



Ecocritical Consciousness in A.K Ramanujan’s “A River”: A Study through Lawrence Buell’s Framework

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ABSTRACT

Wendi Doniger, in her introduction to *The Collected Essays of A.K Ramanujan*, emphasises the transformative role, suggesting that Ramanujan should be read not simply as cultural transmitter but as a critical theorist in his own right. Doniger situates him among global intellectuals such as Freud in the sense that he recast interpretive practices to challenge existing boundaries. Through this positioning, Ramanujan emerges as more than an Indian English poet. He becomes an architect of critical modernity who redefines the relationship between tradition and interpretation. This article draws upon that intellectual positioning to propose a fresh reading of Ramanujan’s poetry through Lawrence Buell’s ecocritical framework. Buell’s idea of the environment as an active presence in literature allows us to reconsider the ways Ramanujan’s poems, especially “A River”, engages with ecological realities. Instead of treating nature as mere backdrop, Ramanujan’s poetry foregrounds the lived tension between inherited cultural rituals and the silenced realities of environmental catastrophe. Such a reading not only amplifies the ecological undercurrents of his work but also connects Ramanujan with global theoretical discourses. By situating Ramanujan at the intersection of cultural translation, literary modernism, and ecocritical theory, this paper highlights his enduring relevance. It demonstrates that Ramanujan’s poetry offers not only cultural memory or iconic critique



but also a profound ethical awareness of human entanglement with environment; an insight which urgently resonates today.

INTRODUCTION

Attipat Krishnaswamy Ramanujan (1929-1993) stands as one of the most versatile figures in modern Indian letters: a poet, scholar, folklorist, translator, linguist, and critic whose works resist being confined with single literary or cultural frame. His poetry embodies a rare synthesis, drawing from his deep immersion in South Indian traditions while engaging with the modernist idiom of the West. Ramanujan is remembered for his meticulous craftsmanship to fuse the Indian cultural inheritance deeply rooted in him with the Western intellectual milieu in which he later immersed himself. While in America, through his masterful translations, Ramanujan introduces classical Tamil and Kannada poetry to Western audiences, making these rich traditions accessible beyond their linguistic and cultural boundaries. With many honours to his name, A.K Ramanujan earned recognition not only as a poet and scholar but also as a global intellectual. Among his most distinguished awards were the Padma Shri from the Government of India, a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, and his election to the American Academy of arts and Sciences. His influence extended far beyond national boundaries; he was sought after worldwide for his insight and scholarship. As his friend and colleague Wendy Doniger observed, “no one who has been exposed to the man or his work will ever look at India or many other things in the same way again” (qtd. in Dimmock and Ramanujan xviii).

A collected volume of poems, representing the finest work of a lifetime, marks a significant milestone in any poet’s career. Such a volume, long contemplated during A.K Ramanujan’s lifetime was ultimately published posthumously. It brings together his three earlier collections- *The Striders* (1996), *Relations* (1971), and *Second Sight* (1986), along with a fourth, *The Black Hen* (first published in *Collected Poems*,1995) which appeared within the collected edition for the first time. Notably the poem chosen for analysis here, “A River”, which I read through the ecocritical lens of Lawrence Buell, also finds its place in this collected volume. As Wendy Doniger notes in her introduction to *The Collected Essays of A.K Ramanujan*, at a time when the American ideological establishment regarded Indian scholars merely as sources of information like the raw fibres to be processed in British mills- Ramanujan taught them how to weave a theory, a folktale, a poem, a book (Doniger 3).

The speaker situates the poem in Madurai, a city renowned for its temples and poets who often romanticise its beauty, portraying it through vibrant rituals, melodious ceremonies, and the divine aura of



its colourful temples crowded with devotees. Ramanujan, however, shifts the focus by drawing attention to an ecological concern: every summer, the river in Madurai dries up, reduced to a mere trickle, suggesting the looming possibility that one day it may cease to flow altogether. The river appears translucent not because of its crystal clarity but because in summer it dries up so completely that every pebble, grain of sand, straw and even strands of women's hair become visible. Once mighty and majestic the river loses its charm, shrinking to the very bottom and exposing even the rusty bars beneath the bridges.

