

HUMAN BODY, ECOLOGICAL METAMORPHOSIS AND SPECIES BOUNDARY: REIMAGINING HUMAN-NONHUMAN RELATIONS IN A. K. RAMANUJAN'S *A FLOWERING TREE* AND KRISHAND'S *AAVASAVYUHAM*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines ecological metamorphosis and species boundaries in *A Flowering Tree* retold by A. K. Ramanujan and the malayalam film *Aavasavyuham* directed by Krishand. It uses an ecocritical approach to explore how both works challenge human dominance over nature. In *A Flowering Tree*, a woman transforms into a tree, and her body becomes part of the natural world. This transformation shows a close link between humans and plants. It also reveals how greed and patriarchy exploit both women and nature, turning the female body into a resource. Ecology and gender are therefore deeply connected. In *Aavasavyuham*, identity shifts across species and time, and the human figure appears unstable and fluid. The film questions the idea that humans are superior to other forms of life and presents existence as interconnected and evolving. Nature is not a background but an active force shaping life. Both works blur the boundary between human and nonhuman existence, though they do so differently. The folktale uses myth and sacred change, while the film uses modern cinematic language and evolutionary thought to rethink humanity within an ecological framework.

Key Words: *Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Ecofeminism, Human–Nature Relationship, Myth and Ecology, Environmental Humanities.*

INTRODUCTION

Across cultures, transformation between human and nonhuman forms appears as a recurring narrative pattern in mythology, literature, and folklore. These stories challenge rigid boundaries between species and suggest a worldview in which humans exist within, rather than above, the natural world. Classical mythology provides well-known examples in the works of Ovid, particularly in *Metamorphoses*, where humans transform into animals, plants, or natural elements. The nymph Daphne turns into a laurel tree to escape the pursuit of Apollo, while Arachne becomes a spider after challenging Athena (Ovid 25-29, 160). Such narratives reveal a symbolic understanding of metamorphosis as a way of expressing power, punishment, transformation, or escape. Similar motifs also appear in South Asian folklore. In the realm of kannada folklore, a young woman gains the ability to transform into a flowering tree, illustrating the intimate connection between human life and the vegetal world.

A. K. Ramanujan compiled and translated a wide range of Indian oral narratives in his collection *Folktales from India*, which is also published under the title *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India*. This collection brings together diverse folkloric traditions from across regions and languages, preserving the richness of India's oral storytelling heritage. The tale "*A Flowering Tree*," included in this volume, exemplifies Ramanujan's interest in narratives that blur the boundaries between the human and the natural, the sacred and the everyday. By situating such stories within a broader cultural archive, the collection highlights how folklore encodes ecological consciousness, social values, and symbolic meanings through seemingly simple narrative forms.

A comparable reimagining of species transformation appears in the Malayalam film *Aavasavyuham*, directed by Krishand R. K. Unlike mythological narratives where transformation is often magical or divine, the film presents a more fluid and ambiguous movement across species and time. The protagonist's identity appears to dissolve into different forms of life, challenging the idea of a stable human identity. Through its experimental narrative and ecological imagery, the film questions anthropocentric assumptions and suggests that human existence is intertwined with other biological forms. This paper attempts a comparison between these two works, which appear different at first glance, but at a deeper level share similar ecological concerns and ideas. While "*A Flowering Tree*" centres on the mythical and folkloric tradition, *Aavasavyuham*, on the other hand, belongs to a contemporary cinematic context, but both texts share or interrogate the relationship between human and nonhuman life. They challenge the assumption of human superiority, anthropocentric view of nature, and instead present existence as interconnected and fluid.

ANALYSIS

The idea of metamorphic transformation in *A Flowering Tree*, retold by A. K. Ramanujan, appears mythical and sacred at the surface level. The woman's ability to become a tree is framed as a ritual act, requiring careful preparation and specific gestures that mark it as culturally and spiritually significant. However, at a deeper level, this transformation reveals an ontological continuity between human and natural life. The boundary between body and environment dissolves, suggesting that the human is not separate from ecological existence but embedded within it. The folktale, rooted in Kannada cultural traditions, also grants a form of agency to the female figure. By selling the flowers produced through her transformed state, she participates in an economic system that emerges directly from her bodily connection to nature. Yet this agency is not uncomplicated. The same transformation that enables autonomy also exposes her to exploitation, as her body becomes a site of extraction and control. The ritualistic dimension of the transformation further intensifies this tension, as sacred practice coexists with material use, revealing a complex interplay between reverence and consumption within the human–nature relationship. The idea of transformation into *a flowering tree* is detailed in the story and the transformation repeats three or four times, each time differing the purpose of transformation. At first, the young girl transforms into a flowering tree to support her family and her instructions are clear: Sister, I'll sit under this tree and meditate. Then you pour the water from this pitcher all over my body. I'll turn into a flowering tree. Then you pluck as many flowers as you want, but do it without breaking a sprout or tearing a leaf. When you're done, pour the water from the other pitcher over me, and I'll become a person again. (Ramanujan 111)

