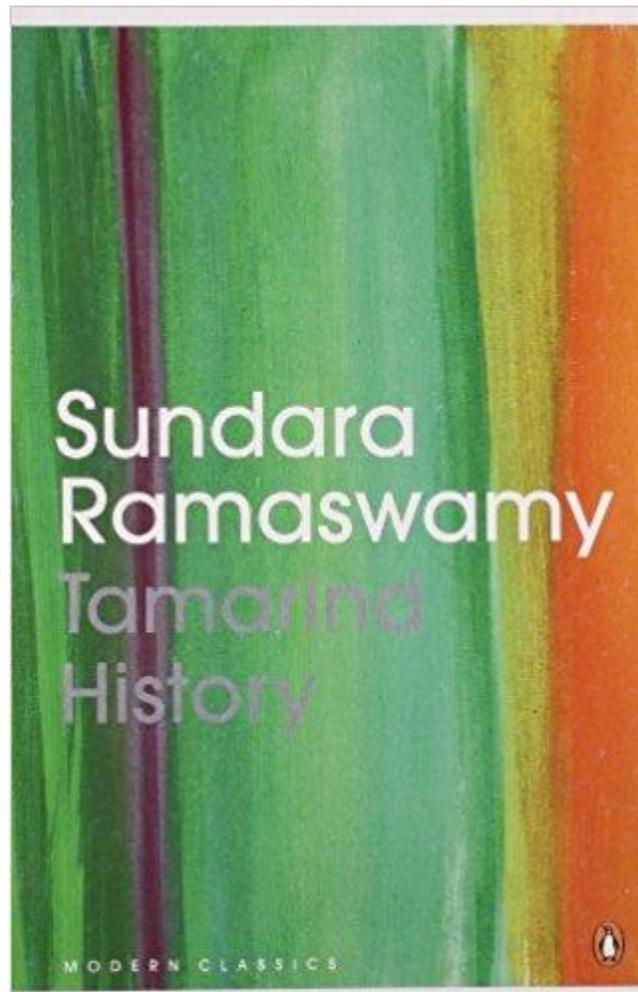


Nature at Cross-roads: An Ecocritical Analysis of
Sundara Ramaswamy's *Tamarind History*

R. Saritha



Abstract

Ecocriticism is the contemporary theory which explains the affiliation between literature and the earth. Ecocritical theory explains the significance of the natural world and it centers on the principal of relating physical environment with the textual writing. This environmental outlook is employed to explain the natural milieu and its decline in Sundara Ramaswamy's

