



ECO-SENSIBILITIES IN THE “AKAM” POEMS OF SANGAM LITERATURE

Dr. A.R. UMA RAMAMOORTHY

Assistant Professor of English, Saraswathi Narayanan College

Madurai – 625022

e-mail: unasn70@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

In the ancient time, man lived along with Nature. Hence, the harmony between man and Nature made him produce literature that glorifies Nature-culture interference. All the renowned literatures of the world exhibit a serious concern for the fundamental issues related to environment. Hence, it can be stated that Sangam literature announces that Nature is part and parcel of human life. Here “Akam” poems of Sangam literature comes for an aid and enhances man to understand the importance of Nature in his life. Hence the new branch of scientific study of Nature, “Ecology” evolved as a branch of knowledge and this has naturally echoed in literature and resulted in the evolution of eco-criticism. Deep Ecology is a movement which promotes an awareness of the oneness and interconnectedness of all life and its cycles of change and transformation. This deep concern over Nature through philosophical view is known as ‘Eco-philosophy’ or ‘Ecosophy’. The poets of Sangam age minutely observed how the climate of a region and its natural resources lend something to their own energy and to the character of its inhabitants and how their manners and modes of life undergo an imperceptible change owing to their influence. In fact, those were days when man was more dependent upon Nature and therefore his habits and tastes were moulded by his environment and he himself was more or less a product of Nature’s handicraft. The poets fill the poems of “Akam” by getting tint and colour from Nature and have made their poems produce everlasting interest not only to man’s life but also to Nature, itself. Wordsworth’s observation, “The world is too much with us” absolutely reflects the perceptions of “Akam” poets.

Keywords: Akam, Sangam literature, Ecosophy, Ecocriticism, handicraft, *tinai*, and *andril*.

Introduction

Literature is regarded one of the powerful modes of communication. In the ancient time, man lived along with Nature and hence the harmony between man and Nature made him produce literature that glorifies Nature-culture interference. The ancient texts like The Vedas, The Upanishads, The Bible, and The Quran emphasize the need for close proximity between Man and Nature. These holy texts, perhaps with a view to safeguard the purity of environment recommend a life style which inculcates a sense of respect for Nature in our life. These texts are blessed texts for they deal not only with the relationship between man and God but also

the fine and frank treatment of harmonious relationships between human and their natural surroundings. In this sense, all the renowned literatures of the world exhibit a serious concern for the fundamental issues related to environment. Hence, it can be stated that Sangam literature is one of the ancient texts that announces the world that Nature is part and parcel of human life. The Sangam literature announces the world that if man tries to live away from Nature, he has to face the adverse consequence in the form of environmental degradation.

The modern man has plundered the Mother Earth and even the Universe in the name of exploration of knowledge about these heavenly bodies and also for the advancement of science. This has resulted in environmental degradation. Hence man has turned towards the past to explore the values of Nature. Here "Akam" poems of Sangam literature and other ancient texts come for an aid for he needs to understand the importance of Nature in his daily life. Hence the new branch of scientific study of Nature, "Ecology" evolved as a branch of knowledge and this has naturally echoed in modern literatures of the world and resulted in the evolution of a new branch of critical study called eco-criticism. This new branch of critical study of literature, eco-criticism is also called 'green (cultural) studies' and 'eco-poetics'. The eco-critical study includes Eco-feminism and Ecosophy. There are two different study of ecology. They are 'Shallow Ecology' and 'Deep Ecology'.

