

A LOOK BENEATH THE GROUND

(The Eco-Political awareness emerged in Kerala and its Dialogue with Indian Thought)

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Abstract:

This paper observes the eco-political awareness emerged from the time of 1990s in Kerala in socio-political arena as well as in cultural expressions of art and literature. The environmental issues addressed from that period and its necessary relation with creativity is addressed. Those findings are put in dialogue with eastern concept of ecology especially in Indian Philosophy and Aesthetics. This discussion is most relevant in our times of extreme climate emergency.

Keywords: Ecology, Eco-aesthetics, Indian aesthetics, Political awareness

1. Introduction

The question of ecology naturally leads us to the relationship between man and his environment. Man is not only a part of the nature, but the one and only conscious being in it, in so far as our limited knowledge is concerned. So, man is, on the one hand, destined to obey the natural laws, like any other being of the nature, and on the other, capable of changing the laws for his material comforts. This changing of natural laws is called "the culture", which later on turn out to be the basic point of reference for explaining or involving in any possible events in the Universe.

The basic dichotomy between nature and culture was clearly recognized by the French structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, who tried to define the basic elements, which constituted the term "Man". Man in Western concept is a privileged term to denote male, western, white, rich, cultured being as opposed to female, non-west, black, aboriginal human races. Western modernity has raised such an ontological subject, along with the dawn of industrial revolution and enlightenment with its subsequent progress in the fields of science, technology, rational thinking, secularism, nationalism and capitalism. The blind growth of cultural development in all walks of life has led to the uprooting tendencies of man from nature. The he is away from the nature, the better he is regarded cultured

During the second half of twentieth century, the westerner had to realize the disastrous consequences of human progress, by the exhausting natural resources, global warming, unstoppable green house effect, ozone layer depletion, pollution and so on. This ignited the fire for resistance against development policies, natural excavations, extreme industrialization and blind scientific advancements. The "green movement" in the west has raised the primary question that, with the current rate of utilization of natural resources, there will not be anything left for our future generations. So exploitation of nature can be allowed, when we read between the lines, if it maintains half the pace at which it accelerates presently.

One can never see such a human centered perspective all through the centuries old Eastern tradition. Indian wisdom dates back to 2000 B.C. with a variety of Sanskrit texts, such as Vedas, Upanishads, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Smritis, Puranas and Itihasas. In all these texts, one can find that man is placed not at the centre of the Universe but as a part of it. Mother and child concept is adopted so often to describe man's relation with the nature, and further that man is not the only son of the Mother Nature; others being plants and animals. The polytheism of Vedic period was the necessary evidence for the influence of nature on man. The concept of "Punarjanma" (rebirth or multiple births) is a clear evidence for the non-centrality of man among other species of nature. It is believed that one has to take multiple births as worms, insects, dogs, tigers, elephants and many others to attain the eternal liberation (Moksha). When the ontological part of this philosophy is cut with an occalm's

razor, what remains is the egalitarian concept towards all forms of life in the nature. In the ancient Tamil poetics text Tolkkappiyam, a complete vision of eco-aesthetics can be seen, which deduces aesthetic theories from the descriptions of the literary works of Sanghom age. As Bharathamuni proposed ultimate essence of poetry as Rasa, Tolkkappiyar also had proved it through various natural objects, trees, animals, climates, seasons, natural phenomena, as the supporting elements for achieving the required Rasa in a literary work. Neither of these two grand traditions locate man at the centre of the nature,

2. Eco-political awareness in Kerala

event It was in the year 1978, the first outbreak of environmental activists in Kerala occurred as the central government proposed a multi-crore power project, across the river Kunthippuzha at the site of 90 sq. km. evergreen forest called "Silent Valley". Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad, a non-governmental organization, which till that time was engaged in spreading the scientific knowledge among the mass, fought actively to invite national and international attention to this issue. Environmental activism, thus started, can be seen concentrated against three major areas, viz., pollution, deforestation and natural excavations. The second major in the environmentalism in Kerala was the decade's long struggle against Chaliyar river pollution by Gwalior Rayons Company. The recent issue of Endosulfan in Kasaragode area, the urban pollution problem at Laloor, Thrissur district, and similar issues can also be taken as the vigilance the environmental activists observe to protect nature and lives. Due to the heavy rate of sand mining, most of the major rivers in Kerala are dying to its last breath, even though different protection committees are active for rivers like Bharathapuzha, Pamba and Periyar. Natural excavation issues like Madayippara, Plachimada Cocacola plant and Kanjikkode Pepsi plant are instances of the growing awareness of eco-politics. Anti-deforestation programmes were active at Silent valley, Koorachundu, Peeriya and mangrove forests of the coastal belt

