



## Reading Indian folktales through green lens with special reference to A.K. Ramanujan's folktales from India: An ecocritical perspective

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### Abstract

The revival of retelling folktales of India potentially occupies enough space in research field. The folktales are deeply rooted and nourished by the human experience as served an authentic mirror. Nature is the predominant backdrop of the folktales though the tone of each tale varies like didactic, symbiotic, conversation of nature and so on. Especially, they never forget to celebrate the nature and its functions. Indian folktales enrich with indigenous culture and capture the reminiscences of eco-centric lives. A.K. Ramanujan's tales showcase humanity that intimately entwined with nature. Ecological ideas permeate in all stories. Women in his folktales are often equated with nature and the environment what ecofeminism defined. The symbiotic relationship between humankind and nature is evident. Human body is often compared with trees. Each story captures ecological sensibilities in its own inimitable way. Speaking with trees and non-human creatures, transforming bodies from human to animals, biological relationship with animals is quite common in these tales. As a reservoir of information, this collection gives adequate resources to trace ecological ideas. This paper is an effort to bring out the contextualizing the text in ecocritical perspective.

**Keywords:** Folktales, Ecocriticism, symbiotic relationship, anthropomorphism, interconnectedness, ecofeminism

### Introduction

Folktales of India is being the wealth of Indian literature as they serve as a very authentic mirror of rural and aboriginal life style of the natives. they are rooted in general human experience. The stories are enriched by the soil. They have not changed much from the very early times i.e, they crossed the sea shores as an oral format. In recent days, the revival in the field of research about folktales can be evident. By the own interest there are many researchers are collecting, recollecting, retelling, recording the indigenous stories from each side of India. There is plethora of opportunities to do research in various concepts in the field of folktales. But it will be appreciated if the folktales are looked through ecological lens; because the folktales may not preserve history of the time or teach moral lessons but they are the medium to know about the interconnectedness between nature and humankind. Folktales, in simple terms, are the reservoir of human experience with nature. They have no boundaries and unable to confine them into a particular country or literature or particular author. In fact, literacy is not needed quality to create any folktales but the creative mind with the knowledge for nature can do. Folktales can be found wherever the humankind exist as they are for whole humanity. Indian folktales itself can compare with the folktales of other countries. Similarities can be found as they are travelled a lot from people to people, generation to generation and country to country. To maintain the essence of the stories, the tales are narrated with a connectivity of the local or regional dialects in its own spontaneity. A.K. Ramanujan, <sup>[5]</sup> one of the pioneering figures of modern Indian literature in English gives his hands in the field of Folktales also. As a folklorist, he spent his valuable time to collect the stories from India and took at most care in retelling them which entails original substance. The book Folktales from India contains hundred and ten

stories from twenty-two languages of India and represents the vitality of India's ageless folklore tradition. Though the stories are moving in different directions, the thread of ecology can bind them together. Trees, animals, birds, the earth, ocean, clouds and any form of nature can serve as a character in the tales. Localities, indigenous practices and rustic people are the major catalysts to bind the stories under the concept of ecocriticism. The very term ecocriticism defined as "the study of the relation between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xxviii) <sup>[2]</sup>. This paper also follows the very idea of ecocriticism and studies the relationship between natural world that represented in the collection with humankind.

### Discussion

The characters in the short story collection get physical and psychological healing in the lap of the nature. Nature solaces the innocents in all possible way. In "The Barber's Secret", the barber feels psychological healing from the tree with whom he reveals the king's secret as he prohibited to tell that to any humankind. He addressed the trees like 'punga', 'iluppai' and 'padiri' tree as his friends and revealed his secrets with them. After that only, he relives from the killing laughter. In another version of the story, the barber gets fatter and fatter till he tells the secret to his wife, who also faces the same issue. She decides to tell the secret to the earth through a dig in the earth. After covering the dig, they find a tree that grows; the flute and drumstick made from the tree will broadcast the secret. Tree is an archetypal symbol in Indian culture where tree is worshiped as a deity. Cutting tree is not an auspicious act among them. The trees appeared in this story collection are connotative symbols of home. For some extent, the trees are the meeting spots of thieves, girls and animals. On the other hand, trees are given shelters to the innocents. In this story collection,

