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## **Revisiting Malayalam Eco-poetry in the Post-flood Scenario: a Reading of Selected Poems**

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**Abstract:** The disastrous floods and landslides that devastated large areas of the state of Kerala in July-August 2018, raised numerous questions about dominant development discourses. At a time when the current version of development is being contested, and the view that it should be re-defined with greater concern for environmental well-being is gaining more acceptance, this paper re-visits the work of eco-poets in Malayalam, in an effort to unravel the ecological message that forms their subtext. Eco-poetry in Malayalam challenges current models of development based on the ruthless exploitation of the natural world and creates a powerful counter discourse that is based on respect and reverence of the natural world. Such poetry subtly embodies the ecological concepts of inter-connectedness and holism and warns us of the dangers of severing our bonds with the biotic world in our pursuit of short-sighted "development" goals. Poets like Sugathakumari remind us of the value of what has been gradually lost by continuous exploitation of the natural world, and suggest that the way forward lies in re-defining our 'modern' attitudes towards the natural world. While re-awakening in us, the awareness that we are merely a small part of the great web of life, they urge us to regain the eco-centric values embedded in our own traditions.

**Keywords:** Malayalam Eco-poetry; Poetry of Sugatha Kumari, Eco-centric Values and Development.

The devastating floods of 2018 will be etched in the collective memory of the people of Kerala for a long time to come. The unprecedented torrential rains that lashed the state in August 2018, and the resultant floods and landslides, claimed precious lives across Kerala, and washed

away entire masses of land, eroding and transforming the topography of many regions of the state. Several thousand homes were destroyed, while livelihoods of many were affected since small industries and local enterprises were damaged beyond repair by the deluge. Several agencies, including the World Bank, have assessed the economic impact of this natural disaster, though the psychological impact of this traumatic experience is yet to be fully appraised.

The 2018 floods created reverberations in the creative imagination of a deeply disturbed society in Kerala – poems and short stories centred on the flood theme have been appearing continuously in the literary space of Malayalam. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's famous short story "Vellappokkathil" ("In the Flood") has been read and re-read with renewed interest as a story that captures the tragedy unleashed during an equally devastating flood in 1924 (the year 1099 in the Malayalam calendar), spoken of as the "flood of '99" by old-timers.

While scientists continue to debate whether or not the floods of 2018 could be directly attributed to climate change, there is a general consensus that environmental degradation and lack of proper environmental planning heightened their impact. In an interview published in 'India Today', Chandra Bhushan of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), New Delhi said, "The floods in Kerala were caused by climate change and the disaster was exacerbated by bad development practices, particularly in the Western Ghats and other ecologically sensitive regions of Kerala." Leading ecologist Madhav Gadgil also viewed it as a "man-made calamity," and blamed "irresponsible environmental policy" for the disaster, citing quarrying as a major factor responsible for the mudslides and landslides (India Today, August 17, 2018). In an article titled 'A people's Campaign to re-build Kerala' (The Hindu, August 30, 2018) Gadgil reiterates this view: "There is no doubt that the short-sighted attempts in building man-made capital (buildings in hilly forests, encroachments on wetlands and rivers, and stone quarries) while ignoring the attendant degradation of natural, human and social capital, have played a significant role in exacerbating the problem," and points out how laws to safeguard natural capital are flouted with impunity. This disaster, like many others across the country, thus raise numerous questions about dominant development discourses and the visions of development upheld by successive governments in the country.

It is not as if the events of 2018 came as a total shock – environmentalists had been sounding warnings for years, especially

regarding the degradation of several areas of the Western Ghats. In the year 2011, Madhav Gadgil submitted a report that designated the entire Western Ghats as an Ecologically Sensitive Area, and laid down guidelines for conserving such areas. The report categorised the Western Ghats into three zones of varying ecological sensitivity, severely curbed human interventions in the area, especially activities such as quarrying, construction of new dams and railway lines, clearances for mining and establishment of polluting industries. This report submitted by Madhav Gadgil, one of India's finest ecologists, was derided and abused as being "anti-farmer" and "anti-development" by those who had vested interests in these areas.

At a time when the dominant version of development is being contested, and the view that it should be re-defined with more concern for environmental well-being is gaining more acceptance, it would be worthwhile to re-visit the work of creative writers who had expressed misgivings similar to those voiced by environmentalists. Environmentalist activism in Kerala has always drawn sustenance from creative writing – in fact, the strength of the Silent Valley movement, one of the earliest environmental resistance movements in Kerala, came from the leadership of writers like Sugathakumari and N.V. Krishna Warriar, whose writings created a literary discourse that carried the message of the movement into the hearts of Malayali readers. The movement witnessed an unusual flowering of creative writing with strong environmentalist undertones – 'Bhoomikkoru Charamageetham' (O.N.V.Kurup), 'Kaadevide Makkale' (Ayyappa Panikkar), 'Kunje mulappal Kudikkaruthu' (Kadammanitta) and 'Marathinu Sthuthi' (Sugathakumari) were all written during this period, and published together in an anthology, *Vanaparvam*. In the introduction to this anthology, poet Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri explains how this writers' collective was formed with the intention of launching a literary battle against the dominant development model that destroyed natural resources (Namboothiri 25).

