

**High Impact Factor 8.1458** ISSN



**Vol. 11, No. 3**



**Double-blind  
peer reviewed**



**Referred Journal**



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# **Reading Sundara Ramaswami's Tamarind History as an Anthropogenic Narrative written in an Earth Centric Way**

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## Abstract

When the developing world seems to be swayed by the late currents of modernity overlooking the environmental concerns and climate change, Sundara Ramaswamy's Tamil novel *Oru Puliyamarattin Kattai* (1966), translated by Blake Wentworth in 2003 as *Tamarind History* in English explores the themes of the changing interaction between humans and nature in a fictional Indian town in the context of historical and social-political changes. It highlights nature nurturing not just life at earth but also facilitating the imagination of the creative spirit of the mass of humanity. The novel also looks at nature as the 'Subaltern' becoming the victim to the games of the power-hungry-race of humanity. The paper analyses the telling of the life story of the specific tamarind tree at the main crossroad of the narrator's hometown in the novel as the author's attempt at telling anthropocentric history in a novel earth centric way.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism, Earth-centric, Nature and Human relationships, Modernity, Ecocide.

## Introduction

Sundara Ramaswamy's Tamil novel *Oru Puliyamarattin Kattai* written in 1966 and translated by Blake Wentworth as *Tamarind History* in English in 2013 is a narrative based on the life and death of a tamarind tree. Sundara Ramaswamy was a novelist, poet, translator and literary critic, widely considered to be a pre-eminent figure in post-Independence Tamil literature. *Tamarind History* is the first novel of the author and has been popular long after its

publication. It has been translated into Malayalam, English, Hebrew, and Hindi. It is written in a narrative voice that projects sustainable living and environmental concern to be vital to Tamil culture, civilizational survival, and individual ethics.

It is estimated by scientists around the world that global warming and climate change will rapidly leave a major part of the earth uninhabitable for both humans and other living organisms. Historically the rampant destruction of environment by “progressive” imperialist powers has led to a shift in people’s (and communities, cultures’) point of view from a bio-centric view into an anthropocentric one, more centred even then around an exclusive group of people and communities. Scholars and artists thus need to assess the current threats to environment through their interactions with the scientific community to change the anthropocentric understanding of history and the world to form a more earth centred worldview i.e., taking the non-human and nature in account while actively challenging human supremacy on nature. To counter anthropocentrism, Eco-criticism embarks upon the project of reconceptualizing nature, not as an object of observation or interpretation, but as an active agency by articulating the silence of nature, and exploring the nonhuman world in literature and discussing how it gets marginalized or silenced or incorporated into the romanticise-idealized form, or as hostile wilderness reasserting a binary way of thinking that justifies the present the catastrophic abuse of nature

The verbal constructions of nature, either in its romanticized ideal form, or as hostile wilderness, especially in a form of allegory is sometimes used to not just raise the issues of the environment but also to touch upon the ideas, beliefs, issues and the problems of humanity and its inter-connectedness with nature. Contextualization of ecological themes such as the environmental pollution, deforestation, vanishing of the

animals and species, deforestation, toxic waste contamination, and destruction of forests, in the literature would lead to enhancing the process towards developing a more comprehensive perspective on the subject.

## **Ecocriticism and its concerns**

Critical Theory in general can be said to examine the relations between the text, author, reader, and the world, in which the world is synonymous with the social sphere, Ecocriticism then expands the notion of the world to include the entire ecosphere. It explores the way literature interacts with nature. It looks at ecological issues and nature as a central force in the literature and deals with these environmental problems like pollution, global warming, deforestation, pollution, climate change and exploitation of land and forest in literary text. As the theory is still in its development phase, critics use this approach as per their own way. Critics like Glotfelty state that “the movement needs to become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice, and when a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion”<sup>1</sup>

While Nature is the prime category in an interpretation of any literary work, elements such as gender and culture are studied in relation to the former. It also analyses the cultural construction of nature. Jonathan Bate in his book *The Song of the Earth* (2000) suggests significant questions Ecocritics should ask such as, what is the place of creative imagining and writing in the complex set of relationships between human kind and environment, between mind and world, between thinking, being and dwelling? The answers to all these questions can be found in the layered narrative of *Tamarind History*.

