

REQUIEM FOR A RIVER: ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE WRITINGS OF M.T VASUDEVAN NAIR

Annie Siby

3rd Year B. A English (Hons), Christ (Deemed to be University), Bangalore.

Bharathapuzha, affectionately called Nila, is the ebbing lifeline of Kerala's cultural spaces. The river, which has groomed the heritage of southern malabar region, figures a major part in the life and writings of the jnanpith laureate M.T Vasudevan Nair. Longest among the forty two rivers in the state, Nila flows through the hamlet of Kudallur in Malappuram district, where M.T grew up, and thus it became a major source of creative inspiration for the writer. M.T's writings sketches out the river as a character in itself, rather than just a facade or a backdrop. Having been brought up on the banks of the personified river, he has left a trace of wistfulness throughout his writings. Over the last two decades, anthropocentric exploitation has resulted in deterioration of the river's health. Sand mining mafias have devastated the riverbed and rendered the once formidable currents into a bare trickle. The personal perspective of the narrative lends itself to a unique ecocritical reading. Research on this topic is relevant in scholarly, ecological as well as socio-cultural context, since there still exists the possibility of revitalizing the river. The paper intends to understand the ecological consciousness that is embodied in M.T Vasudevan Nair's oeuvre, particularly his autobiographical works, and how it puts forth questions regarding development and sustainability in the twenty first century.

Keywords: Bharathapuzha, M.T Vasudevan Nair, Ecocriticism, Sustainability

Malayalam literature manifests awareness of the environment and eco-sensibility in its oeuvre. Kerala, crowned with the sobriquet 'God's Own Country', boasts of bountiful monsoon rains, serene backwaters, vibrant vegetation and fertile soils. Consequently, nature is the supreme muse to M.T Vasudevan Nair, one of the stalwarts of regional literature. River Nila, which flows through his village, has been portrayed as a character, rather than just a backdrop in most of his fiction and autobiographies. This paper intends to place a collection of his memoirs named *Ammaykku* and a documentary *Kumaranelloorile Kulangal* or *Ponds of Kumaranellur*, partly based on M.T's memories rooted in the water bodies of his village. The subtle personal narrative that is reflected in the autobiographical accounts of M.T Vasudevan Nair, imbibed with ecological memory, is a far more effective discourse on environmental degradation. Malayalam literature manifests awareness of the environment and eco-sensibility in its oeuvre. Kerala, crowned with the sobriquet 'God's Own Country', boasts of bountiful monsoon rains, serene backwaters, vibrant vegetation and fertile soils. Consequently, nature is the supreme muse to the stalwarts of vernacular literature. Thus, rivers, groves and the foot of the western ghats figure as backdrops to many poems, ballads and short stories in the archive of literature. M.T Vasudevan Nair is a venerated figure in Kerala's literary and cultural landscape. The jnanpith laureate, fondly nicknamed M.T, is a veteran in various genres of literature. Along with innumerable other awards, M.T has been awarded Kendra Sahitya Akademi award in 1970 for his novel *Nalukettu* as well as honorary degrees from various universities. He has generously contributed to the arena of cinema as well; he has penned the script for many films that have bagged the state and national awards.

Bharathapuzha, affectionately called Nila, is the ebbing lifeline of Kerala's cultural spaces. The river, which has groomed the heritage of southern malabar region, figures a major part in the life and writings of M.T Vasudevan Nair. Bharathapuzha, longest among the forty two rivers in the state, flows through the hamlet of Kudallur in Malappuram district, where M.T grew up, and thus it became a major source of creative inspiration for the writer. His fictional works sketches out the river as a character in itself, rather than just a facade or a backdrop. Having been brought up on the banks of the personified river, M.T Vasudevan Nair has left a trace of wistfulness throughout his writings. Over the last two decades, anthropocentric exploitation has resulted in deterioration of the river's health. Sand mining mafias have devastated the riverbed and rendered the once formidable currents into a bare trickle.

