

REPRESENTATION OF ECOLOGY, NATURE, AND THE NON-HUMAN IN THE SELECT POEMS OF K. SATCHIDANANDAN—AN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Current ecocritical discussions have steadily focused on literature as a space where human connections with the natural environment are formed, challenged, and reinterpreted. Poetry, through its concise language, vivid immediacy, and ability for extensive defamiliarization, holds a distinctly influential role in this discussion. This paper explores how nature and the non-human are portrayed in specific poems of K. Satchidanandan, an eminent Indian writer and poet from the lands of Kerala. The work contends that some poetic works effectively undermine human-centered hierarchies by entrusting ecological agency, voice, and subjectivity upon the more-than-human realm.

Utilizing Lawrence Buell's concept of environmental imagination—especially his criteria for texts focused on the environment—combined with the tenets of deep ecology and biocentrism, this analysis closely examines selected poems to explore how poetic form and language engage with ecological thought. The examination focuses on how imagery, perspective, syntax, and tone either support or challenge the enduring cultural inclination to depict nature as a backdrop, resource, or passive representation of human experience.

The article studies that the analyzed poems go beyond merely illustrating nature; they enact an ecological ethic that acknowledges the inherent worth of non-human life independent of its usefulness to humans. By altering speaker positions, blurring the lines between subject and object, and emphasizing non-human timings and rhythms, these works embody what could be termed biocentric poetics.

This paper adds to the expanding area of ecocritical literary studies and highlights the importance of Indian poetry in influencing ecological awareness during a period of increasing environmental crises.

Keywords:

Ecology, Ecocriticism, Environment, Biocentrism, Nature, Non-human

1. Introduction

English literature, English language studies, literary theory, and criticism across the globe have undergone various developments and changing trends in recent years. The trends comprised a range of socio, cultural, economic, psychological, physiological, and human-centered developments and concerns. This development and change also led the way where writers, theorists, and critics started to think from a new perspective, where they

decentered humans. This de-centered human approach paved the way to study and analyze any work of art and literature from different perspectives. Ecocriticism is one such theory that follows this trend and has become one of the major schools and frameworks of study.

Ecocriticism explores the connections between ecology, nature, literature, and the human. It addresses the representation and examination of

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nature, environmental issues, socio-cultural matters linked to the environment, and perspectives on nature. It examines how individuals in their cultures act and react to nature, the environment, ecological concerns, and the non-human. Additionally, increasing societal focus on environmental harm and technological progress has garnered significant interest in ecology and ecocriticism. It provides a unique method for interpreting and comprehending literature that broadens the range of literary and theoretical inquiry within the context of the natural world.

The environmental movement and the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 started the rise of ecocriticism. Carson's work blurred the line between nature writing, science, and advocacy, and it stirred a generation of readers. It was in 1980 that ecology and environmental concern gained momentum. Ecocriticism was initially conceived by Joseph Meeker as a concept known as "literary ecology" in his work *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* (1972). The phrase "ecocriticism" was created in 1978 by William H. Rueckert in his article "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Glotfelty remarked, "An indication of the fragmentation in the initial attempts is that these critics seldom referenced one another's writings; they were unaware of each other's existence... Each was an isolated voice crying out in the wilderness." (xix) However, ecocriticism—in contrast to feminist and Marxist critiques—did not solidify into a unified movement in the late 1970s. During the mid-1980s, academics started collaborating to define ecocriticism as a genre, mainly through the efforts of the Western Literature Association, which aimed to reposition nature writing as a legitimate non-fiction literary genre. Scholars had been adopting an ecocritical perspective since the 1970s, but they typically operated independently until ecocriticism gained greater institutional focus in the 1990s. The widespread focus on local identities in cultural studies and identity politics during the late 1980s and early 1990s created a framework where ecocritical approaches could integrate more seamlessly than with poststructuralist variations of theory.

The pivotal event for the field occurred with the founding of ASLE (Association for the Study of Literature and Environment) in 1992, co-established by Cheryll Glotfelty, Michael P. Branch, Scott Slovic, and other academics. ASLE advanced in establishing the academic framework for ecocriticism by initiating an in-house journal, *ISLE* (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment), in 1993. In her preface to the 1996 book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty offers a functional definition: "ecocriticism examines the connection between literature and the natural world." In 1990, at the University of Nevada, Reno, Glotfelty was the first individual to obtain an academic role as a professor of literature and the environment.