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<sup>1</sup> Glotfelty xxv

Tamarind History can be easily considered one of the first novels in Tamil as well as in Indian literature written with an environmental consciousness. The novel is not extraordinary for its times but perhaps reflecting a proto-ecocritical consciousness in readers, authors and critics much ahead than the Western authors had intended to do so in their own languages and literature. The great Indian literary tradition of Kalidas and Valmiki, the Vedas and Puranas and running down to the poetry of the anticolonial consciousness embracing mother nature for its warmth that guided the emerging nation to walk into freedom, to the modern Indian writers whose works have also recognised nature as a regenerative force in the corrosion and disillusionment of the modern age, nature has infused meaning to the land since the land and its language has existed.

Celebrating nature, evoking the spiritual aspects of nature, the intertwining of the path of nature and man, comparisons of nature with women and mother, personification of nature, theses have been recurring themes in Indian epics, Puranas, and its ancient oral tradition.

The Tamarind history is not just tracing that very tradition but it also infuses the eco-critical consciousness in the text, which according to William Rueckert, involves “application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature”<sup>2</sup>. The anonymous narrator of the novel lives in a busy fictional town in Travancore. His first memory of the town where he grew up, is standing at the tamarind tree junction, bustling with life and activity. The narrator describes how the tree had been the living ancestor of the townsmen’ and women, who had grown up under its shade. The storyteller Damodar Asan, who was the oldest man of the narrator’s town, the custodian

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<sup>2</sup> Rueckert William. Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism. p 107. 1978

of the town's history and many legends, had passed on the stories of the tamarind tree through many generations of the town

## Celebration of Nature

Ecocritics in America celebrated nature and wilderness in literary writings. Inspired by nature, writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810- 1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) published works which believed in the inherent goodness of man and nature and were to be the founder of a new movement known as Transcendentalism. Though Tamarind History neither borrows its theme, nor was meant to be directly influenced by the movement, as a text it does parallelly what the transcendentalists intended. Damodar Asan's stories in the text recorded a shared past of the town in which interactions between human and nature were deeply intimate.

Every day, the children of the town, including the narrator as a young child would collect near his resting spot to listen to his amusing stories of the town and the tamarind tree. He told the children who listened to each word of his that the place and the tree had always been like that ever since he was a young boy. He would go back in his memories to describe how in his youth, the herding boys, would drive the buffaloes to the tamarind tree tank then head off to the casuarina grove and rip the place apart with their antics:

*In those days they romped around the place like monkeys. The dependable aura of serenity lead to the grove becoming a spot for exchange of ideas, a rare luxury. The boys screamed out whatever curses came to their mind, and whether it was in the pleasure of inventing new obscenities*

*or enjoying how good the curses sounded when said aloud.*<sup>3</sup>

They talked and discussed the mysteries of sex amidst each other, making it a space of shared solitude in the heart of the town in a carefree past. Chewing areca nuts and betel leaves, he always hailed the past as the golden age, romanticising nature in its pristine form. His experiences with nature shaped him to be man rooted to not just the earth but rooted to a distant past and its ways:

*Back when the tree was there the darkness closed in from every direction. A spiteful wind was always hissing through the trees making them groan like a bellows. For Damodar Asan however the grove of Casuarina tree, at the south of the tamarind tank was the closest thing to heaven. Whiling away the time there under the lone dictatorship of solitude, was an ultimate delight for him.*<sup>4</sup>

R Saritha suggests in her ecocritical reading of the text,

*"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"*<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Ramaswami Sundara. Tamarind History. trans. Blake Wentforth. 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Penguin Books. Haryana. p-54. 2013.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> R Saritha. Nature at Cross-roads: An Ecocritical Analysis of Sundara Ramaswamy's Tamarind History. p-8. Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com). ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 17. 2017

When the modern mechanised and materialistic culture turned unbearable for him, he escaped the town to be only found as a dead body lying in the foothills of Himalaya. He truly belonged to nature. To him the strong winds which blew the tamarind tree 'hard', were merely 'friendly'. Asan would reply, "and oh, does not it feel great. It is like being 'stroked' with pure silk, like baskets of jasmine being dumped over you"<sup>6</sup>

## History of the Tamarind tree

Tamarind tree is known for its tangy Tamarind pods which are used as an essential element in the cooking of traditional South Indian food such as Rasam and Sambhar. Tamarind is also used in many herbal medicines and traditional remedies for digestion, nausea and pain relief. At the same time, it is also believed in tribal myths and folk cultures that the canopy of the tamarind tree is home to ghosts and haunted beings and so they are never planted in the vicinities of temples. Though Tamarind pods are very important in tribal and poor households which use them in cooking their staple meals, they are still considered inauspicious in religious beliefs.

