

Planting a Green Future: An Ecocritical Reading of Sugathakumari's "For Tomorrow" and ONV Kurup's "While Planting a Sapling"

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Abstract

Human society today confronts an unprecedented global environmental crisis, undoubtedly a crisis of consciousness. Man's reckless exploitation of Earth Earth has led to alarming depletion of natural resources and degrading of habitats. In this context, it is imperative that all human beings willingly adopt an eco-friendly lifestyle and support sustainable development. Poetry is a powerful tool to express environmental concerns. Words are catalysts that can change the way people perceive the world. Poets like Sugathakumari and ONV Kurup use language resources to convey their message on how to make our world a better place to live. Sugathakumari's poem "Nalekku Vendi" ("For Tomorrow") and Kurup's "Oru Thai Nadumpol" ("While Planting a Sapling") demonstrate that these eco warriors' green thinking and the ecocritical perspectives of their poems have contributed significantly for the protection of Kerala's natural beauty and ecological resources. Their veneration of trees and deep concern for Mother Earth evokes an extreme empathy for the sentient and non-sentient beings in the ecosystem.

Keywords: environmental crisis, eco warriors, green thinking, veneration of

trees, sustainable, eco-friendly development.

Introduction

World Environment Day is celebrated annually on 05 June. It is the United Nations' chief vehicle for encouraging awareness and action for protecting the environment and describing the importance of nature in our lives. This year's (2022) World Environment Day theme is 'Only One Earth,' which signifies togetherness as the world comes together to create an atmosphere conducive to a pollution-free, healthy, and peaceful co-existence on this planet, which is our only home.

Literary creations, down through the ages, have reflected any society's social and cultural leanings. While analyzing the development of any academic work or theory, reflections of specific social, political, economic, and cultural occurrences and events must be considered. Historians term the 1970s as a "pivot of change" in world history as it witnessed tumultuous economic upheavals. It was also when people everywhere had to confront the post-war trauma and dilemma. The impact of the industrial revolution with its widespread use of machinery to keep people in material comforts and luxury

continued undiminished. It led to rapid exploitation of the environment and the ecosystem at large. Industrialization and Urbanization caused far-reaching damage to the environment. It was in the 1970s that Environmentalism became one of the most dominant social concerns. The environmental movement gathered momentum and mobilized to protect the Earth from ecological degradation caused by pollution threats and the accumulation of toxic wastes due to industrial dumping. Moreover, the publication of Rachel Carson's acclaimed work *Silent Spring* also became a catalyst that heralded the modern environmental movement.

The relationship between people and the environment has long been documented in literary works. Before ecocriticism became a formal theoretical study in literature, many great naturalists, poets, essayists, environmental thinkers, and advocates wrote of nature and how it could influence society's spiritual and intellectual growth. Ecocriticism developed in the 1970s as a distinctive literary theory in Europe and America. Glotfelty describes ecocriticism as the "study of the relationship between literature and physical environment" (xviii). In his 1978 essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism, William Rueckert first coined the term ecocriticism." Rueckert states, "Green plants are among the most creative organisms on earth. They are nature's poets" (111). He reminds readers that the biosphere or ecosphere is the home that life has built for itself on the planet's outer

surface. And "in that ecosphere, there is a reciprocal interdependence of one life process upon another, and there is a mutual interconnected development of all of the earth's life systems" (Rueckert 112). In this pioneering essay, Rueckert further suggests what this idea of ecocriticism might look like. He observes:

Specifically, I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, and as the basis for a human vision) has the most significant relevance to the present and future of the world, we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years.... I could say that I will try to discover something about the ecology of literature or develop ecological poetics by applying ecological concepts to the reading, teaching, and writing about literature. (107)

Rueckert tries to warn his fellow beings regarding the prevailing ubiquitous ecological imbalance: "We are violating the laws of nature, and the retribution from the biosphere will be more terrible than any inflicted on humans by the gods" (113). Rueckert wants man to change his unjustifiable hostile attitude toward ecology and nature. He adumbrates that it is "his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing (113) that needs to change.

