

**Truncated Portrait of Nature: Unveiling the Era of Ecological
Awakening in Malayalam Literature**

Liz Mary Antony

Research Scholar

St. Teresa's College

Ernakulam

Truncated Portrait of Nature: Unveiling the Era of Ecological Awakening in Malayalam Literature

Kerala is resplendent for its scenic splendour as well as its sizeable contribution to literature. Malayalam literature shared a strong relationship with nature from the very beginnings. Nature was alive in different art forms like painting, sculpture, music, folklore, poetry, novels and so on. Ancient writers always saw nature as a primordial wonder. Hence they admired nature through their works. Ezhuthachan, the father of Malayalam language used a parrot to narrate his epic *Adhyathma Ramayanam*. Through a bird Ezhuthachan instills in us a realization that each and every life form is an indispensable element in this world. Nature was an inevitable background in most poems. The Western Ghats and Bharathapuzha inspired the creative facets of many writers. In the Malayalam literary scenario nature was not just a factor or backdrop. In fact nature was synonymous with human beings.

An ecological awakening took place in the literary history of Kerala from 1970 onwards. The ecological crisis that our nature went through arose primarily from our attitude. For decades we followed the western anthropocentric views. Western anthropocentric value systems see nature in terms of its value to humans. They place humans as the primary and supreme holders of moral standing. So other forms of life remain only as a resource that is to be utilized by human beings. But according to Indian perception both human and nature are one single entity. Indian concepts of nature are highly ecocentric. Ecocentrism places ecosystem at the center. Robyn Eckersley his book *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* says

Ecocentrism is based on an ecological informed philosophy of internal relatedness according to which all organisms are not simply interrelated with their environment but also constituted by those environmental interrelationships. (49)

In Indian mythology rivers, mountains, plants and trees have equal existence with humans. According to Hindu mythology Lord Krishna asked his foster father Nanda to forgo the sacrifice to Lord Indra and to worship Govardhan Mountains which causes rain and thus makes the grains grow. During the Dravidian and the Aryan ages nature was considered as sacred. The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Puranas and Smriti contain the earliest messages for the preservation of ecological balance. In Kerala we celebrate Onam in memory of Asura king Mahabali. Onam is also a harvest festival. It is during the month of Chingham that our main harvest takes place. Here the myth of Mahabali can be attributed to a grain which is pushed into the Earth, where it gets life. The Hindu myth revolves on birth, death and rebirth principle. This same principle is attributed to agriculture. Thus the legacy is continued.

The epoch of novels and stories with ecological perspective emerged in Kerala before 1970s. It was mainly due to the advent and advancement of anthropocentric admiration of man. Before 1970s the focus of novels/stories was the reciprocal relations between human and land, urbanization, environmental conditions etc. A literary revival occurred in the first half of 20th century in Kerala. It was mainly due to the progressive waves of communism. Caste, sub caste, land lordism and royalty were considered ordained by nature, fate or God. During those times the city could hardly distinguished from village. Literature representations connected everyday life and nature. A real renaissance began as a result of the disintegration of a quasi feudal caste based society. Exploitation and inequality behind feudal masks were identified by the downtrodden. It was the Communist movement that restructured the texture of Kerala's social fabric. They fought against feudalism. Feudal lords occupied plenty of

land. But communism ensured ownership right to peasants. These subaltern peasants used the verse of ONV when they led the upheaval. "Nammalkoiyyum vayallellaam/Nammudethakum paingiliye" 'The farmlands where we work / will be ours someday'. Novels during this phase were realistic. Ecological concerns were not the constant focus of the writers as the nature was not injured much. Still a few works of prophetic nature unknowingly emerged. The lead writers were Takazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Uroob and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer.

Astonishing industriousness, courage, self-sufficiency and confidence of the peasants urged these writers to create novels which were so deep rooted with nature theme. These realistic writers found themselves a place in Malayalam literature when they used nature as a medium to speak against feudalism, discrimination and manipulation. Takazhi underlined his connection with Kuttanad and agriculture in most of his works. Uroob remarked that the inspiration and source of novels were the socio-cultural world view of that time. An anxiety caused by ecological imbalance is reflected in Uroob's *Visakanyaka*(1948).

BhoomiyudeAvakashikal(1977) by Basheer echoes a different voice on environment. He yearns to create a sustainable way of life for all inhabitants on Earth. All forms of life should coexist in nature. But ever since man became a numerous species he has affected his environment notably. Intentionally or unintentionally change in human ways affected non-human nature. Basheer pleads to end this. Agriculture, political inclinations, caste and urbanization are some basic factors which influenced Malayalam literature before 1970s.