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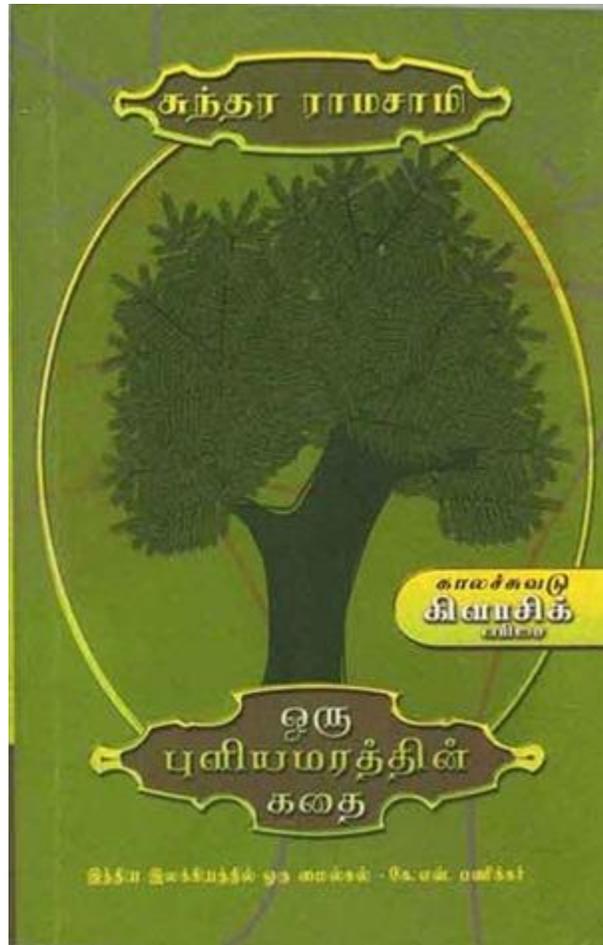
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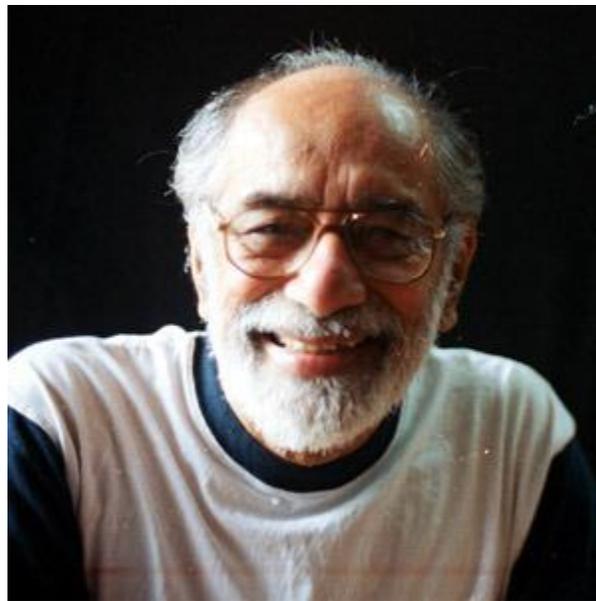
Tamarind History translated in English by Blake Wentworth. This Tamil novel illustrates the events that revolve around a tamarind tree of a small town which stands for generations and character's associated with it. The town's wilderness and its pasts are admired by an old wanderer and he transmits it to the younger generation through stories. The novelist in the fiction depicts the progress which human beings bring forth to improve the town. However, commercial development takes a toll on the pristine nature and the characters in the novel reflect on the loss of the wilderness. Sundara Ramaswamy brings out changing human ways impacting environment. Ecocritical reading of the novel drives home the point of destruction of natural atmosphere of the town with rise in modern developmental progress.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Nature Degradation, Environment, Deep Ecology, Modernization, Anthropocentrism.



Eco Criticism

Modern world is fast changing with scientific inventions and technology. The progress is primarily considered as boon to humans, where it establishes the superior rationality of intelligent mind in work to improve conditions for general amenity. These changes are creating disturbances in the natural balance. The impact of fast-paced growth is resulting in environmental crisis. Literature as a respondent to this contemporary issue, gives rise to the theory of ecocriticism. Twentieth century arousal ecocriticism is defined through Cheryll Glotfelty's (1996) words in *The Ecocriticism Reader: The Landmarks in Literary Ecology* as "study of relationship between literature and physical environment". (Glotfelty xviii) The physical environment includes the non-human world other than human beings with the consciousness of the entire ecosphere, thereby it is called "earth-centered approach".(Glotfelty xviii) Describing the process of modernization and its corrosion of environment is Sundara Ramaswamy's Tamil novel *Tamarind History* translated and published in English in 2013 by Blake Wentworth. This modern classic Tamil work stands as one of its kind in the narrative world, which is centered on a simple tamarind tree of a small town as the title indicates. This paper tries to analyze *Tamarind History* in the light of ecocritical perspective, as it helps in relating the depiction of the titular tree and its setting playing an eminent role in multifarious characters present in the novel.



Sundara Ramasamy (1931-2005)

Sundara Ramaswamy

Sundara Ramaswamy (1931-2005) is one of the representatives of modern Tamil writers. He is a versatile artist with works in other genres like poetry, plays, short stories and literary criticism. His other two novels are *Children*, *Women*, *Men* and *Waves*. These novels are also translated into English. *Tamarind History* is the maiden novel of Ramaswamy published initially in 1966 in Tamil. It is one of the earliest works in Tamil fiction that expresses environmental concern. The story is unveiled through a young nameless narrator and his memory about the tree. The tamarind tree is present at the crossroads in a small town in Kanyakumari district. The plot revolves around the tree and its history for about fifty years. Advent of modernity and the greed of the human beings bring about the destruction of the tree. The novelist says that, “This is the story of the tamarind tree living and dying”. (Ramaswamy 3) The green concern of the novel is brought out through ecocriticism, as Richard Kerridge, one of the ecocritics, defines the term in his work *Writing the Environment* in the following words “Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis”. (Garrad 4) The fiction explains the fall of an age old tree, along with old morals and association of nature with tradition.