Similarly, in the narrator's town, the tamarind tree at the crossroads had many myths growing around its existence. The tree provided Damodar Asan, the town's healer tamarind pods to make medicines for treating many ailments of the towns' people. The narrative in Tamarind History seems to consider the old tamarind tree to be a significant observer to the town witnessing all the changes in the environmental, historical-social context of the town as well; from the pre-colonial times when the tree was just a bud sprouting in the town's cremation ground and had witnessed the flood of 1890s and stood for 3 days in water up to its neck, "the tamarind tree had

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<sup>6</sup> Ramaswamy Sundara. Tamarind History, 53

barely begun its life back then; so much more growing it had to do”<sup>7</sup>. Growing up it witnessed many seasons, many ups and downs, living as a secluded life form with the water of the tamarind tank all around it. As the town grew, the tamarind plant also became a fully grown tree.

*“This place used to be a jungle, it swallowed up corpses! 4 people a day were put to the stake here. One breath from the righteous king Pooram Thirunal and poof! A cremation ground becomes a paradise.”<sup>8</sup>*

When the king Pooram Thirunal could not bear the stench coming from the Tamarind tank when he had gone on one of his travels to supervise his kingdom, the town's whole population had to come together overnight to clean the tank. They cleaned the tank and sowed bushes and aromatic shrubs around the cremation ground to overpower the nauseating stench coming from it. After it the whole area glowed with a wonderful sense of fulfilment:

*How beautiful the tamarind tree looked, it stood like a hundred bright green parasols set on a single line, flying out all over the sky and being pulled back down. The shimmering lights that stretched out as far as the eye could see, the streets filled with gaudy stores, shoppers packed in row after row, trucks creeping past bumper and humanity's sheer noise, the roar of the winds that rocked the tamarind tree still rings in my ear<sup>9</sup>*

This also stands for the deep ecological standpoint of the novel. Deep ecology is one of the environmental positions which are founded by Arne Naess. Deep ecology postulates

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 206

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 37

<sup>9</sup>Ibid. 50

about the integrity of all living things on earth and the values of their lives irrespective of their relation to human beings. It claims that every existence is having “intrinsic value.”<sup>10</sup>

The tree brought a great deal of advantage for the British govt. which auctioned the tamarind pods every year and filled its coffins. The tamarind tree brought a good harvest every year. Nobody ever stole the tamarind pods as there was always a commotion around it. Nobody wanted to be caught stealing tamarind pods with others watching them. As transportation evolved and bus travel became widespread, the area where the tree stood was converted into the bus stand, rows of stores and couple of restaurants sprang up around it. In course of time, it became a central junction. A cinema hall was also built near it. After independence, the intersection was crowded with traffic and changed significantly:

*The tamarind tank was long gone. The milling crowd and the loud roar of traffic tried to drown each other out. For most people seeing the Casuarina trees right next to all those proud displays of modernity must have looked inappropriate as seeing a fashionable woman going off to college with her grandmother's jewels in her hair. People got caught up in the idea of good taste, and looked forward to the day when the tree would be gone.*<sup>11</sup>

## Ecocide and Modernity

Ecocide is a primary concern of the Ecocritics. According to Collins Dictionary ecocide is defined as “the destruction of the natural environment, especially by human being.” It is a

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<sup>10</sup> Drengson. The deep ecology movement: Origins, development, and future prospects (toward a transpersonal ecosophy)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 55

purposeful and intentional killing and destruction of the environment. Man-made ecocide, as the term suggests are possible to prevent, while natural ecocides are inevitable. Ecological imperialism is also a form of manmade ecocide, which involves the destruction of natural resources on the large scale by introducing commercial, foreign, and non-indigenous variety of plants and trees. In The Tamarind History, manmade ecocide led to the killing of the Tamarind tree as well as the loss of livelihood for traditional healers like Damodar Asan who were dependent on the trees for making medicines and remedies for small ailments.