This section of the paper intends to review research that has already been done in relation to ecological consciousness that is embodied in M.T Vasudevan Nair's fictional as well as autobiographical works. To the best of my knowledge, no original academic research has yet been conducted on M.T's autobiographical memoirs or *Kumaranelloorile Kulangal*, an eco autobiography of Nila in a documentary format, directed by M.A Rahman. However, this section attempts to review literature in the academic arena surrounding ecological subtexts in M.T's novels, particularly *Kalam* and *Nalukettu*.

ECO-AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN M.T'S FICTION

In a chapter titled, *M.T Vasudevan Nair: A Postpastoral Reading*, academician T.K George discusses the dimensions of autobiography in M.T Vasudevan Nair's fictional works. M.T's childhood was financially insecure and was, for the most part, lonesome. He grew up in a dilapidated matrilineal Nair household, much like the characters in most of his stories, and the only source of income for the household was a small bundle of money that his father, who was a plantation worker in Ceylon, sent once in a while. However, he spent his childhood in the midst of rich heritage and cultural ethos, which, according to him,

influenced his writing as well. The researcher propounds that young M.T's fascination with nature stemmed from his loneliness and dissatisfaction with his familial relationships. Thus, the river figured as a source of comfort and solace for young M.T, which has contributed in the formation of ecological consciousness in his writings. (George 140) In several of his stories, the closely bound relationship between biophysical environment and socio-cultural atmosphere is discussed in detail. For example, the banks of the village ponds eavesdrops on gossips and rumours, the shade of the banyan tree near the temple become sites of philosophical meanderings and dense thickets of groves witness clandestine meetings between young lovers. Thus, ecological spaces intermingle with societal and cultural nuances.

Thus, it is evident that most of M.T Vasudevan Nair's short stories and novels revolve around the land he grew up in, the tharavads (ancestral homes), and more importantly, the rivers and ponds. Nature has always seeped into works of literature, be it the fog covered hills of Mussoorie in Ruskin Bond's stories or the sweltering heat and the smell of splattered jackfruit wafting from Ayemenem in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. A significant part of M.T Vasudevan Nair's fictional works are set in his own village Kudallur, located on the foots of Western Ghats in Palakkad district. His own childhood experience of witnessing the fall of his matrilineal Nair family has influenced the character's cultural background in *Nalukettu*. The background of the novel is an amalgamation of his own familial memory, that of his neighbours and other people in his village. In a way, his stories are concoctions of collective memories from the hamlet of Kudallur.

My paper intends to analyse ecological consciousness in M.T's childhood in particular, as described in his small collection of memoirs titled *Ammaykku*, which translates as *For my Mother* which was adapted for the screen in the form of the documentary *Kumaranellorile Kulangal*, directed by M.A Rahman.

ECOCRITICISM IN NALUKETTU

Nalukettu, translated as *The House Around the Courtyard*, is one of the major works of M.T Vasudevan Nair. The novel, translated into English by Gita Krishnamurthy, is a bildungsroman of Appunni, a man who grew up witnessing the undercurrents of familiar tension wreak havoc in his community. The architectural structure of *Nalukettu*, which is a symbol of oppression and desire in his childhood memory, disintegrates along with his family as grows into adulthood. When he returns to his homeland, he finds himself to be a stranger in the soil, left with only demolished skeleton of the *Nalukettu* as the only relic of the past. The story is set in Kudallur, M.T's homeland. Much like many of his fictional works, some elements of the author is reflected in the protagonist. They seem to be sharing snippets of shared history. Appunni, like M.T, grew up along the banks of Nila and spent most of his childhood playing and bathing in the river, which was has historical and cultural significance to his community.