Survival of Nature

Deep ecology is one of the environmental positions which are founded by Arne Naess. He along with George Sessions formulated certain significant principles that remain as its core position. Deep ecology postulates about the integrity of all living things on earth and the values of their lives. It claims that every existence is having “intrinsic value”. (Drengson 54) Sundara Ramaswamy also echoes the same in the novel, as he believes in the survival of nature for its own. Environment adds value onto human beings, and therefore he says, “It is an essential principle, to live life without being consumed by the way we push and shove each other just for self-preservation. The tamarind tree teaches us that lesson”. (Ramaswamy 3)

The narrator knows the past of the tamarind tree and the places around tamarind tree through the stories of an eccentric old man, Damodara Asan. His tales excite the narrator and the other youngsters of the town. Damodara Asan recalls the yester years when water surrounded the tamarind tree; unlike in the present where it stands on a bustling road. Damodara Asan describes

the place as: “Back in those days, the tamarind tree was surrounded by a small tank, its water stagnant in the murky depths. It was known simply as the tamarind tank”. (Ramaswamy 8) The tamarind tank is near a grove of casuarina trees. The atmosphere is serene with breeze and tall grasses growing around the tank. Village people and cattle bathe in the water of the tamarind tank. Even some valuable medicinal plants grow in the area and local herbalists collect them for treatment of many ailments.

Narration of Daily Activities Centering on Nature

The environment is complacent with greeneries and in the ecocritical sense it can be seen as a bioregion where the land and people are interrelated in a close community. Bio-regionalism extols the presence of the human with nonhuman beings and insistence of the consciousness of the place. Bio-regionalism explains this stance as, “the land must speak to us; we must stand in relation to it; it must define us, not we it”. (Clark 131) Damodara Asan gives explicit narration of daily activities centering on nature. The village serves as a bioregion in which community coexists with the environment.

Human beings think about themselves and try to destroy nature. Damodara Asan, in the novel vividly explains the incidents where a tussle erupts for attempting to cut the innocent tree. Ecocriticism views the interaction of the human with the nonhuman world as “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it”. (Glottfelty xix) Sundara Ramaswamy points out that human beings take advantage of nature to express their undesirable emotions.

Anthropocentrism

Chellathayi, one of the village women, hangs herself in the tamarind tree after knowing about her husband’s death. Anthropocentrism is the stance in which humans place themselves above all living creatures. Deep ecology critiques anthropocentrism as it forms the basis of ecological crisis where men exploit the world. So this attitude paves the way towards the erosion of the environment where human beings do not value other inhabitants. Similarly in the novel, the anthropocentric attitude of Koplana, one of Chellathayi’s relatives is seen where he vents his

anger on “a tree that had no one to stand up for it and no way to argue with him”. (Ramaswamy 30) Asan stops him from bringing down the tree.

Deep ecologists believe in the equality of all the living beings. This is a common notion in varied environmental distinctions; where they propagate a shift from anthropocentrism to non-anthropocentric orientation. This alternative view is known as ecocentrism or biocentrism. Ecocentrism blurs the distinctions between the living creatures of the world. It is explained in the following words as: “The world is an intrinsically dynamic, interconnected web of relations in which there are no absolutely discrete entities and no absolute dividing lines between the living and the nonliving, the animate and the inanimate, or the human and the nonhuman”. (Eckersley 49)

Ecocentric Attitudes

The novel brings on the ecocentric attitude of Damodara Asan, where he cares even for a single tree. Damodara Asan with his wit convinces Koplana about an evil spirit residing in the tree. Finally, Koplana cuts out the branch where Chellathayi hung herself. Removal of the branch leaves a scar on the trunk of the tree and it loses its regeneration ability which is explained in the following line: “No new shoot grew on that branch, nor a single leaf, a single flower, bud or fruit”. (Ramaswamy 31) Damodara Asan, in the novel expresses his affinity for nature and its elements. He stops the tree from being cut down and solicits the essentiality of nature preservation through tales to young generations. Deep ecology proposes an ecocentric attitude for the collective well-being; and Asan with his ecocentric outlook guards the tamarind tree.

