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Ecocide and Environmental issues in Rajam Krishnan's *When the Kurinji Blooms*

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Abstract

Man's foremost concern should be understanding the environment and responding to it. By preserving the environment he/she must ensure that the progeny also enjoys the bounty of nature. The desire to safe guard the environment will be possible only when there is love for the nature. When greediness surpasses 'topophilia' man commits heinous crime of ecocide. Deforestation, replacing the indigenous flora and fauna, results in climate change. In this paper an attempt has been made to highlight the issues related to environment with special reference to the hills of Nilgris which is the setting of the novel. Rajam Krishnan in her novel *When the Kurinji Blooms* depicts how the Badaga community was clearing the forests and were turning it into tea and coffee plantation. They were cutting down the trees and were slowly losing their affinity to nature. This becomes causative to other issues faced by the community which originally lived in unison with nature. Rajam Krishnan insists the need to protect the environment through the characters of Lingayya, Jogi, and Paru who are the crusaders of nature as opposed to the exploiters of nature Rangan, Nanjan son of Jogi, and many others from the community who lose their love for land out of greed for money.

Key Words: Ecocide, Conservation, Deforestation, Climate Change, Greediness, Indigenous, Eco-alienated

The regional turn and re-reading of literature in the light of regionalism created a need for understanding the environment and responding to it. The focus has shifted to preserving the environment in order to retain the regionality. Regionalism has given rise to "topophilia" love for a peculiar place because of cultural and historical affinity. W.H. Auden rightly says "little is common with nature love but depended upon landscape infused with a sense of history." This aspect is very clearly presented by Rajam Krishnan in *When the Kurinji Blooms* (2009). She talks about the history of the Nilgiri, which gets its name from Neela + Giri (Blue Mountain) because of the Neelakurinji which blooms in the hills. This historical aspect of the place gets annihilated when the ecology of the place gets destroyed.

Ecocide, the destruction of ecology and environmental issues related to it have become a popular discourse in recent times. Destruction caused to the natural environment because of errant human action out of negligence is a great cause for concern. The deliberate harming of the environment leads to a lot of issues that create imbalance in the eco-system which ultimately causes natural disaster. The replacement of indigenous flora and fauna trigger a series of environmental issues. The region referred in *When the Kurinji Blooms* is mountain / hilly region. The environmental issues specific to this region are deforestation, depletion of ground water, climate change and landslides etc. The climate change results in destroying the native plants and causes pestilence.

The cry for protecting the environment was initiated only after the Stockholm Declaration of 1972. However, there is a provision in the Indian Constitution making it mandatory to protect the environment (Article 51 A(g)). The Government of India in order to reiterate its stand in protecting the environment came up with The Forest (Conservation) Act 1980. By this Act, the government protects the forests and diversion of forest lands for other purpose. *When the Kurinji Blooms* depicts how the Badaga community clears the forests and turns it into tea and coffee plantation. They were cutting down the trees and were slowly losing their affinity to nature. This becomes causative to other issues faced by the community which originally lived in unison with nature.

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When the Kurinji Blooms is the translation of the *Kurinji* (1963) written by Rajam Krishnan originally in Tamil. The translation was done in 2002 by Uma Narayanan and Prema Seetharam almost forty years after its first serialised publication in the magazine *Kalaimagal*. The Tamil name *Kurinji* means “honey from the kurinji,” which wildly grows in the Nilgiri Hills. For the Badagas, the kurinji-span meant a twelve year period as the flowers appear on the shrubs only once in twelve years. According to Gunnell Cederlof the Badagas were shifting cultivators who gave *guddu* (annually a portion of the grains cultivated) to the Todas. Badagas possess the skill to increase productivity of the land. Edgar Thurston, in his *Castes and Tribes of South India* remarks that the Badagas migrated to Nilgiris from Mysore three centuries earlier because of famine and political unrest.