Deep Ecology is a movement which promotes an awareness of the oneness and interconnectedness of all life and its cycles of change and transformation. A new paradigm of science, the Metaphysics of Space and the Wave Structure of Matter offer great insight into explaining the dynamic unity of reality. Thus, the Deep ecologists' realization about 'All is One' and interconnected is felt by many of the scientists of the world. This resulted in the realization of the conception, all matters are discrete particles. The dynamic unity of reality is not a new idea, its foundation lies with the ancient philosophers and poets. For thousands of years, they have gazed at the stars and known that one thing must exist that is common to and connects the many things within the universe. This deep concern over Nature through philosophical view is known as Eco-philosophy' or 'Ecosophy'. Unfortunately, and tragically the modern human society has lost the holistic connections between universe or Nature or god. We are 'bleeding at the root because we are cut off from the Earth' as D.H. Lawrence stated. Hence this paper aims at focusing on the eco-sensibilities of 'Akam' poets of Sangam Literature who have produced 'Akam' poems with eco-philosophical or ecosophical views.

Discussion

No man ignores the power of Nature over man's thoughts and feelings. The dark and gloomy Nature rouse him to solemn awe and the gay landscape with blue sky and silver clouds give him joy and pleasure. This was noted by Tamil poets thousands of years ago; especially in the Sangam age when Tamil Nadu was a nest of singing bards as England in the golden age of Queen Elizabeth. The poets of Sangam age minutely observed how the climate of a region and its natural resources lend something to their own energy to the character of its inhabitants and how their manners and modes of life undergo an imperceptible change owing to their influence. In fact, those were days when man was more dependent upon Nature and therefore his habits and tastes were moulded by his environment and he himself was more or less a product of Nature's handicraft. This interconnection between man and his environment is pronounced by an ecocritic, Cheryl Glotfelty in her introduction to *The Eco Criticism Reader* and she states: "Nature and culture do not exclude each other but be entangled with each other in multiple ways" (iv).

As Nature became part and parcel of life, it echoed in minute details in Sangam literature especially in the verses on the esoteric themes of love. The influence of Nature on man is not so much clear in the exoteric poems called "Puram" which deal with subject other than the esoteric aspects of love. Yet there are descriptions of Nature in brief and sometimes in detail in "Puram" poems but not so frequently as in the poems of "Akam". In the poems of "Akam" Nature is personified and sometimes it is considered as the counterpart of the hero (Thalaivan) or heroine (Thalaivi) and some other times it is treated as a friend of the hero or heroine. As esoteric poems treat coexistence of Nature with man very greatly and so it is necessary to analyse the effects of the change of Nature on man.

The Sangam poets have not only painted landscapes as scenic backgrounds for the play of human love, but have also depicted their heroes and heroines as projecting their own personal feelings into Nature and discovering there, sometimes a sympathetic response to their emotions, at other times an unsympathetic repulse. This very coexistence of Nature with man is termed as "Pathetic Fallacy" in later century by a British cultural critic, John Ruskin in Volume 3 of his work, *Modern Painters* (1856): "to signify any representation of inanimate natural objects that ascribes to them human capabilities, sensations, and emotions" (Abrams 203). When the hero and heroine are glad and prosper in their love, they feel that Nature's beauty increases in their ecstatic state; at other times it brings only cruel mockery to the rejected lovers with dark and cloudy days. Thus, the external world is brought into direct relationship to their individual feelings in the "Akam" poems. This shows the close proximity that exists between man and Nature.

While depicting Nature, some of the Sangam poets are found to be content with the most delightful scenes as a whole; some enter into details and depict the nuances of it; and some have genuine appreciation and love for Nature in her milder forms and some in her wild forms. The poets' minds freely wander in woods, deserts, meadows, shady grooves, plains with their blossoms, smell and colour of the land; their minds sometimes soar up and roam on the mountain and in the sky and some other time the minds of the poets go very deep into the bottom of the sea and river to explore the beauty of them. They picture birds, animals, fish, reptiles, etc. with awe, in their inspired condition and add beauty not only to the texts but also to the Nature, itself. Their ability in depicting the sensuous delights of Nature's forms, colours, sounds, and motions immortalizes their poetry as well the Nature.