Literature often addresses ecological issues through which the eco consciousness of the readers is elevated. Poetry is a powerful tool to express environmental concerns, and words are catalysts that can change the way people perceive the world. Malayalam literature, incredibly poetic outpourings from the 1980s onwards, turned towards a new phase known as *Paristhithi Kavitha* (Environment Poetry). It was quite a relevant period historically and culturally due to the Save Silent Valley Movement of the 1970s, an environmental movement to save one of the country's largest and oldest tropical rainforests, with its unique and rich biodiversity. The battle for the now famous Silent Valley raged for over ten years, and thousands of people who did not even live in the vicinity were involved in the campaign.

Consequently, a deluge of prose, poetry, and popular literature on environment-related topics such as the extinction of wild species, energy crisis, consequences of industrialization, and the socio-economic approaches towards developmental projects flooded the literary and cultural world. Sugathakumari, N. V. Krishna Warriar, and ONV Kurup stood at the forefront of the academic group supporting the movement. Kurup stated, "Surviving poets such as Sugathakumari, Satchidanandan, and this humble speaker remain as wounded soldiers of a battle with an unpredictable outcome" ("ONV Kurup broaches Silent Valley"). He maintained a unique voice among the literary activists of the Silent Valley Movement and "visualized the aftermaths of irreparable damage to the delicate

balance between the ecosystems and the various forces that sustain the Earth as a hospitable planet within the solar system" (Thomas, "My Editor's Note").

ONV Kurup and Sugathakumari, the veteran poets of Kerala, are hailed as guardian angels of trees and Mother Earth. As eco-poets, they instinctively understood the necessity of maintaining a harmonious correlation between human beings and the physical environment. In his lecture titled "On Poetry that defies definitions: Its relevance in modern times," Kurup speaks, among other things, about how defending the Earth has become a global movement and how Indian poets were at the forefront. "Today, poetry has a dynamic role in the great struggle to save nature. It is indeed a miracle that you and I are still alive despite the extreme contamination of the air we breathe and the water we drink" ("ONV Kurup broaches Silent Valley"). Kurup was deeply convinced about the responsibility of writers as spokespersons who raised their voices not only on social, political, cultural, and economic issues but also as environmental activists.

Sugathakumari, as a pioneer of environmental activism in Kerala, used her poems as instruments to convey the message of conservation and protection, despite the general lethargy in Kerala against ecological activism. Nature, as a theme, entered Sugathakumari's poetry when she became an integral part of the Silent Valley Movement. Her poem *Marathinu Sthuthi* (An Ode to the Tree) became a powerful symbol of the Silent Valley protest and became the movement's

anthem. She raised her voice against deforestation and unwanted constructions that ruin the ecosystem. The move led to shelving the proposed hydroelectric dam project, which would have destroyed the evergreen forest (Praveen, "Sugathakumari-the Poet"). The poet's poetry and environmental activism were intertwined, and she showed awe, reverence, and admiration for flowers, trees, flies, birds, and every minute organism in the ecosystem. As K. Satchidanandan observes, "She is an Indian version of Australian poet Judith Wright, an environmentalist, and campaigner for land rights of aboriginal tribes. She refused to remain in the ivory towers of poetry and never hesitated from taking part in protests and struggles" (qtd. in "Remembering Sugathakumari").

Even though ONV Kurup and Sugathakumari are primarily noted for the literariness, lyrical notes, rhythm, and musicality of poetry, while approaching their poetic oeuvre from an ecocritical perspective, we are astounded by their ecological vision. They highlight the anti-ecological interventions such as deforestation, pollution, and resource depletion and their threatening reverberations. This paper is an attempt to explore the ecological vision as depicted in Sugathakumari's poem "Nalekku Vendi" ("For Tomorrow") and Kurup's "Oru Thai Nadumpol" ("While Planting a Sapling") and how such poems help in shaping a green future for succeeding generations.

Sugathakumari begins her poem "Nalekku Vendi" ("For Tomorrow") by urging humanity to plant saplings not only

on annual environment days but on all possible occasions. She says:

Let's plant a sapling for our Mother
Let's plant a sapling for our grandchildren
Let's plant a sapling for hundred birds
Let's plant a sapling for a promising future.
(My own Trans. "F T")