The concept of "one earth, one life" of Prof. Johncy Jacob is a unique perspective, where Man is not written with initial capitals and not even at the centre of the universe. A search for alternative attempts proved successful in "Kanavu" of K.J.Baby and "Sarang" of Gopalakrishnan and Vijayalakshmi. They raise the importance of sustainable development models through their natural educational methods, living in harmony with the nature and producing food through organic farming. The environmentalists are on the road right now, as the two subsequent governments have opened all our natural resources for sale, including the drinking water to the multinational companies, the hot issues being attempts to sell river waters from Malampuzha and Periyar, and diversion of the river Bhavani at Attappady area. Recent attacks on tribal people at Muthanga wild life sanctuary is yet another instance of centralized power politics. The aboriginals were forced to acquire their land after waiting for decades to get their promised land from the government. The ambiguous stand of environmentalists in this issue is a key to the romantic, western hang-over they bear. One can hardly find any group or incident where the environmental activism in Kerala waves off the western paradigm of anthropomorphism. They have never turned up towards an alternative.

3. Creative fields

Ecological standpoint of modern Malayalam poetry can be deduced from two poems of two different poets. One is Kuttippuram Paalam of Edasseri Govindan Nair, wherein the poet envisages the forthcoming threat of urbanization and industrialization, while standing on a newly built bridge at Kuttippuram, across the spinal cord of Malayalam culture, the river Bharathapuzha. He envisions the devils of modernity who spits poison into the river and making it into a drainage. On the other extreme is the poem Sarppakkadu by Vailoppilly Sreedhara Menon, where the poet acts as an advocate of western modernity to put fire on the icons of our blind believes such as "Sarppakkadu", in favour of the new forms of agriculture and capitalistic mode of living. When one is to deconstruct these two poems, it is obvious that a silent cry can be heard from both the poems. The bad omens seen in these two instances mark the launching of an eco-centric philosophy in Malayalam poetry.

The poetess Sugathakumari was first inspired by the Silent valley issue which later made her an eco-poet and an elegy for our dying earth was written by O.N.V. Kurup, who professed the death of mother earth due to the acceleration of man's greed. This fire was later transferred with greater intensity by Methil Radhakrishnan, who wrote a long poetry about earth and death. There are many others coming under this stream like Ayyappa Panicker, Civic Chandran, D Vinayachandran Sachidanandan and A. Ayyappan. The names of P. Kunhiraman Nair and G. Sankara Kurup need special mention with their early poems of anxious vision on the fate of earth and nature.

Malayalam fiction has also produced a good number of works by various authors at different periods, who have anchored primarily on the ill fate of man as "prodigal son". An outstanding model for the atonement of the evils of human civilization and a remedial solution for living in harmony with nature were portrayed by the works of O. V. Vijayan. The novel, Madhura Gayati, a romantic fantasy, was a successful attempt in that direction. Daivathinte Kanmi of N.P.Muhammed, Alahayute Penmakal of Sarah Joseph and Maveli Mantram of K.J.Baby are the three novels focusing on the same issue. Some short stories of T. Padmanabhan, V.P.Sivakumar, N. Prabhakaran; Nadugaddika, a drama by K.J.Baby, films of G. Aravindan are similar attempts in different media. There are various documentaries and docufiction, produced by Malayalees both in English and Malayalam (such as Jalamarmaram on the Chaliyar issue by T. K. Rajeevkumar), which strengthen the awareness of eco-politics in Kerala.