Up to now, there have been two phases of ecocriticism: the initial in the 1980s and the subsequent in the 1990s. The second phase built on the first, extending the scope of environmentalism. Ecocritics from this wave reinterpreted the concept of "environment" to encompass both natural and urban settings and questioned the differences between human and non-human as well as nature and non-nature.

Lawrence Buell, one of the foundational voices of ecocriticism, argues in *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) that an environmentally oriented text is one in which the non-human world functions as an active presence rather than mere scenery, where human interest is not treated as the sole measure of value, and where nature is understood as a living process to which human beings are ethically accountable (Buell 7–8). This ethical orientation is deepened by Arne Naess's concept of deep ecology, which rejects the shallow environmentalism that protects nature only for human benefit and instead affirms the intrinsic value of all living beings independent of their usefulness to humanity (Naess 95–96). Furthermore, biocentrism reaffirms that all living things have inherent worth, not just humans. Philosopher Paul Taylor argues in *Respect for Nature* (1986) that every organism has a "good of its own"—a life worth living on its terms (Taylor 45).

2. Research Gap or Questions

Though there was a steady growth in the field of ecocriticism across the world, there remained a gap in Indian literature and Indian writing in English, particularly from the South. Therefore, the following research questions arise:

South India features some of the planet's most valuable ecosystems—the Western Ghats, the Cauvery River, the Kerala backwaters, and the Southern coastline. Therefore, in what ways do poets from India, especially from the South, depict these particular ecosystems under the lens of ecocriticism? Do they grieve for the downfall of nature? Do they honor their biodiversity? Do they allow the rivers and forests to speak for themselves? And in South Indian English poetry and works of translation, do animals, trees, rivers, and other non-human beings exist as autonomous living entities with distinct voices, or are they simply employed as symbols for human feelings? In what way can we interpret these poems through the lens of the non-human world?

3. Objectives

1. To analyze and critically assess how poets from South Indian English—especially K. Satchidanandan—depict nature, ecology, and the non-human realm in their poetry.
2. To examine how K. Satchidanandan's poetry transcends viewing nature as simply a backdrop or symbol, instead portraying animals, trees, rivers, and ecosystems as dynamic, living entities—employing a non-anthropocentric ecocritical framework.

4. About The Author And His Works

K. Satchidanandan (b. 1946, Pulloot, Kerala) is a prominent Indian poet, critic, editor, and translator who writes in Malayalam and English. He possesses a Ph.D. in post-structuralist poetics from the University of Calicut and worked as secretary of the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi (1996–2006). His main works in English consist of the poetry anthologies *Summer Rain* (1995), *So Many Births* (2001), and *Stammer and Other Poems* (2005), along with the

critical works *Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions* (1999) and *Indian Literature: Paradigms and Praxis* (2008). Awarded more than twenty national and international accolades, his poetry is profoundly connected to the ecological and cultural scenery of Kerala, interacting with nature, political defiance, and the non-human realm. His writings have been translated into over twenty languages, making him one of South India's most globally acknowledged literary figures.

Celebrated poet Jayanta Mahapatra described his first English collection *Summer Rain* as containing poems of "great strength and power, a moving tribute to the generation in which we live." Italian critic Carlo Savini identified him as a poet who "resists all kinds of mass ideas and conditioning" and "celebrates his inner freedom even while respecting the real values of man and his soul."

5. Analysis

Current ecocritical discussions and discourse fall under the aforementioned second phase. It has steadily focused on literature as a space where human connections with the natural environment are formed, challenged, and reinterpreted. Poetry, through its concise language, vivid immediacy, and ability for extensive defamiliarization, holds a distinctly influential role in this discussion. This paper explores how nature and the non-human are portrayed in specific poems of K. Satchidanandan, an eminent Indian writer and poet from the lands of Kerala. The work contends that some poetic works effectively undermine human-centered hierarchies by entrusting ecological agency, voice, and subjectivity upon the more-than-human realm.

This research study focuses on the representation of ecology, nature, and non-humans in the poems of K. Satchidanandan. It explores the way in which humans and nature interact with each other.