Hierarchy, Social and Ecological Degradation

Sundara Ramaswamy comments on the gradual degradation of the tree along with its milieu brought about by human actions. Hierarchy imposes power and avails of it for human ends. Deep ecology desists from dominion that calls upon societies’ norms which command nature. In the novel, the tamarind tree is slowly losing its natural setting. Damodara Asan explains to the narrator and others, the tale of Maharaja Pooram Thirunal. The Maharaja is perturbed by a strange stench during his routine annual visit to Vadivamman temple of Meenakshipuram. He takes off for his palace in a rage, as the cause of the odour is the unclean water of the tamarind

tank. So the officials' hatch plans to drain the water from the tank into the ocean and fill it up with earth: "They dug a sluice to drain the water from the tamarind tank into the Theregalputhur channel. In just one day, the tamarind tank merged with the Indian ocean". (Ramaswamy 45) The tree with the tank is now converted into a pathway and the majesty is happy about the change. Bioregion is a place where elements of nature such as land, water, along with other organisms intermingle with the human beings. However, after the removal of water surrounding the tamarind tree, diversity is lost. The village with the tamarind tank as a bioregion is altered into a junction with numerous vehicles running on the pathway exuberating modernity.

Growth of Towns and Ecology

Ecocriticism criticises the way of treating resources as a personal gain and in order "to manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically", then call it "progress". (Heise 507) Sundara Ramaswamy eventually in the story details how a small village turns into a modern town in the process of development. People affected with their own short-sightedness unnecessarily destroy natural sphere to create leisure spots. In the novel, the municipal commissioner decides to remove the grove of casuarina trees in order to make the tamarind junction a bustling place: "The road that ran in front of the tamarind tree was paved with cement. The grove of rain trees that stood next to the tree junction was converted into a city park". (Ramaswamy 48) A landscape architecture is appointed by the commissioner to plan and execute the modern park. Man domineering perception towards nature is not right as, "This domination strips nature of any value other than as a material resource and commodity and leads to a gradual destruction that may in the end deprive humanity of its basis for subsistence". (Heise 507)

Deep ecology considers "self-realization" (Devall 66) as the process of recognizing the non-humanity as a part of oneself. Self-realization is propounded by Arne Neass for development of the self, which includes extending the boundary to the other living beings. The novel presents ecological orientation of Damodara Asan where he prefers the natural world for its wholeness. The narrator is reminiscing about Damodara Asan's love for the trees. He says: "For Damodara Asan, however, the grove of casuarina trees was the closest thing to heaven". (Ramaswamy 51) The presence of trees with mild breeze gives the place a look of everlasting beauty. Asan spent his young days climbing the trees and playing in the vast ground beneath the tall trees. It serves

as a place of solitude and haven for him. The novelist presents the old man with a biocentric view, considering nature as part and parcel of his life. Damodara Asan's association with nature can be seen as that of the deep ecologists' claim for self-realization where his identification with the nonhuman world is going beyond narrow selves. The narrator says that: "Asan, who had told us all these stories about the grove, took his leave of the world without lingering on to witness its incredible transformation, perhaps magnificent, perhaps terrifying, into a municipal park". (Ramaswamy 51) With values and stories recounting the beauty of the trees, the narrator feels incredible pain to see the slicing of the giant trees.