The speaker of "A River" is none other than Ramanujan himself, a fact evident in the poem when he mentions that he was in Madurai for a day during the floods and heard people everywhere discussing the rising water levels in inches. By situating himself within the scene, Ramanujan grounds the poem in lived experience, contrasting his first-hand observations with the inherited tradition of earlier poets. This poem reflects not only the physical and cultural dimensions of the river but also its symbolic and ethical significance. The poem captures the river's seasonal changes and the way it interacts with human life, highlighting the nuanced relationship between nature and society. Beyond mere observation, "A River" explores the ethical relationship between nature and humans, emphasising environmental stewardship (Kumar 17). Ramanujan suggests that humans must care for and protect nature rather than exploit it. Its continuous flow and its power to shape the landscape serve as reminders of its intrinsic value and the need for human vigilance. By stressing the interconnection between humans and nature, Ramanujan implies that responsible actions towards the environment are essential for the well-being of both parties.

Ramanujan's use of imagery such as crocodiles and buffaloes create a vivid ecological picture of the Vaigai river and its surrounding in Madurai. These images underscore not only the natural life that inhabits the river but also its deep cultural and religious significance. In Tamil Nadu, the Vaigai is revered as a sacred river, serving as a site for ritual practices, spiritual rites, and acts of cleansing sins. "A River", is analysed here through Lawrence Buell's conception of environment, which regards nature as an active process rather than a passive backdrop to human activity. Through Buell's reading of the *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, this article examines how Ramanujan's poem highlights pressing ecological realities. In contrast to the traditional poets of Madurai who glorified the river only in its seasonal grandeur, Ramanujan foregrounds its neglected state, drawing attention to the human-made waste and ecological damage that persist beneath the veneer of cultural reverence. As Patel rightly observes, the role of ecocriticism is to help the humans to see nature from a bio-centric view to recognise the inevitability of nature for the sustenance of the living organism on the earth. Indian English poetry for instance, throws the light on the



unavoidability of the human-nature relationship” (Patel 1324). Through this lens, “A River” reveals how human-centered narratives reduce ecological crises to aesthetic description, undermining the biocentric awareness ecocriticism advocates.

“A River” is analysed here through Lawrence Buell’s conception of environment which emphasises the ecological world as an active, dynamic process rather than a static backdrop. Presenting a vivid and realistic picture, Ramanujan draws attention to the piles of rubbish dumped, both intentionally and unintentionally into the river. Although rivers in India hold profound cultural and symbolic significance, their sacredness is often acknowledged only during ceremonial rites. Beyond such occasions, the river is neglected- left unclean and reduced to a dumping ground; an unfortunate but common sight that Ramanujan underscores in this poem.

Ramanujan, a realist himself in this poem draws attention to the callous attitude of poets, both ancient and modern. These poets, in their artistic expressions, fail to capture the essence of realism, merely repeating what their predecessors had written, with only slight variations in narration. Ramanujan’s return to Madurai after a long stay abroad did not diminish his ancient sensibilities or attachment. On the contrary, “A River” serves as his subtle critique of past and present poets, exposing their detachment and self-delusion as they construct poetic fantasies that evade harsh realities. His realism is brought into sharp focus by the flood in the Vaigai River, which he witnessed on his first day in Madurai. What he encountered was people recounting the same stories, emphasising minute details of how the floodwaters rose, how many steps were submerged, and how bathing places were covered. Yet the same floods had mercilessly destroyed three village houses, claimed the life of a woman expecting a child or perhaps with twins, and drowned two cows named Gopi and Brinda. The casual, almost indifferent manner in which poets and people approach human tragedies were often ignores or silenced in poetic tradition. In contrast, Ramanujan’s perspective is deeply grounded in realism, drawing attention to the lives lost and the hardships endure. His returns to Madurai after years abroad did not dilute his Indian sentiments or attachment; rather, it sharpened his critical vision, enabling him to expose the insensitivity and distance in how art and society often respond to calamity. Both old and new poets fail to acknowledge the real suffering caused by the river’s floods. Instead they merely recycle inherited images and traditions; overlooking the stark realities of life and death. They paint fantasies as a way of escaping the harsh intrusion of reality while Ramanujan insists on confronting that very reality through his verse. Ramanujan refuses to accept the casual indifference with which the poets of Madurai address the floods, for their verses betray a striking absence of empathy and emotional engagement. Their portrayals reduce calamities such as drowning, devastation, and the loss of lives- to routine events narrated with