According to a book review written by Rizio Yohannan Raj, nature plays a symbolic role in the Appunni's character arc. (Raj, 193) Set in a matrilineal Nair household in rural Kerala in early twentieth century, rituals closely related to nature appears frequently in the text. A journal article by Neena Kishor speculates that MT portrays a Kerala that is "untouched by modernity", where in the story takes the readers back in time. (Kishor 392) For instance, Sarpam Thullal, a ritual that involves virgins who sit on the floor of dense thickets of groves invoke the spirit of serpent gods in their bodies, is described in detail in the novel. Serpent groves are spaces that navigate the nature versus culture debates. According to the lores, these groves must be left undisturbed, lest humans invoke the ire of serpent spirits. A maxim popular among the community, which translates as "Lest the grove be disturbed, the ponds shall die" signifies the cultural and ritualistic significance that the ecosystem harboured in the community.

In the groves, Appunni encounters his first sexual experience. He desires the writhing body of a girl named Ammini, who participated in the Sarpam Thullal ritual. The reviewer observes a subtext of biblical allusions regarding sexuality in this instance; he draws a parallel to the sensual undertones of the biblical narrative of Eve being tempted to commit sin by the satan appearing as a serpent (Raj, 193) Thus, in this instance, sexuality becomes a part of the ecological subtext. I hope to apply this ecocritical approach to M.A Rahman's documentary, which focuses on memories of Nila, as well as various ponds in M.T's village of Kudallur and place the same in the context of questions regarding development and sustainability in the twenty first century.

SIGNIFICANCE OF NILA IN KAALAM

The river Nila has figured in many of M.T Vasudevan Nair's fictional and non-fictional works. The river acts as a motif in his novel *Kaalam*, translated into English by Gita Krishnamurthy. It follows the story of Sethu, who transforms from an ambitious young boy into an adult thoroughly disillusioned with life. In the novel, the river stands for the binary between the untainted nature of the village and the corruption wreaked by development. In the chapter titled, *M.T Vasudevan Nair: A Postpastoral Reading*, T.K George identifies two levels of interpretation regarding the symbolic aspects of the river. First is the verisimilitude the river holds to the course of Sethu's life itself, filled with twists and obstructions. On a secondary level, the researcher draws parallels between Sethu's sexuality and the nature of the river. (George 182) The river is always in a state of flux, much like how Sethu falls in and out of love in the trajectory of his adolescence.

Over the span of two decades, unscientific groundwater development, climate change and indiscriminate land mining has taken a toll on the river's health. According to scientific research done on this topic, Bharathapuzha is one of the rivers of Kerala that has been subjected to illegal sand mining. Using loopholes in the law, the sand mining mafia use unsystematic methods that has nearly killed the river and has also degraded the riverbed, which is a habitat for many organisms. (Sreedhar and Irfan 4-6) As a result, it is evident that the logic behind the symbolism between the river and the protagonist's life is more relevant in the current environmental crisis. In the novel, the river witnesses the ebbs and flows in Sethu's life. As Sethu transformed from a lively, lovesick adolescent to a disenchanting adult, river Nila has also transformed from an entity that spills over with life to large stretches of parched land. Thus, just like the river, Sethu longs for excitement and purpose in life; he starts 'dreaming of floods.' (Kaalam, 234)

While the academic papers mentioned above have worked on his fictional works, my research paper will primarily focus on M.T Vasudevan Nair's memoirs titled *Ammaykku* and *Kumaranellorile Kulangal*, his biographical documentary. I intend to analyse elements of ecology reflected in M.T's other works as well, particularly focusing on the significance of the river Nila. Thus, I will attempt to see how Nila becomes a character in his life and works, rather than just a backdrop. Also, unlike the research mentioned above, I intend to contextualise M.T's works in the present condition of the river, in light of corruption, sand mining and climate change and how the ecological consciousness projected by his works navigates the liminal spaces created by development in the twenty first century. The following sections deals with further analysis of ideas regarding the relationship between ecology and culture, impact of ecological memory in bio-conservation, contextualisation of my primary texts *Kumaranellorile Kulangal* and *Kaalam* with ideology of the romantic era, Arundhati Roy's 1997 Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things* among various other aspects.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ECOLOGY AND CULTURE