Change in Desired Ecology

The only person to voice his opposition against the cutting of the casuarina trees is an old man. He clearly does not understand the logic of planting hedges in the place of trees. The narrator thinks that he sees Damodara Asan in that old man. The novel presents clashing ideologies of the modern and the ancient. Deep ecologists are inclusive of ecological consciousness, which consider people in communion with nature. Bill Devall and George Sessions in their book *The Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, propose that: "The foundations of deep ecology are the basic intuitions and experiencing of ourselves and Nature which comprise ecological consciousness". (Devall 65) Ecological consciousness looms largely on the old generation which prefers nature in its originality. They consider it insane to slay trees in the name of modernity. The new place without the grove of casuarina trees is presented as: "The sun's rays glare down on the empty space where the trees were felled. The darkness that once concealed the grove is gone, and the place is unrecognizable". (Ramaswamy 58) The park symbolizing development imposes the dominant view of society and its industrialized notion which "regards humans as isolated and fundamentally separate from the rest of Nature, as superior to, and in charge of the rest of creation". (Luke 180) The city park is full of artificiality with a decorative pond in the middle and rubber ducks floating on the water. A zoo also erupts near the park. The novelist voices his discontent on modern science and mocks at humans who partake in the process of creation; he displays it through the character of the architect who establishes the park. He says:

Plants blossomed with bright flowers at his command. The touch of his hand led delicate creepers to curl in tight spirals. Swaying leaves grew long on the shrubs

to fulfill his whim. It amazed everyone, the way he smeared the face of creation with the blossoms of science. (Ramaswamy 60)

The park becomes the centre of attraction with people of all ages spending time within it. Varying notions of the human beings in the society is seen in the novel, where a majority of them prefer the park and appreciate it. The narrator in the novel feels that the period is witnessing fast changes with public indulgence in superficial and artificial entities.

Anthropocentric Culture and Civilization

Anthropocentric behaviour is evident in the novel, as the Municipal council takes charge of the tree only because of the presence of the tamarind pods in particular seasons. The council values the tree in terms of revenue as it incurs money through auctioning pods. Anthropocentrism in regard to nature is explained as: “the nonhuman world is reduced to a storehouse of resource and is considered to have instrumental value only, that is, it is valuable only insofar as it can serve as an instrument, or as a means, to human ends”. (Eckersley 26) Nature is not restrictive with human utilitarianism and their subsistence is devoid of materialism.

The novelist pictures this in the novel as he describes that the tree exists in a manner like, “It was a tree that took no one as master, but lived by the enlightened creed that it belonged to everybody”. (Ramaswamy 79) Scavengers of the town tempted with the taste of the pods take out everything. Thereby, annual auction does not take place after eleven years. The novelist is of the opinion that the government cared only about revenue, even it is from a tree. So he voices that: “All it needed was money: to keep people safe, to keep the town running and take care of any difficulties”. (Ramaswamy 79)

Tamarind History depicts the change in thinking in the modern era where human supposition is overwhelmed with materialistic concerns. This inherent quality is the essence of anthropocentrism. Deep ecology argues that the anthropocentric deeds will in certainty lead to environmental destruction. The novel reflects this human-centric norm which is evident through the characters and their motives.

Deep ecology is of the view that “nature of human interference in the various ecosystems is not sustainable”, (Drengson 54) and the human beings intrusion with nature is increasing. Deep ecology critiques the dominant view of self in human beings and its influence in negligence of the other living entities in the world. This adversary view preoccupies Abdul Khader and Damu in the novel, the rivals who own stores near the tamarind tree junction. Both compete with each other for money and power trying to establish their superiority.

Abdul Khader and Damu

Abdul Khader hates Damu thoroughly, so when he contests in local election, he too enters the race. *TrivancoreNesan*'s reporter, Isaki helps Khader to plot against his enemy. In an attempt to breakdown Damu, the reporter suggests: “It’s the shade that calls out to people when they pass by the store, and coaxes them to buy something ...No shade, no business”. (Ramaswamy 173)

To establish their authority, Khader and Isaki further articulate the idea of destroying the tree through news reports. The Municipal Council along with President Joseph forms a committee to decide the fate of the tree.