detachment, as if such tragedies were unworthy of serious reflection. This mundane acceptance of suffering unsettles Ramanujan, who observes how poets merely recycle familiar images in their verses. Yet, with each repetition, their lack of originality and emotional attachment becomes all the more apparent. They continue to paint the same images of the flood without engaging with its concrete consequences. As a realist, Ramanujan insists on confronting these overlooked dimensions, particularly the fate of victims such as an unborn child with its mother. In questioning the poets' silence on such realities, he explicitly critiques their creative limitations and exposes the diminished value of a literature that privileges aesthetic repetition over the accurate and humane depiction of lived experience.

The Vaigai flood is depicted as an act of devastation that swept away countless lives, both human and animal. While poets of the past and present have mentioned the flood, their focus remains on its superficial effects on the city's temples and social milieu, rather than on its deeper human and ecological consequence. Such representations reveal an overtly anthropocentric vision, where the river and its flood are considered only in relation to human culture, ignoring the interconnected of ecosystems, nonhuman lives, and the environment itself. From an ecocritical perspective, the calamity is not merely a random natural occurrence but can be read as the environment's response to human actions and neglect. Through "A River", Ramanujan foregrounds the atrocities nature inflicts when provoked, a reality that none of the city's poets have chosen to confront in their verses. Instead, they remained preoccupied in romanticising the river and the grandeur of the city, failing to engage with the genuine suffering and agonies brought by natural disaster. Their poetry thus diminishes the terror of floods, reducing the catastrophe to aesthetic detail, and in doing so exposes not only a failure of literary imagination but also a failure of human compassion. By neglecting to acknowledge the environment as an active participant- compromising both living and non living entities, the poets reinforce a reductive view of nature as mere backdrop, whereas Ramanujan insists on its integral role in the entanglement of human and ecological existence. This critique resonates with Lawrence Buell's conception of ecocriticism, which insists that literature must represent the environment "as a process rather than as a constant or a given" (The Environmental Imagination 8). In the poets' neglect of ecological realities, Ramanujan exposes precisely the anthropocentric tendency Buell cautions against. By demanding attention to the overlooked victims, Ramanujan aligns with Buell's argument that the environment and its disruptions are central to the moral imagination of literature. "A River", therefore not only critiques the indifference of the Madurai poets but also anticipates an ecocritical vision in which human identity, culture, and literature are inseparable from ecological entanglement.



Infusing his artistic expression with an Indian sensibility, Ramanujan employs wit and irony to underscore how the rising floodwaters submerge the ghats- the river steps and the bathing places imbued with ritual and cultural significance. The poets of Madurai, however, remain preoccupied with celebrating this spectacle, admiring the fullness of the river as it engulfs these sacred sites. Yet, amid their verses of praise, there is little concern for the human and animal lives lost to the flood. The drowning of an expectant mother and the two cows is mentioned almost in passing, a casual reference that starkly reveals the insensitivity of a poetic tradition that glorifies the river's grandeur while neglecting the suffering of ordinary beings. Both ancient and modern poets extol the swollen river as a magnificent sight, but Ramanujan's irony exposes the troubling contradiction: a state of celebration that conceals tragedy, and a literary imagination that privileges beauty over empathy.

Ultimately, read through Buell's conception of ecocriticism, Ramanujan's "A River" resists the anthropocentric gaze of tradition and restores ecological awareness. Buell argues that truly environmental texts must recognise the nonhuman as an active presence, resist purely anthropocentric interests, acknowledge human responsibility, and portray the environment as a shaping force rather than a passive backdrop. Ramanujan's poem enacts this very principle: the river emerges not as scenery for human suffering but as a dynamic agent shaping life and memory in Madurai. Buell insists that authentic environmental texts must resist reducing nature to metaphor and instead foreground its agency. Ramanujan achieves exactly this: by detailing the drowned houses, the ironically named cows, and the unborn twins who will never live, he insists on the river's ecological force. The poem thus exposes how cultural memory often beautifies nature's spectacle while ignoring its costs, compelling readers to confront the human and non-human entanglements of life in Madurai. In doing so, Ramanujan aligns with Buell's call for literature that fosters ecological accountability and redefines the human-nature relationship.

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