Here, the girl functions as an economic provider for the family. Her ability to transform into a flowering tree marks a symbolic crossing of the boundary between human life and the natural world. This metamorphosis allows nature to be directly integrated into systems of livelihood. By selling the flowers plucked from her transformed body, she generates income and supports the material needs of the household. At one level, this suggests a form of autonomy, as her unique ability becomes a source of economic agency. However, this autonomy is deeply ambivalent. The same act that enables survival also reduces her body to a productive resource, aligning it with the logic of extraction. Thus, the transformation not only overcomes the perceived divide between nature and culture but also exposes how that very connection can be shaped by material demands and structures of control. The very agency and power later turns into exploitation of resources as the story progresses. She becomes a subject for massive exploitation from her husband and sister-in-law, which turns her ability to a curse as they repeatedly ask her to perform the transformational ritual. The husband loots her of her ability in the guise of

conjugal bliss and she was repeatedly asked for the transformation to the tree. This becomes a tiresome exploitative ritual: They spread the flowers, covered themselves with them and went to bed. They did this again and again for several days. Every morning the couple threw out all the withered flowers from their window. The heap of flowers lay like a hill. (Ramanujan 114)

Later, this process is repeated by the sister-in-law and her companions, but without the care and ritual discipline that originally governed the transformation. As a result, the woman is left physically and emotionally devastated. The focus shifts entirely to extracting as many flowers as possible, while her wellbeing is ignored. What was once a sacred and controlled act becomes a site of unchecked exploitation. This moment is crucial, as it exposes the collapse of the ethical balance between human and nature. Her body, already aligned with the natural world, is treated as a limitless resource, mirroring the logic of overconsumption. The narrative thus reveals how easily reverence can turn into violence when desire for material gain overrides respect for both the human and the ecological. In their greed to get flowers, they tore up the sprouts and broke the branches... They poured the second pitcher of water at random and ran away. When the princess changed from a tree to a person again, she had no hands and feet. She had only half a body. She was a wounded carcass. (Ramanujan 115)

The pouring of water "at random" indicates not only haste but a loss of knowledge and responsibility. When she returns to human form, her mutilated state, "a wounded carcass", becomes a literal inscription of violence on the body. This is not merely physical damage; it is the consequence of treating a living being as an inexhaustible resource. The scene exposes how greed erases the distinction between use and abuse, turning sacred metamorphosis into ecological destruction. In this sense, the broken body stands as a powerful metaphor for a damaged ecosystem, where the disruption of balance leads to irreversible loss. Violence over the transformed body also hints at the ecological destruction for the material gains and resources from nature which leads our ecology to a state of "mutilation." The body, now indistinguishable from the natural world, bears the marks of this excess, suggesting that ecological systems, when subjected to unchecked consumption, are similarly reduced to a state of damage and fragmentation. The repeated plucking of flowers from the transformed body has become a site for extraction. It is mediated by structures of power, particularly patriarchy. The tree-body is not merely symbolic of harmony with nature, it is also subjected to mutilation. It suggests that ecological interconnectedness under existing social conditions is marked by violence and commodification.

On the other hand, *Aavasavyuham* presents human-to-nonhuman transformations in a more lucid and convincing manner. The narrative flow of the film reminds of a documentary on scientific subjects. The film centers around Azhikode, Puthuvype regions of Ernakulam where the rare ecological species were once abundant. Saraswathy Nagarajan rightly observes on the theme of the film as follows: The film revolves around an enigmatic man, essayed by Rahul Rajagopal, who has a mystifying relationship with all creatures and nature. On a nature trail in 2015, elusive amphibians and snakes respond to the strange noises he makes. While fishing at Azhikode and Puthuvype, he has a knack for attracting shoals of fish and crustaceans. Called Joy in one part of the film, he symbolises man's innate bond with nature and her creations. (Nagarajan) This ecological intimacy, however, is not merely a celebration of the natural world, rather it also introduces a deeper tension into the narrative of *Aavasavyuham*. Through the character of Joy, the ecological balance between human and nonhuman world is questioned. The protagonist, Joy, resists a stable categorization. His presence is marked by ambiguity, he is at once human and something beyond the human. The film is structured into different chapters and tells the story of Joy and his predicaments in different ecological parts in Ernakulam, particularly Puthuvype and Azhikode, where people live a life dependent mainly on fishing from

sea and backwaters.