Deep ecology believes humans are an integral part of a whole web of creation. The earth belongs to all forms of life and they possess value. However, the precedence of self in people creates the problem of ecological destruction as in the novel. Man’s subjugation of nature for their whims is seen in *Tamarind History*, as the characters channel their revenge for fellow human beings and bring on the degradation of the environment.

Social and Economic Conflicts and Ecology

Deep ecology questions the possession of exclusive legal rights for human beings and not for the non-humans. It is antagonistic for nature because people claiming these rules take advantage of the resources, thereby depleting the wealth of the earth. The novel shows how the people in authority use law as a tool to create the environmental crisis. The committee abiding by Joseph’s decision finally confirms to abolish the tamarind tree. Kambaramayam Anandan Pillai as a councilman opposes the notion saying: “This is a holy place, this town, he said, and

the tamarind tree is sacred to it. True, it cannot speak, and true, it is frail, but it's a living being all the same". (Ramaswamy 187) The novelist exhibits prevalence of "biocentric equality" (Devall 66) in the character of Pillai. Arne Naess puts forward this aspect where all living things possess equality in the earth. They are inherent and have right to survive for their own accord.

On the other hand in the novel, Damu gaining insight about the plot of Khader through an employee decides to protect the tamarind tree for his benefit. Therefore, Pillai and Damu jointly start an opposition rally to stop the destruction. Damu with great diplomacy turns the tree into a religious symbol for gaining the trust from the public and converts this tussle into communalism.

Modern society is driven towards possession of economic and political benefit to exhibit superiority. The novel further displays the plight of the tamarind tree which is caught amidst a war between two characters Damu and Khader. Abdul Khader taken over with anger poisons the tree with mercury syrup using coolie Ayyappan. Damu's workers get hold of Ayyappan and in the ensuing fight he is stabbed accidentally with a knife. The novelist portrays in the novel the petty fight of men over power and killing a solemn tree for their own reasons. In the end, it is the tamarind tree which loses life after its survival for decades. The narrator is full of grief as he explains the tree's transformation on toxicity in the following words: "The tamarind tree was still at the crossroads, wasted and barren. It was clearly dead. Only its carcass remained, yet to be carried off". (Ramaswamy 205) Absence of the tamarind tree in the junction is irreplaceable and the novel portrays it in the following lines:

The place will fade away to nothing any time now. It had been so many years since the sun's rays touched the ground there, playing over the earth just as they liked! Fifty years, maybe even more. The tree had changed light into shade, bright heat into gentle coolness, and now it had finished its service. (Ramaswamy 205)

The novelist presents the tale of a simple tree with insight into human bonding with nature. Even after the death of the tree in the novel, the town junction bears its name. The novelist portrays the irony where the absence of the tamarind tree is due to the people, yet society continues to call the place as Tamarind Tree Junction. *Tamarind History* shows the

thoughts of human beings in relation to nature, where environment is measured through benefits. The novelist through his narration points out the inevitability of nature and its role in the lives of people.

Ecocritical analysis of the novel brings out the novelist's concern for nature in emerging modern days. Sundara Ramaswamy reveals the hypocrisies of the human mind and its havoc in impacting the environment. Anthropocentrism seems to be a vital cause in the origin of natural disruption as reflected in the novel. Damodara Asan stands as man who presents ecocentrism as the essential norm to prevent the damage. He represents the old tradition which sees nature in a holistic sense. Men like Asan, relate community with nature and protect it. The principles of deep ecological movement perceive villages as sustainable and so it is said: "Deep ecology, associated often with a valuation of wild and rural spaces, self-sufficiency, a sense of place, and local knowledge". (Heise 507) The narrative clearly voices the drastic changes a small village undergoes in the process of modernization and the loss of pristine environment accompanying it. Bill Devall and George Sessions as deep ecologists propose: "We are not alone. We are part and parcel of the larger community, the land community. Each life in its own sense is heroic and connected... This perspective encompasses all notions of saving anything, whether it be an endangered species, the community or your own self". (Luke 184) *Tamarind History* definitely as a novel resonates the era of modernity and the need to protect elements of nature with this simple tale of tamarind tree at the crossroads.

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