The towns' elected government promulgated an official decree to clean the grove of Casuarina tree to the south of the tamarind tree to build a brand-new park to develop the place into a modern city. Hedges were to be grown all over the place while the trees were cut one by one, witnessed by most people of the town who stood silent like the narrator at a collective loss of their generation. The author exclaims that though the same place befits modern fashion and the shrubs and flowers growing in that enchanting place are bathed in cool glow of fluorescent tube lights, the town still had its collective memories of the trees alive.

In the crowd that had gathered to witness the killing, an old man of the town had cursed the fate of the town and the changing nature of its situation. The narrator is hopeful observing the event that someday other people too will ask questions about the intent and reasons behind those killings and think of the futility of the whole act.

A threat on life also started to dwell on the Tamarind tree. In the tussle between Khader and Damu, 2 of the powerful business owners of the town, who each wanted to establish their supremacy, the Tamarind tree accidentally got placed at the centre of their rivalry. Khader's shop which was situated right opposite to the tamarind tree was damaged by ragpickers

and some school boys who were trying to collect the tamarind pods by throwing rocks at the tree that fell on Khader's shop too and it led to the escalation of the rivalry between the two due to a misunderstanding.

## **Exploitation of Environment and Erasure of a Community's History**

The Tamarind tree from thereon became the talk of the town, The municipal corporation made a committee to investigate the stealing of the tamarind pods which had disappeared from the tree before being auctioned and many established and powerful men of the town were part of the committee. The committee suggested in its report that since there is sufficient reason to conclude that Khader's shop had been smashed by unidentified vandals who threw rocks at the tamarind tree in retaliation for the tax levied by municipality on posting advertisements there, the best course of action would be to get rid of the tree to prevent any untoward accident in future. On the other hand, Isaki, the provocative journalist of the town had created a movement of the people, making an abrupt demand before the municipality that the tamarind tree needed to be cut down. He researched the tree's long-lost history like an expert historian:

“It appeared that the tamarind tree had been damned by fate. Cursed, an inauspicious omen.”<sup>12</sup> The legend of how Chellatyi had hanged herself from one of its branches was given artistic touches by him for political gains, in his column in Travancore Nesan, he distorted the story of the Tamarind tree tank, which according to his fictitious narrative had started to spread a rotten smell in the air as the withered branches and leaves of the tamarind tree had fallen in it, ruining the procession of Maharaja Pooram Thirunal. In truth, the tank was located

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 185

near a cremation ground and hence it smelled so rotten. Isaki tried to polarise the town by questioning the safety of the people who worked or who would hang out in the place:

*How could any authority in the world provide just compensation if a branch happened to fall from the decrepit old tamarind tree and land on some needy little girl? He went on to pit the tree against the people by saying that the tree was old and may fall down any unfortunate day on a crowd gathered near it or those standing under it since it was close to the marketplace of the town and the cinema hall was also located around it.*<sup>13</sup>

Through distorting the facts around the tree's past, Isaki and some powerful men of the town were trying to kill the tree for their own selfish interests. The killing of the tree was yet questioned by many common people in the town, who organised a goddess festival in front of the tree to raise its stature from an ordinary Tamarind tree to the town's sacred tree. A group of folk musicians had also turned up to perform near it and a meeting was held under the tamarind tree to promote Hindu dharma, and to protect its tenets which called for protecting the natural environment, respecting all life forms, and living peacefully with them.

By Aiyappan's act of poisoning the tree, the town had lost not just a spiritual space of coexistence of man and nature in its most intimate form but also erased the history of the town that had been passed on from generation to generation in the stories of the Tamarind tree of the town told by Damodar Asan whose own disappearance marked an end of an epoch. The tragic end of the novel is painted as a lesson by the writer. As the world faces the global challenges of climate crisis and tries to look for measures to reduce its carbon footprint and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 186

return to sustainable ways of living, the tamarind history as a text also becomes significant in its portrayal of the vacuum created by the absence of nature and wilderness in the everyday lives of individuals and communities.