These texts conveyed the urgency of the ecological mission of the Silent Valley movement more effectively than the best scientific writing on conservation as emphasised by Sugathakumari herself in 'Silent Valley: a Case Study'(14) - - and in making it a truly popular movement. These writers inaugurated a tradition of eco-poetry in Malayalam, and in retrospect, many poems in this body of writing, seem almost prophetic in forewarning disasters like the 2018 floods. The following section of this paper attempts a reading of some poems of Sugathakumari, the best-

known poet in the Malayalam eco-poetic tradition, in an effort to unravel the ecological message that forms their subtext.

Sugathakumari's oeuvre is marked by her sensitivity to the natural world; her passionate commitment to an environmentalist ethic becomes more pronounced with her poems of the Silent Valley period – 'Marathinu Sthuthi' ('Hymn in Praise of the Tree'), and 'Thames Nadiyodu' ('To the River Thames'). 'Marathinu Sthuthi' ('Hymn in Praise of the Tree') is not a Romantic effusion on the beauty of trees, but a thanksgiving that acknowledges the role of trees in the great web of life, in maintaining balance in the environment and in ensuring the well-being of humanity. Adopting the form of a 'sthuthi', a prayer, the poem bows to the tree which blesses us with a bounty of fruit and flower, and is our constant companion throughout all stages of life. Sugathakumari likens the tree to the god Shiva, who as Nilakantha consumed poison to preserve the universe – the tree likewise inhales all toxic elements to release pure, life-sustaining air. The tree, says the poet, imparts life to the soil and, when the floods come raging, ensures that Mother Earth is not swept away; the poet tearfully touches the feet of the tree, the true protector of Mother Earth, and worships them. Even when humans relentlessly cut trees down, they continue to shower kindness and blessings on us. The tree nurtures us with all it has – from its roots to its highest branches, and in return, we create wounds on its heart with axe and fire.

The poem is a passionate expression of thanks that humanity owes to trees and an apology for the mindless decimation of the natural world. The poem concludes with the poet wondering, "the tree is all forgiving - but will Mother Nature forgive us? When is She going to turn a look of fury and rage towards us?" These words are particularly significant at a time when continuous deforestation, especially in the Western Ghats has taken its toll, leading to rapid erosion, and eventually causing landslides and mudslides of unprecedented magnitude.

By recreating an age-old tradition of tree-worship, this poem appeals to a sense of environmental concern that lies dormant within Indian traditions – this is not environmentalism that speaks the imported language of the Western academy. 'Marathinu Sthuthi' succeeds in reminding us how much our lives are intertwined with the non-human world. Not only does the tree sustain us with a bounty of fruit and flower, but it also helps bring down the rains, prevent erosions and landslides and protect Mother Earth - yet humans decimate huge forests for narrow commercial interests. This poem is a sincere, tearful apology for the wrongs done to the non-human world in the name of



'development' and also a poetic reminder that sooner or later, humans will have to encounter the fury of an unforgiving Mother Nature.

A public intellectual of unusual stature, Sugathakumari has, for several decades now, been voicing her concern about the onslaughts against the natural world in the name of development, through her addresses and writing. She has been working tirelessly, as the title of one of her prose anthologies suggests, as "Kaadinu Kaaval", a watchful "sentinel of the forest". As the critic S. Saradakkutty points out, long before environmental issues had come into public focus, Sugathakumari had begun to question the excessive interventions into the natural world that she witnessed around her (205). Her engagement with ecological concerns begun during the Silent Valley period, continues in later poems such as 'Oru Paattu Pinneyum' ('One More Song'), 'Kurinjippookkal' ('Kurinji Flowers'), 'Ninglaen Lokathe Enthu Cheythu?' ('What have you done to my World?'), and 'Paschimaghattom' ('Western Ghats') all of which give voice to the non-human world, which has been stifled in the name of development.

In 'Kurinjippookkal', Sugathakumari wonders whether the beautiful 'neelakkurinji' - a flower that blooms once every twelve years in the Western Ghats, and has been celebrated in South Indian culture from the classical period in Tamil literature onwards - will survive in the consumerist culture of modernity where the natural world is sacrificed at the altar of commercial interest and the relentless pursuit of 'progress'. The poem conveys Sugathakumari's apprehension whether these flowers would continue to cover the Western Ghats with their radiant blue colours and expresses her fear that in a world where utility and commercial value reign supreme, the meadows of neelakkurinji flowers in the Western Ghats, may give way to rubber plantations and developmental projects. The fragile beauty of these flowers become in this poem, a metaphor for the entire non-human world which is under threat from the commercial greed and short-sightedness of humans.