The geographic control of life is an idea recently reached by science and newly expounded in treaties on Anthropogeography. But the ancient Tamil poets have somehow understood the influence of universal bodies on natural environment and in turn on man and have established conventions in their works especially on various aspects of life. Love is the most established theme of "Akam" poems and so Nature has a vital role in the lives of the hero and the heroine. The convention of using the theme of influence of Natural world on man proves that ancient Tamil poets were inspired by acute details of Nature and their influence on human life in its different aspects. Thus, the literary conventions of the age are seen not only in such gracious blending of the human passions with the beauties of Nature but also in the classification of the sentiments of love in accordance with the different regions and assigning them to particular seasons and hours.

The Sangam poets depict the various stages of love between the hero and heroine, beautifully, by blending the love theme with the harmony of nature. The stages are, meeting of lovers, parting of lover from his love by promising his return soon after raising money, the heroine's sufferings because of the long absences of her lover, urging her lover to marry her after his return from business venture, and the union of the lovers in their marriage. The romantic theme of "Akam" poem has such varieties of situations in the course of love journey which goes hand in hand with the change of seasons in the Natural world:

Akam poetry typically explains the background of the lovers' story around three concepts: time and place (mudal), natural setting (karu), and their actions (uri). The poems often rely on these natural settings as metaphors for the lovers' actions, blending seasonal changes, the external natural features, and interior states. The concept of place and emotion were also connected with poets drawing on a set of symbols from a specific regions' "gods, food, fauna, flora, music" and other local landmarks or symbols or the regions... this can be interpreted as an early poetic for the 'ecosystem' concept. (en.m.wikipedia.org)

Generally, the heroine is accompanied by her lady companion who helps her to pursue her lover and sometimes the companion herself woos the lady's lover on behalf of her lady. The companion also plays a prominent role in consoling the lady while she is away from her lover and probably affected by love-sickness. *Natrinai* verses 232 and 106 depict a typical situation of romantic love in verses of supreme quality. The heroine wants to meet her lover and wants to share the ecstasy of love with him. In the beginning, she exclaims that the mere presence of her lover itself is sufficient to match with her passion. The lovers meet in the mountain grove adjacent to the *tinai* field and the growth of *tinai* crop with rich ear like leaf-blades has a great part to play in

the course of their love. The crop understands the feelings of the lovers and that helps them have their meeting in the shade of it.

In fact, the heroine's father bids her to watch the field to scare away the parrot that come there to eat the fully grown *tinai* corns. This makes the heroine's lady companion happy and she advises the heroine to utilize the opportunity. In the *tinai* grove, the heroine meets her lover and shares her love for him. After a few days, the heroine wants to inform her lover of her cares and anxieties in leading such a secret life of love. She also informs the *tinai* crop that she watches it only on account of her lover's boundless affection towards her and also his concern for her friend. With hope, she requests the crop to grow still fertile and rich with ears. This address is meant to be heard by the hero who has come just then and whose presence she pretends not to have noticed. The verses inform the readers the message that in ancient days the crops grew in full fertile and also they helped man in each pursuit of life.

The contribution of lady companion of the heroine in her love course is worth mentioning because like Nature, the lady companion also helps her lady without any gain from the lady. The duty of the lady companion is beautifully depicted in the verses of *Ainkurunuru* 289 and *Akananuru* 28. In course of love between the hero and heroine, there comes a stage of wedding between them. But the hero decides to marry the lady but for some reasons postponed it. Hence the lady is in a position to goad him to marry her after the harvest. However, the lady may not have the chance to meet her man after the harvest. So the lady's companion informs the hero about the lady's situations - the mother of the lady has smelt the love-affair and so she may not allow the lady to go the field saying that the *tinai* has grown full and is ready for harvest. Above all, the mother will not let the lady watch the field till the harvest since her melodious voice invites the parrots instead of scaring them away. The lady companion also advises the lady to scare away the parrots in full voice or the mother will not allow her to go to field for guarding the crop:

You don't understand the situation
because of your passionate love.

My friend! Let me tell you!

The water flow to the field has
been stopped. Even before the
mature, long clusters of millet
have been plucked, stubble has
appeared among may green stalks.