Joy's mysterious arrival changes the life of Raghavan, a poor fisherman who struggles to earn a living because he cannot catch enough fish. After Joy comes, there is a sudden increase in the fish catch, which improves their situation. Because of this, Joy quickly becomes a favorite member of the family. The whereabouts of Joy remain hidden, it is believed that Joy was a Srilankan refugee. But there is no confirmation. He had a peculiar scent, like wearing a perfume made of dried fish. Perhaps that smell is unpleasant to everyone. I have always found him with that scent. Whenever he is near me, he smells of dried fish." (00:22:43-58)

As Lissy Raghavan recollects in a documentary interview on Joy, clearly mentions Joy's affinity with the natural world, especially aquatic species. His affinity with water and its species has given Joy a kind of power over them. They come when he makes some peculiar sounds. This power is not a kind of subjugation. Or it does not hint at the 'anthropocenic' thought. Here, Joy is being treated as a 'fellow creature' among themselves. Later, as in "*A Flowering Tree*," Joy's abilities are similarly exploited for profit by Susheelan Vava, a shrimp farmer in Puthuvype who rescued Joy from a dire condition. Just as the woman in the folktale is repeatedly forced to undergo transformation into a flowering tree for economic gain, Joy too was also forced to use his tricks to attract the fish and increase productivity. In both cases, what initially appears as a gift or unique ability becomes a site of control and extraction, where the individual is reduced to a functional resource. Call them from both sides, strange sounds you make... Get all the crabs. Your call should reach all the cracks and fissures... I think you're betraying those little ones. Even though we are in profit, the little ones come out of hiding to your call. We are in profit anyway so ignore... Hurry up, call the crabs. (00:46:52-00:47:30)

In a way, Joy was also becoming a part in the exploitation of those species as his sounds attract the fish and crabs. He became a kind of bait for the 'predators' to exploit the species. This realization strikes Joy as he tries to withdraw from such activities or at least tries to be unavailable for such exploitations. As the film moves to the climax, the tension and confusion around Joy increases. The film from its title itself is clear that it centers around 'an amphibian hunt.' This hunt is both symbolic and literal. In one sense it may hint at the hunt of Joy who is repeatedly exploited or rather become a tool for the people to exploit nature. And in literal sense as the film progresses to the climax it is revealed that Joy is literally 'tamed and hunted' for being an amphibian in human form, a frog man- a name repeatedly used in the film. This astonishing transformation as in '*A Flowering Tree*' has consequences. Though it doesn't fetch any positive outcomes, it has clearly brought in the negative ones. Joy's complete transformation into an amphibian happens in the house of Madhusmitha, a Puthuvype native. She works in a Kudumbashree unit, and earns a livelihood by making pickles. Her husband was killed in the Iraqi Wars, and her son tragically died in the Okhi Cyclone. She lives alone in the secluded swampy region of Puthuvype where the backwaters attract wide varieties of species from the sea including dolphins. As she narrates the incident of confronting Joy as 'a creature' in her house, in the very intimate space of her home, she screams for life. This attracts a wider audience to her house as they think it was a kind of 'dolphin' that has trapped inside her house. (01:231:10)

From this point onwards Joy is treated as 'a thing,' which people try to exploit or even make money out of it, by imposing 'tickets' to witness such a miracle as a 'frog-man.' In a way, *Aavasavyuham* presents a striking inversion of the familiar fairytale motif of a frog transforming into a prince through the kiss of a princess. Instead of an upward movement toward idealized humanity, the film stages a reverse trajectory, where the man mutates into a "frog-man," or more precisely, an amphibian (Anna, 2022). Rather than affirming human superiority, the film gestures toward a de-centering of the human, where identity becomes fluid and entangled with other

species. The amphibian figure, existing between land and water, further embodies liminality, suggesting a state of being that resists fixed categorization and reinforces the collapse of rigid species boundaries.

CONCLUSION

The comparison of *A Flowering Tree*, retold by A. K. Ramanujan, and *Aavasavyuham*, directed by Krishand R. K., shows two different but related ways of understanding the body and its connection to nature. In *A Flowering Tree*, transformation is presented as something sacred and ritualistic. At the same time, the story shows how this ecological body becomes vulnerable when it is exploited for profit and controlled by others. The damage done to the woman's body reflects the damage done to nature when human greed crosses natural limits. In contrast, *Aavasavyuham* takes a different approach. It does not focus on a single transformation but shows identity as fluid and changing. The film questions the idea that humans are separate from other forms of life. Here, the body is not fixed but constantly shaped by its environment and by its connection with other species. Together, these works challenge the idea that humans are superior to nature. While *A Flowering Tree* warns about the dangers of exploiting nature, *Aavasavyuham* goes further by questioning what it means to be human. Both suggest that humans and nature are connected, and that this relationship should be based on care and understanding rather than control.

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