there are many trees appeared and played significant role. In a story titled “The Clay Mother-in-law”, the heroine was hiding under a tree where she met thieves and treasures. In “Two Sisters” story, the younger one found shelter in the tree for seven days. In another story a mahul tree asked a man to perch on its branches as a guest. In a story about virtue and vice a thief pleaded the tall tree that “O tree, O tree, save me! (297)” which helped him by giving hiding place and eventually became a victim as its fragrance stuck on his body forever and he showed the tree to the king in fear. As an innocent victim, the tree was cut down mercilessly. In another story, tree symbolizes in a different perspective as the heroine can change herself into a flowering tree. Her body parts are compared to the parts of the tree what ecofeminism believes. In Akbar and Birbal story, the crooked tree symbolizes the son-in-law of anybody as old proverb suggested the son-in-laws are always crooked. Birbal hilariously pointed out, “That tree is crooked because it is the son-in-law of all the trees in the forest” (114). The palmyra tree leaves are used as a tool to write a letter and palmyra trunk helped as a weapon in tiger’s story. Women-centred tales are served as the examples and supported the concept of ecofeminism as mentioned earlier, “The Flowering Tree” is the heart stirring story in this collection in which female body is compared with the flowering tree in certain patterns. The process of transmigration from a girl to flowering tree symbolizes the stage of puberty in every girl’s life. In the transforming process, the girl warned her husband how and when to pour water on the flowering tree and strongly advised him as “Remember, pluck all the flowers you want, but take care not to break a twig or tear a leaf (136)”. This caution is also a metaphorical idea about sex. Unfortunately, she was exploited by her sister-in-law who with her friends did not heed to this warning note and broke the twigs. As the tree got wounded, she turned as lame and misshaped figure. This story showcases the mild tendency of womanhood and its different stages with the beautiful comparison with flowering tree. In some other stories, the representation of women breaks away the stereotypical idea of woman as a pawns or prizes in the hands of males. Sona and Rupa can be categorised as revolutionary against incentive relationship asked the sandal wood tree to save them from their own family by telling “Higher, higher, O sandal wood tree!”. The sandalwood tree grew higher touch the sky. It split and took them inside the tree. They become the part of the tree and vanished within it. This act makes a point clear that the women strongly believes that no one can help them except nature as they think they are a part of the nature as they became. The “Two Sister” story is also worthy to mention here in which the demised sister grows from bamboo tree and snake guards where her hair and skull covered up. A Punjabi story titled “Bopoluchi” showcases how nature warns her against the dangerous thief who kidnapped her. A crow, a peacock and a jackal sang a same song to her as follows: Bopoluchi, beware! Smell the danger in the air! It’s no uncle that relieves you But a robber who deceives you! (9) The symbiotic relationship between and animals is also healthier in many tales. In “Sukhu and Dukhu” story, the nature initially expects help from Dukhu for that she receives rewards later from the nature itself. Dhuku listened to the wind and helped cow, horse and a tree; they helped her with valuable gifts. The stories like “The Kite Daughter”, “The Parrot called Hiranman” are the

vivid pictures of human’s personal relationship with the natural world. The Kite looked after a child as its own daughter and helped her in many ways until its death. Whenever the girl needs help from the Kite, she sings a song, O wind That shakes the leaves of this banyan tree, bring me my mother, Bring me my mother, my kite! (125) Hiranman is the parrot of a king which served as a loyal companion even in his worse situation. The snake which is typically portrayed as an enemy to humankind in many literary texts. Still, in one of the stories the snake and the lion helped the man from the conspiracy as an act to show their gratitude. The treatment of animals in this story collection outlines the concept of biocentrism where “humans are neither better nor worse than other creatures but simply equal to everything else in the natural world” (Campbell 128). In another story a tiger adopted a kid and brought up him as its own son. In “Shall I Show My Real Face?”, the heroine exposed her grief to the crow which helped. Interconnectedness is a fundamental ecological concept. Everything in nature is connected with an invisible thread. If anything disturbs in the cycle, it will affect the whole system. In the folktale “The Dove’s Egg: A Chain Tale”, the blacksmith’s wife steals dove’s egg from the hollow of the big tree which led to the consequences of the following, the ant and crawled inside the elephant’s trunk and bit it in the softest place, very hard. This made the elephant dash into the pool of water and stir it up. The water splashed and began to put out the fire, which went mad and burned the white beard of the old man, who beat the dog, who ran after the cat and bit her. The cat caught the rat, who gnawed the bowstring of the hunter’s bow. The hunter tied on a new one and shot an arrow at the pig, who went and dug up all the yams of the blacksmith’s wife. The blacksmith’s wife knew at once what she had to do and carefully put the dove’s egg in the nest in the hollow of the big tree. (270-71) Several folktales in this collection highlight the concepts of preservation and conservation of nature and its interconnectedness. A.K. Ramanujan <sup>[5]</sup> has finished this story collection with an Oriya song which traditionally sung by people at the end of the story telling. The song also elucidates how the ecological cycle is disturbed and interrupted by human interference in a comic way. My story is done. The flowering tree is dead. O flowering tree, why did you die? The black cow ate me up. O black cow, why did you eat the tree? The cowherd didn’t look after me. O cowherd, why didn’t you look after the cow The black ant bit me. O black ant, why did you bite the baby I live in the dirt and when I find soft flesh, I bite. (384) People’s intimacy with nature is clear in many stories as the characters know the nuances of nature in all walks of life. For instance, the traditional knowledge about nature depicted in “Brother’s Day story”, in which the sister and brother travelled in the middle of the jungle; when they feel thirsty, the brother said, “Wherever I see herons circling in the air, below them I’ll find water” (21). In the same story when the nature threatened the brother to kill him in various occasion, the sister saved him by providing some gifts; she gave a necklace to the river as a holy sacrifice, a cup of milk to the snake, a little lamb to the lion and five toy pebbles to please the tree. These offerings saved her brother’s life. These incidents showcase the communication with nature is balanced and reciprocal. Reincarnation or transmigration, also one of the themes in the story suggests a man-nature relationship through a close-knit bond of the regenerative

powers of nature. Therianthropy is the reflection of shapeshifting that speaks of transformation of a man into animal or a tree and vice versa. The untold stories of Gond are changed their forms into a part of nature as tree, snake and river. "Heron Boy" is the story in which the mother gave birth to a heron and looked after him until he turned to be a "real flesh-and-blood boy!" (163). The story entitled "Shall I Show My Real Face?" serves as an example of transmigration in which tiger took a shape of learned brahman and married brahman's daughter. In "Living Like a Pig" story, the guru foresaw his next life as a pig and did not want to live like pig as he thought it's a lowly life. But when he became a pig, he enjoyed what he hated earlier and asked his disciple "Don't kill me. I want to live on as a pig...it's great. Just let me go (149)". In a different light of ecocriticism, the tales of this collection reflected the real relationship between nature and humankind. Folktales as a platform to renovate our relationship with nature.

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