According to the poet, planting saplings is an act of an all-embracing vision of the universe. Only those concerned about the future alone can carry out such an insignificant but noble mission. On the one hand, Mother Earth is withering in the blistering heat of a scorching Sun. She is dried and longs for water while she swoons and faints. On the other hand, she gets flooded and is swept away by heavy downpours, landslides, and hurricanes. Trees, the lungs of nature, provide fresh air and edible fruits and protect soil from erosion. Further, it is a canopy from the heat and dust and provides rest for man and beast. The poet strongly argues for planting saplings for today and the future, not for the present but for the welfare of coming generations. Since trees provide food and shelter for birds and animals, today's saplings would prepare habitat and livelihood for thousands of species. Ever since the industrial revolution, air, water, and soil have become contaminated and are being polluted at an alarming rate. Deforestation and resource depletion have led to global warming and climate change. At this shocking juncture of universal crisis, Sugathakumari motivates her readers to plant saplings. She says:

We plant saplings for life-breath
We pray and plant it for rain
We produce a hundred saplings for

Beauty, shade, and sweet fruits. (My own Trans. "F T")

The poet brings in some nostalgic memories, such as light-hearted villagers gathering under tree shades and naughty children squirrels climbing on fruit trees. In short, the poetess implies that humanity survives on Earth only because of the sacrificial devotion of trees.

The poem's last stanza depicts a beautiful mother image of Earth, who nourishes her children with breastfeeding. Children who receive the lifeblood of Mother Earth turn against her when they grow up and engage in anti-environmental actions. Deforestation is chief among those, and Sugathakumari emphatically states that planting and maintaining trees in the courtyard is an everlasting virtue; it is a crucial choice between life and death. She further adds:

With the memories of feeding breast-milk
With folded hands alone instead
We do this *puja* with tearful eyes
To soothe Goddess Earth's blazing heat.
(My own Trans. "F T")

Every amiable mother image and mother-child relationship is associated with childbearing and breastfeeding. No reward can substitute maternal kindness and benevolence. As the poet concludes, "with folded hands," children can do the *puja*, that is, planting saplings that genuinely worship and homage to Mother Earth.

ONV Kurup's poem "While Planting a Sapling" is a sturdy recommendation for afforestation which is the sole remedy for almost all ecological issues like pollution,

carbon emission, global warming, ozone depletion, drought, and water scarcity.

The poem's opening lines refrain: "While planting a sapling / a shade is being planted," is an awakening song to the present and future generations. The poet comments that planting a sapling might seem to be a negligible task, but it has far-reaching outcomes. A soothing shade and a floral carpet are produced when a sapling is planted. Kurup's poem reminds us of the words of Glen A. Love, the renowned ecological theorist: "we become increasingly aware, as our technological world begins to crack beneath our feet, that our task is not to remake nature so that it is fit for humankind, but as Thoreau says, to make humankind right for nature" (234). Kurup, through his poem, urges the readers to show a genuine interest and to make efforts to protect and preserve nature by planting saplings that would flourish like vast forestlands.

Another significant aspect of planting a sapling, the poet indeed reminds us, is that shade is being planted while planting a sapling. Under the blazing Sun, people desperately search for shade. Planting saplings is an unparalleled alternative to the sizzling summer. The poet motivates the readers to plant soft shadows and floral carpets to have a siesta out in the open. It is usual for the Natives to have a snooze in the tree shade, whereas modern people immediately search for A.C. buttons instead. Kurup firmly believes that no technological device provides an equally comfortable sleep as the natural soothing shade that only a tree can give:

Touching the azure paste of the heavens,
 You create a dark dot on EarthEarth.
 You plant a pole to erect
 The pavilion of spring.
 You plant the tenderness of the goddess of seasons
 Who dances with her heart's fragrance
 Shared in a thousand pitchers
 While you plant a sapling
 A shade is being planted. ("WPS")

Forests and woodlands are storehouses of rain clouds that bring varied seasons. That is why the poet assures us that while planting a sapling, we produce a pole to erect the spring pavilion. The possibility within each tiny seed or sapling is excessive and abundant. Kurup visualizes the hidden forest nestling within a sapling that provides seasons with all their exciting features. If planted in an appropriate climate, Saplings give birth to herbs, bushes, and green woods. Hence while planting saplings, the tenderness of the goddess of seasons with her heart's fragrance gets shared in a thousand pitchers and the anxious young woman becomes hopeful of getting a good yield from it.

Kurup gives a pictorial description of nature with all its color and beauty in the poem. The poet depicts flora and fauna as significant components of the ecosystem. He says that when someone plants a sapling, they produce a color pageant as it blooms, giving joy to the heart and the eyes. Moreover, trees and their branches are swings for the singing bird where she nests and keeps her nectar pot safe. Kurup here

displays greater hope and anticipation, a mood of exhilarating optimism and relaxation:

You plant color pageant.
 What unfolds in beauty as trees and blossoms
 A swing is planted for the singing bird
 And you plant a hanging alcove for her
 To keep her nectar pot safe.