Ecology has an inherent bond with human cultures and spaces. Ethnolinguistic communities form their identity and conception of self-hood on the basis of ecological aspects that can be used to distinguish the self from the other. This is reflected in various cultural aspects including rituals, beliefs, food, clothing and even naes of the community or topographic region. Take the term 'kerala', for example. The name of this Indian state is widely acknowledged to be derived from the root term 'kera' meaning coconut trees. The cultural denotation ascribed to the term, in this case, marks the symbiotic relationship between culture and ecology.

Ecology has played a role in the construction of national identity as well, which is closely linked to cultural identity. In case of India, an example would be the invocation of natural elements in the national anthem penned by Rabindranath Tagore. The lyrics bring to the fore 'Vindhya mountain range, the Himachal area, the rivers Ganges and Yamuna to create an overarching identity to the nation during the colonial struggle. These ecological symbols, with underlying emotions of patriotism and borderline-devotion has helped to ascribe identity to the imagined community.

Ecological surroundings impact other cultural features as well. For example, names and occupations are often derived from the environmental surroundings that enclose a community. This can be observed especially among fisherfolk communities on the coastal belts of the country, whose lifestyle is largely depended on the ocean, an entity which some of these communities identify as a mother-figure. This relationship is also reflected in dietary practices. For instance, due to lack of availability of water, firewood and harsh climate in the arid areas of Rajasthan, the cuisine is quite dry and can be preserved for a longer duration of time period. Another example is the inclusion of pisceterian dietary practices among the brahmin community of West Bengal.

Environmental humanities, as opposed to environmental studies, envisions to explore the ways in which concerns related to the environment expresses themselves across various disciplines. Environmental studies is based on natural science discourses and adopts an objective approach towards formulating policies based on the scientific observations. Environmental humanities, on the other hand, extends across disciplines, including gender studies and cultural anthropology. This approach has significant impact in the literature arena as well, inspiring revisitation of literary canons including Shakespeare's plays and Romantic literature and has extended to travelogues and visual narratives, as well.

Thus, by examining the primary text through the lens of environmental humanities, the paper intends to further analyse the symbiotic relationship between ecological and cultural arenas, such as how the water bodies in a village construct its communal identity and also examine how it impacts the socio-political aspects of the human dwellings and communities within the biosphere, at the same time.

Margaret Thatcher is famously quoted as saying we borrowed the earth from our descendants and that nobody retains a free hold over the planet. This statement rings true with regard to the ecological memory that we will leave behind for the future generation. Ecological Memory (EM) is a term that was coined in the academia in the recent years, "is defined as the capability of the past states or experiences of a community to influence the present or future ecological responses of the community" (Sun ZY1, Ren H) In the field of natural sciences, it is anticipated that study of EM could contribute towards sustainable development, responsible optimization of natural resources as well as ecological restoration over a period of generational succession.

Ammaykku revolves around memory and recollections. The documentary is often referred to an 'eco-autobiography', citing the personal involvement of M/T with the subject matter. Thus, both the texts are narratives rooted from the ecological experiences of the author (EM) that characterises the texts in question. These memories contain information regarding traditional ecological practices and systems, which helps in improving the ecoliteracy, that is, the awareness and acquisition of skills regarding environmental management. It is important to note that ecoliteracy is different from ecological literature, which are collections of texts that are significant from ecocritical point of view. However, both these concepts are linked since ecological literature helps to improve ecoliteracy among the public.