You wait for your lover who wears a
honey-dipped flower garland with
many fragrance and crosses many
mountains with his fast dogs.

You should rise up regularly and make
loud noises to chase the parrots,
causing your flower garland to sway.

Otherwise, your mother will say,
"she does not know to chase parrots",
and will send someone else instead.

Then it will become difficult for you

to embrace the wide chest of your man. (*Akananuru* 28). (sangamtranslationbyvaidehi.com)

The lady companion understands the adverse situation prevailing in the house of the lady. So she warns both the hero and the heroine about their inconvenience in marrying each other by listing many hurdles that come up in their course of love. She warns both the lover about the attitude of the lady's parents in the above verse. In *Natrinai* 376, the lady companion further understands the impediments that await in the course the lovers. Hence, she seeks the help of the parrots, who are witnesses of the love between the hero and heroine. She sends the parrots to inform the hero about the helpless condition of the heroine as her mother forbids the lady to watch the field, thinking that the lady is careless in watching the field and allows the parrots to eat away

the *tinai* ears and leave only the bare stalks for she is meeting her lover in secret without executing her duty of watching the field. The verse not only depicts the concern of the lady companion for the lady and her lover but also brings out the fertile condition of the land. The *tinai* which has grown in full looks like the trunk of an elephant and that feeds the parrot folks. Still, it has enough to feed the mankind. This shows the generosity of Nature which has profuse to feed both the fauna and human kind. The different kinds of flowers mentioned in the verse highlight the geographical and climatic condition of the region where they grow. Perhaps, the flowers are abundant and that they decorate not only the land but also the human beings of the place where they grow:

Oh parrots! You who are here with
your flocks of relatives with curved
beaks to eat our red millet on big, bent
spears, as big as the trunks of elephants
with ears as large as winnowing trays,
that are generous to you like a donor
who gives without limits!

Carry short message to our man who
is under an asoka tree, wearing a strand
tied with *kullai*, *kulavi*, *koothalam*,
kuvalai and *illam* flowers on his head,
adorned with a fine garland on his chest,
and bearing a tightly strung bow.

Don't you know her unfair mother will not
allow her to guard the millet field any more,
and fearing, might arrange for a *veriyattam*

ritual to appease tormenting Murukan? (*Natrinai* 376) (sangamtranslationbyvaidehi.com)

It was quite a practice in Sangam Age, that the hero had to go to some foreign land to earn money to keep his love in wealth and cheer. This compels the hero to separate from the heroine. This separation makes the heroine to suffer like a sick patient. She becomes pale and thin and does not show any interest in life. Often, she speaks to Nature, for examples to bees, birds, flowing water, wind, sun, moon, clouds, etc, hoping that they are able to travel long distance and help her inform her condition to the hero, who in the foreign land. The separation leads to a powerful union, but the heroine could not tolerate the separation. This pain of separation is portrayed in many of the verses in "Akam" poems.

In *Natrinai* verse 277, the heroine complains to the bee and says that she becomes pale due to the sickness caused by the 'separation from the hero.' So, she questions the bee, why it is not attracted by her complexion just like it is attracted by the *pir* flower in its blossom, as she feels that her complexion matches with the colour of the flower. She also blames that the bee is cruel and has no virtue. She wonders whether the bee is as gloomy and dark in knowledge like the colour of its skin. She curses the bee to suffer like her since it does not help her by carrying her message to her lover, though it has power to fly and cross lands. Not only the heroines but also the hero expresses his miserable sufferings caused by the separation. *Andril* is a bird which is well known for its constancy in love and for its sufferings when it happens to separate from its mate. In *Natrinai* 236, the hero expresses his despair over the pain of separation, when he happens to hear the cry of *andril* at night. *Andril* makes painful cry at night in a hope that its companion at a distance may listen to his words and help him overcome the pain of separation by uniting with him. Like *andril*, the hero also in hope cries at air thinking that the air may carry his message to the heroine. The heroine also suffers hearing the pining voice of *andril*. In *Natrinai* verses 303 and 335, the heroine says that the voice of the bird in the company of its loving mate aggravates her misery and therefore she asks her lady companion whether the hero knows how much she longs for his return. The lady's sufferings increase whenever she hears the lonely *andril* making its sorrowful cry residing in the palmyra tree adjacent to her dwelling.