4. Eco-aesthetics

The eco-aesthetics has been realized as a philosophy or a way of life in the field of literature in 1991, when the novelist Anand published a book titled "Jaivamanushyan" (Organic man); in the book he has discussed the situation where the entire mankind has reached in our present age. He argues that man is a part of the nature and at the same time, he is distant enough to observe it from outside. So much so, that there is a dichotomy between identification and alienation, which is never resolved even through centuries old experiments of culture and civilizations. He argues quoting Spinoza, that the nature knows itself through the man

While analyzing religions and their role in bringing man to the present crisis, he opines that, it was a stage of decline in Hindu thought when Sankara reduced the great energy of Vedas and Upanishads of early days to Karma theory and Maya vaada. Eventhough Christianity has conceived the emancipation of man through sacrifice; the Roman leadership has destroyed the very content of that religion. Same is the case with Islam. Thus Anand sums up, listing the greatest enemies of mankind as (1) western modernity, (2) degenerated religions and (3) authentic Marxism. He realizes the relevance of Gandhism, with its point of departure from the capitalistic mode of unlimited production. This blind journey, in no time, will lead us to the complete destruction of humanity as well as our mother nature. The book "Jaivamanushyan" thus raised the highest need for an eco-centered perspective for human existence.

It was Dr. T. P. Sukumaran, an unique personality in folklore, philosophy, literature and ethnomusicology, proposed a theoretical introduction to the ecological aesthetics in 1992. In his long essay, "Eco-aesthetics an introduction", he examines the theoretical postulates in the light of the slogan "return to the nature", by Roussou from within the framework of native folk culture of Kerala as well as the postmodern observations. It may be a contradiction that his view of ecology is human centered as against the post-structural standpoint of anti-humanism.

It may be a coincidence, that the word "ecocriticism" was first introduced by William Rueckert, in his essay "Literature and Ecology: an experiment in ecocriticism, in the same year(1978) when the first major environmental action in Kerala against the Silent valley issue was at its peak. Ecocriticism or "Green" criticism is one of the most recent interdisciplinary fields to have emerged in literary and cultural studies. Some of the sectors of green movement understand themselves as antagonistic to science, which they perceive as one of the root causes of current degradation of ecosystem in its historical conjunction with technology, industrialization, and urbanization. In Ecocriticism Reader, Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environments" and compares it with other activist methodologies such as Marxism and feminism. Rueckert tries to compare biological and literary activities, suggesting that poems, like plants, store energy from their respective communities and that this energy can be used in the world outside of

where it is stored. These were the main inspirations for Malayalam literary criticism to have a different look away from the point of view of man and to speak for a shift in sensibility.

Malayalam critic, Asha menon has established an uncompromising stand among the prose writers with an orientation towards the westerners, whose real energy is derived from the philosophical depths of eastern thought. The mission initiated by him has been launched even before 80's and now the language and the issues he puts forth are getting wide appeal. Reason: the philosophy behind his arguments does not belong to western enlightenment paradigm. Other critics like G. Madhusoodanan, E. V. Ramakrishnan, and K. C. Narayanan are moving parallel in this direction

At present a philosophy which takes its strength from post-modern, antihuman perspectives has been established deep, in Malayalam literature, which speaks out loudly through creative and critical genres. It is a fact that the Malayalam literary institution tries to resist the energy released from this new born baby. Surely, the path is open for further advancements.

5. Conclusion

I invite your attention to a handful of novels by Daniel Quinn, a series of teachings by a gorilla, named Ishmael, who puts an advertisement in a newspaper:

Teacher seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world.

Even though these seem to be a children's story or perhaps a bad science fiction novel, these are the attempts to find out how to live in this world. Ishmael is the teacher who communicates with humans telepathically. He blames human cultures as we are enacting a fabricated story called "culture". Our centuries old experiments of civilizations still do not know how to live! It is really impossible to fairly represent here the multitude of genuine ideas Ishmael presents. They range from fundamental natural laws of ecology, from the effects of modern civilizations megalomaniacal attitude towards science and world, to the cause of society's epidemic of cultural amnesia. In front of this great critic of human civilization, we have no right to save the world". This may not be a surprise to a reader or follower of eastern thoughts, precisely because the stance of gorilla in these novels is the very position where most of the works which belong to this tradition occupies.

The only thing left for us, on the brink of the threat of extinction, is to look beneath the ground, where we stand, like the famous author of One Straw Revolution, Masanobu Fukuoka, who spent his months-long sojourn in America only by looking at the tiny grass beside his feet.

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