When man thought of detaching himself from soil, environmental crisis became vigorous. In the 1970s an intense environmental dispute was triggered off in Kerala. The Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project controversy created ecological awareness among Malayali audience. This controversy created a discursive corridor for politics and literature. It would be uncritical to assume that the pervasiveness of ecological concerns among the Malayalam writers was unanimously approved. Prominent writers like Basheer, Uroob, Chemmanam Chacko and O

V Vijayan came forward to educate the public about the aftermath of this project. Poets were actively involved in this issue than novelists. And the name we cannot ignore is that of Sugathakumari. This issue urged Keralites to classify their thinking by looking in some historical depth, presuppositions that underlies modern technology, development and science.

A mass migration of people from Kerala to Gulf countries occurred during the same period (1972-1983). Gulf migrants from working and lower middle class gradually became rich and they gained social status. This Gulf boom found its expression in literature. The impact of migration changed the perception of Malayali. Before migration land was considered as a place for their existence. They shared an unbreakable bond with their native place and land. But when they returned they saw land as an object to be owned. Urbanization breaks the bondage of humans with their environment. Nature is the root of our existence and scathing of roots does not enable the urbanized world to survive its own implications. Literature reflects the impact of migration through the novels of Malayattoor Ramakrishnan and M T Vasudevan Nair.

After 1990s the new philosophies of science increased the divide between human and nature. Earth was treated as an object to earn money. Land became an object of modern culture. People bought land to cultivate cash crops. Value of agriculture increased for the sake of seed. Artificial fertilizers destroyed the rhythm and symphony of nature. But there was a time where man was a slave to his soil; where nature was respected by him. Advancement of science brought a sea change in mentality. From slave he became a master. Nature became an opponent to him and later an enemy to be conquered and plundered. He tried to subjugate the powers of nature which includes water, fire, light and wind. Later this overpowering mentality was delineated on other living creatures. The importance of every species is to be understood not by its strength but by valuing its connection with nature. Man failed to realize this and it resulted in his own threat.

The materialist greed allows one to view belief system as weak. It may gradually result in unanticipated change in the environment, which can be more extensive than the predicted transformation. When antibiotics reduce immunity, flood control measures accentuate floods and fertilizers rob soil of its fertility the problem is not merely between use and misuse of technology. It is rooted in the very process of the knowledge which increasingly gave attention to material gain than the ecological instabilities.

In ancient times we had a Gurukula system where the teacher taught the student everything that the child needs to know. All learning was connected with nature. A life distinct from nature was unimaginable for them. Today modern school system is teaching them subjects. Teaching is restricted to classrooms and the link with nature is broken because of limited space. Today in our age of advancement technologies are growing. Now nature became a background to selfies and our children know nature through 'Farmville'. Future cannot be moulded by avoiding technology/science but by embracing it in nature's ways. But we have reached an age of environmental limits and as William Rueckert points out in *Literature and Ecology*, we

. . . need to see even the smallest, most remote part in relation to a very large whole is the central intellectual action required by ecology and of an ecological vision . . . nature should also be protected by human laws, that trees should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights is one of the most marvelous and characteristic parts of the ecological vision. (108)

An emergence of such concept will provide a strong foundation for the truthful relation with the earth.

Works Consulted

Anand. *Jaivamanushyan*. D C Books, 2012.

Balaram, N.E. "Marubhoomiyude Soundharyam." *Theranjedutha Prabhandangal*. edited by Vallikavu Mohandas, Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2009, pp. 213-220.

Cyril, D.V. *Manushyanum Pravruthiyum*. Current Books, 2007.

Eckersley, Robyn. *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach*. State University of New York Press, 1992.

Love, Glen. A. "Revaluing Nature." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, The University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 225-240.

Madhusudhanan, G, editor. *Harithaniroopanam Malayalathil*. Current Books, 2002.

Nampoothiry, Vyassery Vaman. "Eco-critical Readings of *Visakanyaka*." *Malayalam Literary Survey Kerala Sahitya Academy*, vol.33, no.4, 2013, pp. 14-17.
www.keralasahityaakademi.org/pdf/MLS/MLS_dec13.pdf

Pavan. *Keralam Engane Jeevikunnu*. Green Books Private Limited, 2007.

Radhakrishnan, R., and Joji Koottummel. *Silent Valley: Cheruthunilpinte Naalvazhi*. Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, 2012.

Rueckert, William. "Literature and Ecology." *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, The University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp. 105-123.

Satchidanandan, K. *Indian Literature Positions and Prepositions*. Pencraft

International, 1999.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*. Kali for Women,

1988.