Nights are pleasant when the lovers are together, but they are painful when the lovers are separated. In *Kurunthogai* verse 142 and in *Natrinai* verse 319 explain that the hero sighs during night without sleep. The hero's sufferings have not found any expression and so the hero says that in his pangs of separation, he breathes hard at midnight like an elephant in sleep. He feels miserable and says to himself that the thoughts of the heroine make him sleepless even in midnight. Generally, moon and the moonlit nights create romantic atmosphere. The same moon is cursed by the heroine, when it does not help her know the whereabouts of her lover. In *Natrinai* verse 196, the heroine feels very much depressed, when her lover has gone to a distant country seeking wealth. The lady has none, other than the moon to resort to help her, since it alone has the power to travel along the lands within the night. She praises the beauty of the moon which spreads its milk-like white light all over the land.

The lady also says about the nobility and impartiality of the moon in elated terms. After praising the moon, she requests it to inform her about her lover's whereabouts. Interpreting its silence, she gets angry and immediately complains it about its ignorance and failing to be fair with her. She says that it wanes day by day and becomes paler and paler like her own shoulder as it proves itself false and does not bear witness to his whereabouts. But the hero praises the moon. He praises it because he finds the beautiful face of his love in the face of the full moon. In *Natrinai* verse 62, the hero after accomplishing his mission in the foreign land, returns; and on his way, the full moon appears just above a hill and draws his attention; and so he exclaims to himself that he too has a moon of his own on the face of his sweetheart who is in the village.

The sound of Nature go hand in hand with human sound. This is in sharp contrast to the modern beliefs where Nature is thought to be silent. It is worth quoting Manes words here. He proclaims: "the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative" (15). *Ainkurunuru* verses 172 and 107 have such a symphonic record of roaring sea. The hero replies to his enquiring friend that his miserable condition is due to a love affair and on account of it he is sleepless at night just like the restless waves of the sea. The heroine has similar sufferings and sleepless nights by hearing the waves of the roaring sea. The heroine, herself addresses the sea and makes enquiries about its loud cries at midnights and in fact, that cause such sufferings in the heroine also. Thus, Nature constantly remains the hero of his heroine and the heroine of his hero. Each finds his/her counterpart in Nature when they are in separation. In *Ainkurunuru* verse 492, the hero approaching his beloved wife bursts out to her, "Oh dear! On my way the peacock dances like you, the *mullai* blossoms and spreads fragrance like your forehead and the deer look bewildered like you. All these I saw, I thought of you and you alone, and have come fast, even faster than the season itself."

Generally, most male animals, except a few do not have any morality in keeping up his female counterpart, constantly. Yet the Sangam poets ascribe human feelings to animals and through them depict the depth of love. In *Akananuru* verse 383, the hero exclaims that the crab on the sea coast is assigned its own place in the life of lovers. When the hero seeks the favour of the lady-companion, he notices a crab taking with its pincer-like legs a *naval* fruit and offers it to its loving mate in the burrow which is found in the pine roots. Seeing this the hero remarks that the creature is blessed and fortunate to be so loving. He makes this remark in the air in order to make the lady-companion hear and who in turn conveys this message to the heroine and also convinces her of the sincerity of the hero towards her.