M.T's autobiographical narratives retain significant traces of Ecological Memory. He describes in detail the topography and the cultural practices of the village that he was born and brought up in. The village and the water bodies have clearly impacted his psyche, as is reflected in his literature and writing style. As a child, he understood and learnt more about nature through experiences, rather than rote learning from a textbook about the botanical names of flora and fauna and their characteristics, as urban children in contemporary times are used to. In one of his recountings titled *Kannanthalipoookalude Kaalam* he explains in detail the flowers that bloomed at the foot of the hills that have become endangered as time wore on. His writings talk about various species and varieties of plants and their flowers. This personal touch tinged with nostalgia seems far more effective and emotional, as opposed to the scientific calibration of biological diversity. The same theme is explored in Satyajit Ray's film *Pather Panchali*, where the child protagonists Durga and Apu experience the world through senses, be it pressing their ear to the ground in anticipation of the humdrum of an approaching train, or stealing guavas from the neighbour's

yard. This experience positively or negatively reinforces certain behaviours that could contribute in the sustainability of the environment.

'Spatial identity' is an important feature of this rhetoric. The space or locality that is linked to a person's experiences has a role in stimulating the Environmental Memory regarding the experiences and practices. In M.T's case, Kudallur is attributed with this spatial identity that helps to forge bond between the individual, space, and the ecological practices that he experienced. In his narratives, nature is treated as an entity, where humans and the environment engages in a symbiotic relationship which further instigated the bond between the individual, village, and by extension, Earth. M.T often found solace from financial and familial difficulties in the lap of nature and this ecologically significant interactions inspired his artistic spirit. Thus, the accumulation of all his experiences have been instrumental in him identifying environmental issues and has provided him driving force to deal with the same, as opposed to urban counterparts who have disconnected relationship with nature and diversity, due to sheer lack of experience with the same. Thus, by living in a space defined by the interconnectedness of humans and nature, where committee manages resources and traditional agrarian practices and lifestyle that is embedded within the ecosystem, he has been able to garner a system of knowledge that can potentially impact environmental outcomes. This local ontological system, coupled with his affection for nature could help in sustainable maintenance of the ecosystem.

It is important to disperse ecoliteracy among the public through ecological literature, since this is more accessible than quantitative scientific research alone. Ecological literature, characterised by EM, makes the issue more relatable and holistically includes spiritual, aesthetic and experiential aspect of nature which could further motivate its conservation. Thus, the powerful method of storytelling influences the reader to engage in an interactive process that invokes their EM as well which will prove far more effective in the conservation of the ecosystem and the landscape.

Ecological consciousness evident in M.T's fiction (non-kaalam)

In his book *Ecocriticism* Greg Garrard postulates three types of pastoral tradition; "literary tradition, involving a retreat from the city to the countryside,... and becomes a key poetic form in Europe during Renaissance...." (...)any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban' and the pejorative sense in which 'pastoral' implies an idealisation of rural life that obscures the realities of labour and hardship. Lawrence Buell, in his book *The Environmental Imagination* critiques pastoral elements in the canons of literature, especially from America, and reexamines the significance of nature in these writings.

According to Lawrence Burrell, a text embodies environmental consciousness if, human and non-human worlds are integrated, human interest is not the ultimate priority, humans are held accountable for their actions towards the ecosystem, and the environment is a process; not a static condition. (58)

Nature has played a significant role in M.T's personal and artistic development. A deep-seated concern and love for nature can be seen throughout his works. M.T has voiced his opinion regarding the degrading co-scene many times. He believes that true civilization lies not just in 'progress' and construction of highrise buildings rather, in developing the ability to articulate one's love for nature through his/her own language. Ecology and socio-cultural environment is interconnected, which is a theory that the paper will examine in the later sections. No man is an island; nature and man exists in interpolated spheres and the natural cycles of the biosphere correlates with the progress of human existence itself. There exists a 'give-and-take' relationship between man and nature, even though the balance of this exchange has been questioned in the recent times. A habitat or dwelling that a human inhabits is imbued by memory, experiences and rituals. Thus, landscape can never be a disconnected entity. Similarly, in M.T's works, the narrative is inscribed with memories associated with his own homeland, the village of Kudallur. Thus, his own experiences are superimposed in the psyche of his characters, which in turn is influenced by his native village and the river that writhes around it. Thus, the authenticity of his own emotions and affection towards nature figures in his fiction, as well.