For the study only one poem named *Disquiet: Autobiography, First Canto*, has been selected. Since the poem is autobiographical in nature, it is a lengthy translated work consisting of seven sections, and each section could be considered as a single poem. Hence, this poem gives ample scope for research under an ecocritical framework. A prominent feature of K. Satchidanandan's poetry is his special focus on the natural landscape, nature, and the non-human. The landscape of Kerala and his hometown, its hills, rivers, sea coasts, animals, birds, insects, flowers, trees, plants, rocks, temples, etc., resonate in his poems.

Satchidanandan gives a stunning introduction to his poem in the first section, where he makes the readers witness the speaker's birth in this living world. He introduces to the readers the first natural process of birth and figuratively connects it to the process of life in the natural world. The first line itself visualizes the process of how a seed germinates and bursts open the earth's crust to start its life journey. He uses comparisons where nature has a discourse with human birth. Phrases like "impending rain" and "salt that leaves the sea" are not just mere comparisons or a backdrop that beautifies the text but are the important life-giving elements of nature. Rains in the natural world stand for new and renewed life, and salt is the source of energy for new life.

I came, bursting open a proverb's belly (Canto 1).

one afternoon of impending rain
gasping like the salt that leaves the sea
fighting my exile from the dark eternity
of the dead and of gods
screaming against being hurled into
the loveless light of the living. (1-7)

In the same section, the process of life cycle becomes denser under an ecocritical lens. The human

body at birth is described not in social or cultural terms but in the vocabulary of the natural world. The speaker is characterized as "damp like a swamp, with that marshy smell," a depiction that merges the line between the human form and the wetland environment, anchoring human origin in the distinct ecological setting. This corresponds with what Alaimo (2010) describes as "transcorporeality"—the recognition that "the human is continually intertwined with the nonhuman world" (p. 2), in which the body is not distinct from but rather interconnected with its surrounding environment. The portrayal of the newborn as "blood-soaked" and resembling an animal contests anthropocentric beliefs about human identity, exemplifying what Buell (1995) describes as a fundamental aspect of ecological writing—acknowledging that "human interest is not the only legitimate interest" (p. 7). Notably, the child is described as having "squirmed out of folktales," indicating that human identity arises not just from biology but also from the oral ecological memory of the community—the narratives and folktales grounded in the South Indian region. Satchidanandan presents birth as a deeply ecological occurrence, framing the human self as an extension of the nonhuman realm rather than its ruler (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996).

I was a blood-soaked riddle, say the (Canto 1).
neighbours,
and still had only a single head.
Father says I was damp like a swamp,
with that marshy smell.
And sister tells me I was lean
having squirmed out of folktales. (14-20)

In the second section, Satchidanandan enriches his ecocritical perspective by depicting the infant's sensory awakening solely through the non-human realm. The five senses of the child—taste, smell, hearing, sight, and touch—are developed not only

through human culture but also through the natural surroundings: the bitterness of the chenninayakam plant, the kanjiram tree, cooking rice, and the tart flavor of tamarind. This illustrates what Buell (1995) refers to as "environmental orientation" in literary works—in which the nonhuman environment is accorded real presence and plays an active role in influencing human awareness (p. 8).

The vayamp was tasty. (Canto 2)
 ...smelling of the fear of generations
 ...my ear learnt to distinguish between
 ...my nose, between the boiling paddy's aroma
 (16-24)

In the third section, Satchidanandan attains the most extensive ecocritical point of the poem, completely merging the line between the human self and the nonhuman realm. The father represents a cloud, while the mother symbolizes a brook—human connections are portrayed as ecological events, implying that the strongest human ties are intertwined with the natural forces that support existence. This illustrates what Plumwood (2002) refers to as the "relational self"—an identity formed not by detachment from nature but through deep connection with it (p. 9). The stanza's most extreme ecocritical action is the speaker's metamorphosis through various species and ecosystems—expanding like grass, blooming like laburnum, and transforming into a leopard—performing what Alaimo (2010) describes as "trans-corporeality," wherein the lines between human and nonhuman bodies become porous and adaptable (p. 2). The nonhuman realm here is not a mere passive setting but a dynamic participant—parrots convey the speaker's hunger to the forests, fish express the speaker's thirst to rivers, and rivers merge into the cradle—illustrating what Garrard (2012) refers to as "non-human agency" in ecological texts, where animals, plants, and water systems have their own communicative and reactive

