

Rivers in Tulsidas's *Sri Ramcharitmanas* and Ramanujan's *A River*: A Comparative Ecocritical Study

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Abstract

This paper examines ecological consciousness through comparative study in Tulsidas's *Sri Ramcharitmanas*, and A K Ramanujan's *A River*. The description of rivers in 16th century epic *Sri Ramcharitmanas*, and the river in 20th century poem *A River* is explored through ecocritical study that focuses on representation of nature, environmental degradation, and human interactions with ecological systems in literary text. The research aims to show how water bodies are portrayed in ancient time, and in Anthropocene.

While Tulsidas presents natural rivers; Ganga, and Mandakini as an active, and conscious participants in the Ayodhya Kand of the grand bhakti epic, A K Ramanujan presents the river Vaigai in Madurai, with seasonal draughts, flood, and anthropocentric apathy. Though both the texts follow entirely different historical, ideological, and linguistic divergence, but both texts share ecocritical recognition. The rivers being non-human beings are treated by the poets as co-existing entities, and they are portrayed as they hold strength to humble the human hubris.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental Consciousness, Nature–Culture Relationship, Anthropocene, Environmental Degradation, River Ecology, Anthropocentrism

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INTRODUCTION

In the literary, and cultural imagination of the Indian subcontinents, rivers carry foundational status. They have not only served as geographical mark or economic resources but also have work as spiritual sanctuaries, cultural centres, and metaphorical mirrors of human ethics.

In pre-colonial literature, nature was primarily perceived as harmony where ecological balance was found among cosmic order, spiritual truth, and ethics. Contrarily, Indian English poetry accepts an ecocritical realism, addressing environmental deterioration, climate change, and socio-literary apathy commonly followed by natural catastrophe.

This research paper presents a comparative ecocritical study of two seminal works: *Sri Ramcharitmanas*, a devotional epic of Goswami Tulsidas composed in sixteenth century, and *A River*, a mid-twentieth century poem penned by A K Ramanujan. This study seeks to analyse a central question in Indian ecocriticism by juxtaposing a postcolonial modernist poem with a pre-modern devotional text: How does the literary treatment of river ecosystem shift from pre-modern spiritual devotion to modern environmental realism, and what fundamental ecological commitments bind them together over time?

Theoretical Framework

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of relationship between literature, and the physical environment. Lawrence Buell says that ecocritical inquiry evaluates how literary texts portray ecological relationships, challenge anthropocentric worldviews, and embraces environmental awareness. Anthropocentrism focuses on human centred belief that natural world exists for human utility or for aesthetic experience. Ecocriticism, in literary studies, examines key themes such as; the representation of ecosystem, and nonhuman landscape, interaction of human with natural system during time of stability, and disaster, and the ethics of representation, especially how literature can idealize nature or confront real environmental crises, and human sufferings.

The application of this theoretical framework enables the study to investigate how Tulsidas integrates nature into sacred, ethical ecosystem, whereas to critique the romanticization, and idealization of nature's decay in poetry, Ramanujan employs irony, and satire as ecocritical tools.

The River as a living Eco-Spiritual Entity in *Sri Ramcharitmanas*

In *Sri Ramcharitmanas*, rivers like the Ganga, and Mandakini are treated as living entities rather as a static backdrop. Tulsidas portrays them as conscious participants in the natural, and moral world.

In the *Ayodhya Kand*, the arrival of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana at the banks of the Ganga during exile becomes a moment of deep ecological, and spiritual resonance:

तियतरङ्गसमअम्रितधारा।सरससुहावनिसबदुखहारा॥

tiyataraṅgasama amrita dhārā | sarasasuhāvanisabadukhahārā ||

"Her waves are like streams of nectar, sweet, charming, and the destroyers of all afflictions."

- (Ayodhya Kanda, Chaupai 100)

The physical properties of the river like waves as *taranga*, and stream as *dhara* are demonstrated as inseparable from its agency of being destroyer of all sorrows. Tulsidas, here, establishes a non-anthropocentric perspective by showing river's active presence that takes human exile, restore peace, and interacts directly with humans.

The Mandakini river adapts its physical state to match an ethical human presence in the episode of Chitrakoot in *Ayodhya Kand*.