A significant aspect of M.T's writing is the detailed narrative. Even seemingly insignificant details of the environment is recounted in the text.

"Night. Grasshoppers, asleep in the newly sprouted shoots of karuka grass at the edge of the rain-drenched field, wake up startled at the sound of footsteps. They brush against my calves as I walk and rustle softly, evoking a memory that my troubled heart cannot define..... Scent of wet earth and the grey dark. It suddenly occurs to me that darkness and the night have a scent."

(108-112)

This extract is the first few lines from the novel *Kaalam*. The given text reflects a sense of nuanced familiarity in the writing style, even in the insignificant details, which banks primarily on recollected memories of the author stemmed from experience. His characters are aware of the unbridled strength of nature and is always in awe of nature's immanence in their surroundings, as signified by the above extract. . In his novel *Naalukettu*, for example, the protagonist Appunni seeks solace in nature at critical turning points in his life. He observes the flow of the river Nila and the interplay of darkness and moonlight in the ancestral groves while contemplating about his life . Appunni, who hails from a dilapidated Nair household stricken with strife and frayed familial bond, yearns to detach himself from his surroundings, only to realise that it's impossible to sever bonds with the village, which has become apart of his psyche. As a result, after five years, the novel ends with his homecoming, back to his village, his people and his true self.

Terry Gifford, in his book *Pastoral* mentions the concept of 'spontaneous pantheism' (169) as propounded by ecocritical theorist Lawrence Buell. Gifford examines the ballad "The Bitter Withy" wherein he suggests that the 'weeping willow' represents the internal anguish of the main character, who is Christ as a child. Similarly, in M.T's fictional works, the external environment parallel the internal emotional cloud of the characters. A prime example of this is illustrated in how the river Nila mirrors the psyche of the protagonist Sethu in *Kaalam*. The ebbs and flow of the river is indicative of the emotional turbulence that Sethu's life travails. As stated in the introduction to the translated version of the book, Nila accompanies Sethu's journey from adolescence, brimming with ambition and hormone filled impunity, into adulthood that is lackluster and devoid of love and affection. Nila mirrors his life itself, devolving from an unbridled force of nature into a stretch of sand. (Introduction). Towards the end of the novel, Sethu realises that 'his mind was as empty as the parched river' (3644) Thus, rather than just existing as a

passive object in the textual narrative, the river signifies the inextricable bonding between humans and the environment, wherein the nature formulates a part of the character's true self.

Interestingly, M.T's narratives refuses to idealise the rural life and the sociopolitical surroundings. His village is not an idyllic and serene space that is devoid of political and personal conflicts. This is particularly relevant in *Nalukettu*, which portrays a house around the courtyard teeming with patriarchy and egoistical strife. The protagonist is suffocated by the declining traditional Nair family, stricken with poverty and hostility. He yearns to escape that particular space that incites claustrophobia, ruled by the matriarchal uncle. His works also contemplate the divide created between the urban and rural spaces. The advent of utilitarianism that accompanied industrialization creates a fissure in the cultural and geographic identity of the community. For example, in *Kaalam*, Sethu's father works in a plantation in Ceylon since industrialisation has reduced the importance of agriculture in the community, leading to economic decline among those whose livelihood depended primarily on the agrarian sector. Sethu himself leaves behind his village to search for greener pastures in the urban spaces. This results in the realisation that the village is an integral part of his ethos and he is left, alone with his disillusioned self, "dreaming of floods" along with the river (3654)

ECO-SEXUAL IDENTITY KAALAM AND THE THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

Kaalam, written by M.T Vasudevan Nair and *The The God of Small Things* written by Arundhati Roy, can be studied in juxtaposition to further understand the common element of ecological writing and how the texts deal with sexual identity in this frame. Both the novels are partly autobiographical; Ammu, like Roy's own mother, married a Bengali Hindu against her parents' wishes. Similarly, Sethu's father, like M.T's own, migrated to Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) to work in the tea plantations. Further, Rahel and Roy share some features just like Sethu and M.T. More importantly, both the novels are set in the author's native Kerala village, and set around the same time period and both the narratives are impacted by feudalism, casteism and patriarchy.