## Ecosophy

The concept has become one of the foundations of the deep ecology movement. Just as the aim of traditional philosophy is to present Sophia or wisdom, ecophilosophy or ecosophy would mean ecological wisdom. It is often associated with indigenous religion and culture.<sup>14</sup> The Tamarind tree is looked at with suspicion owing to its frail structure and old age along with the rumours of Isaki about its inauspicious presence. During this Kambaramayanam Anandan Pillai opposed the municipal committee's report to cut the Tamarind tree by evoking the ancient Hindu and Tamil tradition of worshipping nature:

*This is a holy place; this town and the tamarind tree is sacred to it. True it cannot speak and its frail but it is a living being all the same. He dismissed people who argued that the tree should be cut may as well kill those who cannot speak for themselves, the handicapped or missing a limb.*<sup>15</sup>

For Anandan Pillai people those who wanted to cut the Tamarind tree were cold materialist and he cited the research of the botanist JC Bose to demonstrate that trees are sentient beings and launched into a sweeping recitation of classical verse to show how the Tamil people had long worshipped

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<sup>14</sup> The term ecological wisdom was introduced by Naess in 1973. It poses the fundamental questions about the way in which men should act towards nature, what relations should they establish with nature in order to build and not lead to certain destruction of natural environment. Ecosophy emerged as a response to the destruction of the world, which leads directly to ecological disaster.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 187

trees as divine. He also compares the Tamarind tree with the symbols of marriage adorned by married woman, "If you really want to wipe the tilak off a married woman's forehead, then go ahead and do it, I just hope that god forgives you."<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The author critiques the urban modernity that has replaced age old tradition of sustainable and shared living, overlooking the environmental and ethical values towards nature. He exposes the hypocrisy of powerful men when they talk about development and who ignore a land and its people, their past and culture for self-interest:

*Immersed in their ambition for country, money, women power, or fame did people really think that they would let the tamarind tree alone while they played their game? Games with stakes so high that go all the way to the end. The tamarind tree was destroyed*<sup>17</sup>.

The tamarind tree was poisoned by Aiyappan, a benefactor of both Damu and Khader who wanted to seek revenge for his miserable state due to the two. Aiyappan was himself stabbed to death by 3 of the campaigners of Damu. The tree gave no sight of injury on the first day but on the fourth day a doctor came and stripped a patch of bark from the trunk and tested it, and declared it dead. After it the town was no more the same:

*As soon as the people got to know the tree was dead, one of the devotees, an old man jumped up as if possessed and ran over to Khader's store where he threw against it, screaming curses. A*

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 207

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 2

*crowd gathered in front of the store and smashed open the windows and hand rushed inside, tearing the place apart... fights later broke out all over the town. The whole area seemed to be on the brink of descending into outright communal war. The government imposed a strict curfew.*<sup>18</sup>

The narrator felt a terrible emptiness in his heart after the incident and missed the tree's presence every time he walked by the tamarind tree junction. He felt quite sure that many people in his hometown felt the same way. He states:

*Even today, with the tamarind tree dead and gone, the name for the crossroads is still the Tamarind tree junction. The name is stamped on our tongues and people cannot forget it. That habit is the only memorial to the life of the tamarind tree.*<sup>19</sup>

By throwing light at the life of the specific Tamarind tree, the novel also highlights the role of communities and individual artists like the storyteller Damodar Asan in engaging with public in understanding the significance of protecting the environment. The storyteller who repeats the same stories of the town and the tamarind tree day after day to generations of the town could not have done so had he kept the past buried within himself. When the whole town moved with the currents of modernity, Damodar Asan, continued to find peace and recluse in the 'solitude' found under the 'friendly' tamarind tree. The text also deliberately projects him in a contrast to the fashionable masses of the town. He preferred the smell of the earth after rain than the many pleasant smells of ecstatic flora 'beautifying' the town's modern parks.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp: 204-205

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 207

The novel does not talk about the impending climate crisis or forewarn about its future impact backed by scientific data but it subtly warns the readers about the chain reaction that is set in motion with the smallest harm caused to the ecosphere leading to irreversible loss, both physical and personal for communities and individuals in a specific time in history. As for the tamarind tree junction, the bazaar at the junction was slowly deserted once the tamarind tree was gone.

The novel as its title suggests is the history of the Tamarind tree but it is also an obituary for the Tamarind tree, acknowledging and cherishing its intrinsic value in a comic cum tragic narrative style. The narrator's hometown which is home to many stories of the Tamarind tree, nature, the town's inhabitants, their history, their relations and conflicts with each other, their interactions with nature was at a crossroad between its past and present but with the memories of the Tamarind tree who had touched the lives of the narrator countless others by giving shade and tamarind pods to people irrespective of class, age, gender and caste, hope for an egalitarian world lived on even after its death.

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