abilities (p. 11). The phrase "I spread like grass and became a psalm for the color green" holds great importance, as it frames ecological transformation as a type of spiritual insight—mirroring what Huggan and Tiffin (2010) refer to as the "sacred ecology" rooted in postcolonial literary customs, where the nonhuman realm possesses moral and spiritual power surpassing its practical value to humans (p. 16). The speaker's assertion: "I turned into a leopard to know the grammar of instinct." strongly confronts human-centered knowledge—implying that authentic comprehension of the world necessitates leaving behind the human perspective entirely and embodying the animal's body and instinct (Buell, 1995; Nixon, 2011).

Father was a cloud (Canto 3).
 ... mother, a warm white brook
 ... The parrots knew my hunger;
 they told the woods about it.
 ... The fish knew my thirst,
 they told the rivers.
 ... I spread like grass and became
 a psalm for the colour green.
 ... I turned into a leopard to know the grammar
 of instinct. (30-45)

In the sixth section, Satchidanandan depicts the natural realm as a group of dynamic, welcoming entities—leaf, flower, grass, stone, and rain—each striving toward the human self with meaning and intent. This illustrates what Buell (1995) notes as a key characteristic of ecological writing, in which the nonhuman realm has "its own subjectivity" instead of just acting as a setting for human experiences (p. 7). The portrayal of grass touching with "tiny green fingers" and stones conveying impending pain illustrates what Bennett (2010) refers to as "vibrant matter"—the acknowledgment that nonhuman entities possess their own energy and ability to influence the human realm (p. 2). Most importantly,

the depiction of rain as a baptism into "nature's religion" substitutes institutional spiritual power with ecological experience, establishing the natural realm as the main setting for moral and spiritual development—what Huggan and Tiffin (2010) refer to as "sacred ecology," wherein nature holds a spiritual authority that anthropocentric perspectives have historically marginalized (p. 16).

Every leaf invited me into its vein, (Canto 6).
 every flower, into its fragrance and
 honey.
 Grass caressed me with its tiny green
 fingers,
 stones told me of the pains in store,
 the first rain baptized me
 into nature's religion. (80-84)

In the final section, Satchidanandan signifies the conclusion of the infant's ecological purity with a singular, foreboding natural image—a tree adorned with red leaves, black blossoms, and alluring fruits shining with "a million eyes." The tree serves both as an ecological and symbolic entity, marking the child's transition from a state of complete unity with nature to a realm of knowledge, temptation, and separation—reflecting what Garrard (2012) calls the "fall narrative" rooted in Western ecological imagination, where the loss of innocence is inseparable from the loss of harmony with the natural world (p. 51). The tree's unsettling colors—red and black—and its watchful, many-eyed presence suggest that the nonhuman world itself bears witness to this transition, reflecting what Bennett (2010) calls the "thing-power" of natural objects, their capacity to exert moral and psychological force upon the human subject (p. 6).

My infancy had come to an end. (Canto 7)
 A tree with red leaves and black flowers,

heavy with tempting fruits
 shone in the sky with a million eyes. (130-132)

Therefore, K. Satchidanandan's poem "Disquiet: Autobiography, First Canto," in its entirety, is an ecocritical poem that traces human identity not through social or cultural formation but through ecological involvement. From the swamp-like body of the newborn to the sensory education provided by indigenous plants, rivers, and rainfall, and finally to the ominous tree that closes the poem, Satchidanandan consistently positions the human self as inseparable from the nonhuman world that surrounds, shapes, and ultimately judges it. The poem emerges as a rare example of South Indian English poetry that does not merely use nature as metaphor but grants it genuine agency, voice, and moral authority. In doing so, Satchidanandan fills a significant gap in the ecocritical study of Indian English poetry—offering a deeply place-conscious, non-anthropocentric ecological imagination rooted in the biodiversity, oral traditions, and spiritual landscape of India and Kerala and demanding that ecocriticism expand its canon to include such regionally and ecologically specific voices.

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