the human bond too changed. And this changed not only human perception and observation but also societal norms and values. Older ethics and practices no longer could remain the same, but they changed by the influences and

application of these progressive thoughts. The highly globalized world gave a platform to cultural exchanges, and consequently, societal values and ethics underwent an extensive transformation. The course of human variation to ecological circumstances was joined premier by the presentation of apparatuses and their utilization by the crude man. The meaning of apparatuses in the investigation of the development of mankind can be acknowledged from the way that this whole cycle has been arranged with regards to the nature of devices and the nature and nature of the material utilized in making the instruments. Humans have only one earth to live on, and we are responsible for our forthcoming destruction unless we are careful of the blue planet. Environmental literary works deal with human nature's relationship and interconnection with eco-literature. Thus, the writer emphasizes the importance of nature and its connection with human beings. These stories are a lovely example of ecocriticism theory where man's connection with nature is inseparable.

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