सरितासरजलअम्रितजैसा।त्रिबिधसमीरबहइसुखजैसा॥

sarītā sara jala amrita jaisā | tribidhasamīrabahaisukhajaisā ||

"The water of the rivers, and lakes turned like nectar, and the three kinds of breezes blew delightfully." - (Ayodhya Kanda, Chaupai following Doha 137)

In Tulsidas's view, nature, and humanity share a reciprocal term as the health, and ecosystem of river responds to moral human existence.

The River as Stripped Physical Reality in *A River*

A River of A K Ramanujan holds a stark contrast to the idealization of rivers by Tulsidas in his epic. The river Vaigai is situated in Madurai, city of Temples that is a historical center of Tamil culture, and literature. The poet in the opening lines of the poem strips the river of conventional poetic charm:

"In Madurai,
city of temples, and poets,
who sang of cities, and temples,
every summer
a river dries to a trickle
in the sand,
baring the ribs of sand..." - (Lines 1–7)

Ramanujan does not describe river as ideal nectar stream or destroyer of sorrow but presents its physical description as a vulnerable natural body that is a subject to seasonal draught. The poet does not celebrate river for its abstract beauty but exposes its harsh realities.

In further lines, the poet writes:

"...straw, and women's hair
clogging the watergates
at the rusty bars
of the bridges with patches
of repair..."- (Lines 8–12)

Where Tulsidas describes rivers flowing with cosmic grace, Ramanujan exposes the reality by showing the hindrance in the flow of river which are the human debris like straws, and hair. Here, the human interaction with the river is recorded through pollution, ignorance, and insensitivity towards natural body.

Instead of the distinct historical contexts, and ideological orientations, a comparative study reveals few significant confluences between Tulsidas, and Ramanujan.

Both the selected texts for study appear to reject the idea to demonstrate the animals merely as setting rather they are given equal space in ecological system.

जलचरखगमृगसुरभिसुहाए।सरिततीरसबरहहिंसुहाए॥

jalacarakhagamṛgasurabhisuhāe | saritatīrasabararahimsuhāe ||

"Aquatic creatures, forest birds, animals, and cattle live together happily along the riverbanks." - (Ayodhya Kanda, Chaupai following Doha 102)

Tulsidas explicitly defines non-human fauna as equivalent inhabitants of ecological community in *Sri Ramcharitmanas* when Ram travels across riverine habitats.

In a similar vein, while describing the catastrophic flood, Ramanujan exhibits an ecocentric awareness. He recounts the devastation brought about by the Vaigai, but he does not confine the loss to theoretical figures:

"...it carried off three village houses,
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows
named Gopi, and Brinda as usual."
— (Lines 20–23)

Ramanujan gives non-human animals a unique identity, and moral significance by calling the cows Gopi, and Brinda. Both poets assert that animals are valid co inhabitants of the river landscape whose destinies are linked to natural cycles.

The riverine serves as an equaliser where human status is humbled for both poets. In *Sri Ramcharitmanas*, the exiled king Ram must negotiate with Kevat, a humble boatman surrendering his royal status to cross the river.

In *A River*, the community suffers loss amid floods on the bank of Vaigai. The river functions as a physical location where human vulnerability is revealed in both works.

Both works differ on their interactions with literary, and social traditions. Tulsidas's aim in composing the religious framework is to foster respect for nature as divine creation among mankind. The river is a symbol of both physical, and spiritual rejuvenation. Ramanujan focuses his criticism on literary tradition of glorifying nature ignoring real sufferings.

Ramanujan employs poetry to criticize poetic apathy, while Tulsidas uses poetry to elevate nature to sacred significance. He reveals how literary traditions can neutralize environmental events by putting aesthetic pleasure ahead of moral obligation.

Conclusion

A comparative ecocritical analysis of *A River*, and *Sri Ramcharitmanas* highlights the evolution of Indian literature's interactions with riverine settings across time. An eco-spiritual perspective based on pre-colonial reverence, in which nature is harmonious, responsive, and connected to human ethics, is presented in Tulsidas's epic. The modernist poetry by Ramanujan offers an environmental realism that demystifies natural processes, revealing ecological vulnerability, and human apathy that reduces nature to literary devices.

Yet, the study shows the pre-modern devotional literature, and modern postcolonial poem share core ecocritical commitments as rejection of the idea of strict anthropology by granting agency, and identity to non-human animal, and recognition of riverine sites as vital ecological, and human epicenter.

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