Sexuality, desire and sexual identity is interconnected with ecology in both the text. The concept of 'forbidden love' is explored by these texts in different manners. While instances regarding physical intimacy and sex are subtle in *Kaalam*, hidden under euphemisms and indicative markers, it is much more vocal and fleshed out in *The God of Small Things*. In *Kaalam*, the protagonist Sethu is not a likeable character. He is selfish and the only person he has ever loved is himself, as one of his love interests, Sumitra, observes. The narrative is told from his own point of view. In the first part of the book, he is a hormone filled, yet sexually inexperienced adolescent, attracted to Sumitra, a girl of the same age. In many ways, Sumitra seems more emotionally mature than Sethu; there have been many circumstances where Sethu is insecure about his masculinity and suspects a glimmer of scorn in Sumitra's eyes. This is particularly illustrated in the instance where he writes his own initials in the patterns left on the floor by Sumitra's oiled hair. "No one has the right to touch Sumitra now. Only I can touch her. I, Sethu." (547) Thus, he expresses a desire to "own" Sumitra's body.

In contrast to this, Ammu in *The God of Small Things* asserts her rights over her body. She elopes with a Bengali Hindu in order to escape her abusive father and she divorces her alcoholic husband when he forces her to submit to extramarital relations with his boss, Mr. Hollick. She knew of the consequences of this decision, she would be a divorced single mother, a position of great disadvantage in the particular time and space that she inhabited. In a society where sexual needs of the female is repressed and ignored, she challenges the double standard of morality that it maintains. For example, Mammachi condones Chacko's licentious behaviour under the pretext of a 'Man's Needs'. However, a 'Woman's Needs' are not acknowledged by the society. Thus, Ammu crosses the frontiers of 'touchability' and disobeys the laws that dictates "who to love, and how much".

Ammu and Velutha are marginalised in *The God of Small Things*; She is a divorcee and Velutha is an 'untouchable'. She sees both bodies similar in their marginalisation and thus identified herself with Velutha. "She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against", denoting the seething resentment of the marginalised yearning to strike back against the hegemony. Thus, she is in charge of her own body and maintains a certain extend of agency in the narrative.

Ecology plays a significant role in the realisation identity of the characters in both novels. Like Sethu, Rahel attributes a part of herself with the river in her village, as it ebbs and flows, gains strength and wanes according to her own psyche. Both the characters have memories associated with the river, which pertains huge significance in their adulthood, as well. Towards the end of the novel, the disillusioned characters realise that their respective rivers have dried up, leaving behind puddles of shallow memories. The environment is significant in the politics of desire, as well. The ecology is a part of the characters themselves and it is consequential during their moments of sexual intimacy, as well. For example, Sethu first embraced Sumitra in a downpour. He smells sweat infused with sandalwood emanating from her body. "They stood there, listening to the rain diminish... When he walked home through a fine drizzle, he felt that his heart was brimming over with joy like a field overflowing from the Thulam rains". (525-526). Similarly, the rain is important in Ammu and Velutha's sexual encounters as well. Ammu and Velutha identify each other with the river that writhes around them. "He stood before her with the river dripping from him" (334) "Night's elbows rested on the water and watched them."(335) "She was as wide and deep as a river in spate. He sailed on her waters" (337)

ROMANTIC AGE

The main issue that humans in contemporary society is still grappling with is the question of sustainable development. Humans have achieved humongous accomplishments in the field of science and technology. However, 'development' that is not detrimental to the environment still poses a challenge.