("WPS")

Shade and sapling in the poem are imageries that reverberate to impact many of the ineffable senses. Planting saplings brings countless squirrels and other animals to it as it becomes a tree. Kurup urges readers to be foresighted planters:

The squirrel is planting his *Onam* feat
 And it's merrymaking.
 You plant sweetness
 In abundance for the craving little one.
 You create a resting place
 For the clouds that move with water
 And the accompanying wind.

("WPS")

The great sensuous imageries in the poem exhibit a particular affinity with the Kerala villages, which were once rich in vegetation, flowers, woodlands, rain forests, rivers, highlands, farmyards, and biodiversity. Life in the rural areas was noted exclusively for simplicity, noble relationships, and mutual respect. During the post-independent era, agriculture and farming were the people's primary occupations, which necessitated hard work for better yield and productivity. Through

the poem, the poet reminds us that while planting a sapling, a swing is produced for the bird family to perch, a festivity is grown for the animal world, and at the same time, a feast is prepared for the human community. Here we see a merging of the distinct spheres of human, animal, and bird families. Trees and forests are indispensable for all organisms, even though rational human beings never recognize this reality.

Environmentalists worldwide are deeply concerned with the unsustainable human intervention on land, water resources, coastal areas, and other natural vegetation. When man ignores his responsibility to care for nature, the destruction begins. The poem can therefore be viewed as a slogan and call for afforestation which ultimately guarantees a good climate and seasons. The poet claims that those who plant saplings are philanthropists with a more profound vision since they prepare banquets even for the enemies. The poet tries to convince the readers that those who plant saplings create arms to tie black flags of bats to greet the thieves. The poet persuades his readers to opt for an eco-friendly, sustainable lifestyle that doesn't harm nature or those who depend on it for survival.

Conclusion

Nature is celebrated in both Kurup's and Sugathakumari's poems, although they do lament the devastation of the ecosystem in their musings. Nature is not just an ideal backdrop or setting for the poets but is the central character in their poems. Both Sugathakumari and ONV Kurup have vividly portrayed how life for all on Earth is sustained by planting saplings. Both poets stress the importance

of planting saplings and urge their readers to do it regularly for a greener tomorrow. An ecocritical reading of their poems makes it abundantly clear that all artificial ecological problems and environmental crises can be resolved by preserving nature. This is possible only by planting saplings, for saplings grow into trees. Trees are the 'lungs' of nature that supply us with oxygen which makes survival possible on Earth.

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While planting a sapling

While planting a sapling
A shade is being planted.
A soft shadow is being planted.
You plant a floral carpet for a siesta.
While you plant a sapling
A shade is being planted.

Touching the azure paste of the heavens,
You create a dark dot on EarthEarth.
You plant a pole to erect
The pavilion of spring.
You plant the tenderness of the goddess of seasons
Who dances with her heart's fragrance
Shared in a thousand pitchers
While you plant a sapling
A shade is being produced.

You plant color pageant.
What unfolds in beauty as trees and blossoms.
A swing is planted for the singing bird
And you produce a hanging alcove for her
To keep her nectar pot safe.
While planting a sapling
A shade is being planted.

The squirrel is planting his Onam feat
And it's merrymaking.
You plant sweetness
In abundance for the craving little one.
You create a resting place.
For the clouds that move with water
And the accompanying wind.
You create arms to tie.
Black flags of bats up in the sky
To greet the jungle thief

APPENDIX

(ONV poem translated by K Jayakumar)

And the local thief who arrives by the
wayside.

While planting a sapling

You grow several shades;

Several saplings and several hues.

As you plant a sapling

You produce a shade.

APPENDIX

(Sugathakumari poem translated by Jolly
K.V.)

For Tomorrow

Let's plant a sapling for our Mother

Let's plant a sapling for our grandchildren

Let's plant a sapling for hundred birds

Let's plant a sapling for a promising future.

We plant saplings for life-breath

We pray and plant it for rain

We produce a hundred saplings for

Beauty, shade, and sweet fruits.

With the memories of feeding breast-milk

With folded hands alone instead

We do this *puja* with tearful eyes

To soothe Goddess Earth's blazing heat.

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