Poets from Kalidasa onwards have celebrated the picturesque beauty and majesty of the Western Ghats - Sugathakumari's poem 'Paschimaghattom' (2013), deviates from this poetic tradition in that it not only captures the extraordinary grandeur of these mountains, but is also a celebration of its unusual biodiversity and its uniqueness as an ecological zone. UNESCO lists the Western Ghats as a World Heritage Site in recognition of its "Outstanding Universal Value ... manifested in the region's unique and fascinating influence on large-scale biophysical and ecological processes over the entire Indian peninsula." The UNESCO

document particularly notes the influence of the mountains of the Western Ghats on the Indian monsoon weather patterns. "A significant characteristic of the Western Ghats is the exceptionally high level of biological diversity and endemism. This mountain chain is recognized as one of the world's eight 'hottest hotspots' of biological diversity along with Sri Lanka. The forests of the Western Ghats include some of the best representatives of non-equatorial tropical evergreen forests in the world. At least 325 globally threatened species occur in the Western Ghats" (whc.unesco.org).

'Paschimaghattom' is a poetic evocation of the incredible species richness of the Western Ghats which makes its conservation so crucial; the astounding variety of colourful butterflies and moths, the immense green canopy that cools the earth, the hundreds of varieties of plants and creepers, the myriad insects, flowers and grasses – all together, says the poet, create the cornucopia that is the Western Ghats. Acknowledging their crucial significance in intercepting the life-giving south-west monsoon, the poet says that "these are the blue mountains peaks, which with their numerous green arms, lovingly embrace the monsoon clouds, and gently make them yield their moisture to the thirsty earth". The dark, secret, inner spaces within the mountains, says the poet, belong not to humans, but to its unique denizens – the beautiful orchid, (the 'ipsea malabarica'), the flying squirrel, the lion-tailed macaque, and the Malabar hornbill. This Paradise, which Sugathakumari believes to be the secret abode of Vanadevi, the forest goddess, where humans have no right to trespass, is rudely awakened to the disturbing noise of development, to the terrible blasts in the quarries, where entire mountains are shattered to serve narrow commercial interests.

The report submitted in 2011 by the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel chaired by Madhav Gadgil, expresses similar concerns about the human interventions in these mountain ranges, and the degradation that is now evident in them; the Western Ghats, the report says are "the protector of the Indian peninsula, the mother of the Godavari, Krishna, Nethravathi, Kaveri, Kunthi, Vaigai and myriad other rivers," and points out how its mantle "has been torn asunder by the greed of the elite and gnawed at by the poor, striving to eke out a subsistence. This is a great tragedy as this hill range is the backbone of the ecology and economy of south India." (v).

'Paschimaghattom' is a poetic expression of anguish at the insensitivity of those who plunder this "treasure-trove of biological

diversity" (Ministry 9) with impunity, through unregulated quarrying and other interventions. Sugathakumari's warning note at the end of the poem sounds prophetic – for those who carve out entire mountain slopes, she says, it is too late to set right their wrongs. She warns those hands which tear down the mountains, set fire to them for narrow selfish interests: the wounded mountains will punish us with unbearable heat, drought and death since all water sources have dried up. The once benign mountains will turn furious and send down a torrent of stone, tree and flood, and then where, she asks, can we humans turn for solace? Her ominous words came true in the recent floods when all districts in Kerala within the Western Ghats, experienced landslides of unprecedented magnitude, with a village, Panniyarkutty in Idukki district, being almost entirely destroyed. In an interview published in the Malayalam daily 'Mathrubhoomi' dated August 25<sup>th</sup> 2018, Madhav Gadgil blamed rampant quarrying, which led to deforestation and blocking of natural streams for these landslides, a view endorsed by several others who studied these unusual phenomena.

After the floods of August 2018 and the devastating landslides that affected almost all the mountainous regions of the state, there is a general feeling that disregarding the warning signals sent out by environmental researchers, was proving to be disastrous for the state, especially for ecologically sensitive areas such as the Western Ghats. During the post-flood phase, as the state looked at possibilities of reconstruction, Madhav Gadgil's views were sought out by many. In one of the many interviews granted to Malayalam media, Gadgil outlines a plan for the future: "There should be a long-term plan for resource utilisation... All unauthorised quarries should be shut down. Wetlands, paddy fields and lakes should not be filled. Mangroves should not be destroyed"('Mathrubhoomi' dated August 25<sup>th</sup> 2018); clearly better environmental governance and regulations are the need of the hour.

Sugathakumari's poems and eco-poetry in Malayalam generally, challenge current models of development based on the ruthless exploitation of the natural world and create a powerful counter-discourse that is based on respect and reverence of the natural world. In a culture where nature is commodified and made into a saleable tourist spectacle, they question the inherent hubris of our modern attitude that the non-human world exists merely as resources for human comfort and 'progress'. Such creative writings subtly embody the ecological concepts of inter-connectedness and holism and warn us of the dangers of severing our bonds with the biotic world in our pursuit of short-sighted



"development" goals. The writing of poets like Sugathakumari remind us of the value of what has been gradually lost by continuous exploitation of the natural world, and suggest that the way forward lies in re-defining our 'modern' attitudes towards the natural world. While re-awakening in us, the awareness that we are merely a small part of the great web of life, they urge us to regain the eco-centric values embedded in our own traditions, to revive what the eco-critic Lawrence Buell calls " a culture of environmental concern" (3).

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