With the advent of the enlightenment era, primary focus was attributed to man and reason. The epistemological system, charged with empiricism, sought to conquer and utilise nature for the sake of development. This promoted egocentrism, where humans are considered as the pinnacle of evolution, which condoned materialistic exploitation of nature. This anthropocentric

approach placed the individual and his interests on a pedestal, thus reducing natural resources and the environment into tools to aid for the progress of the same. Ecology studies the interaction between organisms and the environment. It evades the anthropocentric outlook towards environment and instead, prefers to see all elements within the ecosystem and how they interact with each other. Thus, the study of ecology depends not just on the rational faculties, but also on humane spirit, values empathy and imagination. Literature is one of the ideological instruments that helps the study of ecology from this purview.

The idea of the country pervades the English consciousness and imaginary during the Romantic age of eighteenth and nineteenth century. It emerged in opposition to Industrialization and the concept of the 'city'. It was built on the juxtaposition between the hubbub of the metropolis and the solace of the countryside. This was characterised by the advent of landscape art over portraits and historical art. In 'Ode to a Nightingale', Keats longs for a "beaker full of the warm south" that extends beyond the material and economic capital. Thus, the exploration of the interrelationship between nature and the human psyche, coupled with the inscription of historic and personal memory in the landscape, is a salient feature of the Romantic Age. This concept is deliberated by M.T in his works as well. The palimpsest of local tradition, folklore and endangered customs and practices embedded within nature is recounted by the author in his fictional and autobiographical writings.

KUMARALELOORILE KULANGAL: AN ECO-AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This section primarily deals with *Ammaykku*, which translates as *For my Mother*. This is a small collection of memoirs, which has influenced the creation of *The Ponds of Kumaranalloor*, an eco-documentary directed by M.A Rahman, available on Youtube.

Throughout the book, M.T recounts memories of Nila, along with various ponds in the village which influenced the socio-cultural spheres of the community. Much of his childhood memories include the rustic lifestyle of the quiet countryside, like reciting slokas with cousins and observing oracles across the paddy fields. The text was modified into a screenplay from M.T himself and he narrates the documentary. It includes enactment of snippets of his childhood memories by various artistes. Most of these memories are associated with Nila and the various ponds that he loved when he was a child. Young M.T loved the ponds in Kudallur and Kumaranalloor. In times of strife, with his poverty stricken family and a distant father, the water bodies provided solace and comfort to the young boy. He had a personal relationship with the ponds; before going away to the town for college studies, he bid farewell to each of the ponds that cooled his childhood. However, now, half a century later, the river Nila has become a shallow trickle and the ponds in the villages have disappeared. Fond memories of the river is interpolated with the harshness of the present condition of the water body, which juxtaposes the romantic re-imagination of M.T's childhood along with ecological realities.

Over the span of two decades, unscientific groundwater development, climate change and indiscriminate land mining has taken a toll on the river's health. Using loopholes in the law, the sand mining mafia use unsystematic methods that has nearly killed the river and has also degraded the riverbed, which is a habitat for many organisms. The river, which used to flow with unbridled vigour during monsoon has almost disappeared. In many ways, the documentary is his elegy for the carcass of Nila. He holds the greed of mankind responsible; he mentions how even the tools of the sand mafia labourers are smeared with Nila's blood.

This narrative is contextualised with an eerily prophetic poem by Edasseri Govindan Nair written about 50 years ago. The speaker mulls on the repercussions that the construction of a bridge would have on Nila. He comforts himself, saying "You will rise again, O Nila, You will surge against the shores, in full spate of the monsoon". However, the disillusioned speaker ends the poem with the lines: "O, Nila, time reduce you to a turbid canal as well", which, several decades later, has come true.

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