In such a life style there is no trace of the anthropocentric arrogance or dominating attitude towards nature. Man is here a part and parcel of nature, not an exploiter of it. This kind-hearted treatment of man on Nature is realistically drawn in verses 134,4 and 34 of *Akananuru*. While on his return from the distant country after accomplishing the business venture, the hero's heart is filled with tender and affectionate feelings for his sweetheart and so he executes his tender-nature towards the deer and the bees living happily with their mates. Witnessing a stag and a hind in happy union, he requests the charioteer to drive the chariot slowly and silently without disturbing the animals which are in their ecstatic state. Similarly, the hero sees the bees humming and sucking nectar from the flowers along with their mates and so he gets down his chariot and ties up the tongue of the bells so as to prevent them from sounding and disturbing the happy life of the insects.

On his way through the pastoral region in the beginning of early winter, a stag making its pregnant-mate gaze the *aruku* grass and sleep quietly on the bank of a brook; and then it chews the cud and watches the sleeping mate. It draws the attention of the hero who appreciates the qualities of chivalry and nobility that the male animal possesses. He, therefore, requests the charioteer to drive the car swiftly enough and make him reach his place for he feels that he has to meet his lady within a moment and show his heart which is filled with love for the lady like the male animal. He also exclaims that his heart melts away at the sight of the affectionate stag. In fact, after the return, the hero had a fruitful union with his love. They are in trance-like state, encompass each other. This makes one to correlate the modern age writer, Sarojini Naidu's poem:

O let us fling all care away, and lies alone and dream
 Neath tangled boughs of tamarind and molsari and neem

 You and I together, Love, in the deep blossoming words,
 Engirt with Love-voiced silence and gleaming solitudes
 Companion of lustrous dawn, gay comrades of the night,
 Like Krishna and like Radhika, encompassed with delight. ("Summer Woods")

The heroine does not want the blissful state of union to be ceased. She wants the night to be continued for ever and ever. So she curses the cock, which informs the arrival of the morning. *Kurunthogai* verse 2017, explains that the innocent domestic cock makes its usual cry early in the morning. But hearing it, the heroine accuses the bird for disturbing her by waking her up from her pleasant sleep by the side of her lover who has returned from the foreign country only on the previous day. For which she curses the bird to fall a prey to the young wild cat that seeks the domestic rats at night.

In this heavenly state, both the hero and the heroine want the cold North Wind to blow to lengthen their union. But they curse the same wind in their separation. In *Natrinai* verse 193 and *Akananuru* verse 163, the heroine suffers from her desolate loneliness and so blames the North Wind as 'merciless and unsympathetic' and 'harsh and cruel': "Oh! Chill north wind!" she cries, "we have not meant any harm to you. Please don't cause further suffering to this miserable soul". She remarks that the wind is merciless and blows at midnight to afflict her already wounded soul. She requests the wind to take pity on her for she suffers all alone without her lover. She also requests the wind to blow at the country where the hero is, in order to remind him of her pathetic condition and also goad him for his speedy return. But *Akananuru* verse 479, it is written that the hero who is in the distant place feels the effects of the wind on him. In fact, the blow of the wind reminds him of his lady-love. He perceives her sufferings in his absence and so he requests the wind not to blow athwart her village.

Conclusion

Thus, the Sangam poets find close coexistence of man along with Nature in the splendid poems, that itself in "Akam" poems. The poets fill the poems of "Akam" by getting tint and colour from Nature and have made their poems produce everlasting interest in understanding not only life of man during Sangam Age but also his close proximity to nature. Wordsworth's observation, "The world is too much with us" absolutely reflects the perceptions of "Akam" poets. One could find the plethora of Nature with its rare flora and fauna in Sangam literature. What Arnold says in appreciation of Wordsworth "a poet of Nature" can also be exactly matched to the "Akam" poets also. He says that "Nature herself seems to take the pen out of Wordsworth's hands and to write for him with its own bare, sheer, penetrating power, and accounts for this as arising from two causes, the profound sincerity with which the poet feels his subject, and also from the profoundly sincere as natural character of his subject itself." White observes that "Human Ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about out Nature and destiny" (9). This statement and Arnold's observations about Wordsworth are considered, then it can be concluded that the "Akam" poets of Sangam literature are the predecessors of all the future poets like Wordsworth.

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