The ecological concerns are expressed by Rajam Krishnan through the characters of Lingayya, Jogi, and Paru who are the crusaders of nature as opposed to the exploiters of nature. Rangan, Nanjan son of Jogi, The Headmaster and many others from the community lose their love for land out of greed for money. The supporters of nature lived an eco-based lifestyle, with lot of reverence for mother earth, were very happy and content with their life. They were deeply pained to see the destruction of nature and by all means try to protect and preserve nature. On the contrary, the exploiters of nature do not care for it. They are eco-alienated, money-minded, materialistic and greedy. In the name of modernisation they cause destruction to the environment, all their actions are the outcome of vested interest.

Rajam Krishnan, tracing three generations of the Badaga community, shows how the perception of nature changes through the years. For Lingayya the land is very close to his heart, his love of nature is such that he prefers to work on the land with hands. He is so much satisfied with the life that he is leading. He feels sad to see his brother's land lying fallow. His son Jogi takes care of him when he feels saddened at the sight of forest being replaced by tea plantations. When Jogi returns to his hamlet after twelve years serving in the Ayyantemple. He observes how the landscape has changed, he finds potato plants and tea bushes and wonders: “Potatoes are food. But tea? It was money. What was more important? Food or money” (96). He champions the cause of nature when his son (Nanjan) puts forth the need to build a dam. He fumes at him “Traitor to the soil, you have lost your heart to money! You speak totally without feeling. Do you realise that it's this soil which has fed us for generations” (249).

Jogi believes that the land is like a mother and should be treasured. His fear that the building of a dam will create problem goes un-heeded by the authorities “the world has very little time to listen patiently to tribals, with their immense knowledge and creativity... We have decided that what is good for us is good enough for them” (Devy). He vehemently shouts at Nanjan when he says that the loss of land will be compensated: “The land is your mother! How will you know the worth of your mother... Can paper currency be equated to a mother? Can one put a price on a mother?” (251)

Paru is very sad that the tea plantations have replaced the kurinji blooms on the hill side. She recalls: “Once the entire hills had been completely blue with kurinji flowers. There was not one single kurinji to be seen now!” (179). Tea factories emitting smoke have become a part of the landscape. When the School Headmaster asks her to give away the land, she received a gift from her father for developing the school, she is shattered. She is torn between her love for the land and the prospect of higher education for Nanjan. For her the land is “the very essence of our being (185)”. She toils in her land till her last breath.

Paru's husband Rangan, on the other hand, was of a different make. J. Scott Bryson in *The West Side of Any Mountain: Place, Space, and Eco-poetry* observes:

To be placeless does not mean, of course that a person does not exist within a literal place, but rather that that place offers nothing to the person in terms of community or belonging. A placeless person, in other words, feels little connection to his or her surroundings and thus lives in ignorance of the interanimated nature of the world.

Rangan never had any affinity for the place which is why even as a teenager he leaves the hamlet. For him “The lure of silver was stronger than land (49)”. All that mattered to him was money, he would go to any extent to make money. While he was employed in the Snowdon Diary, he diluted the milk by adding water and slyly made a huge profit for himself. The greediness of the likes of Rangan in the community was the reason behind deforestation and increase of tea plantation. Though Jogi, Paru and

Rangan belong to the second generation, they don't share the same sentiment towards the land. The sound of "copper and nickel coins (38)" jingling in his purse was music to Rangan's ears.

Nanjan belongs to the third generation, he was more concerned with modernisation. His education has distanced him further from the soil. He is very keen in building the dam, which he believes is very important for progress. He hopes to dispel darkness and ignorance. He fails to understand that the ecology of the place will be destroyed. He is more bothered about bringing electricity to the place and creating job opportunities. He has no qualms in saying: "I myself don't know the flower, Sir. I don't remember ever seeing the kurinji"(241) to a fellow traveller in the bus.

Rajam Krishnan ends the novel with the inability of Jogi and Paru to come to terms with modernity and that they try to cling on to the traditional way of life till the end. Nanjan is happy with modernity and science. But what the readers are left to ponder is what has been the overall effect on the region. We all realise that it has caused a deep impact whenever we hear about landslides in the Nilgris district.

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