

INTERPRETING ECO-ETHICS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EASTERN AND WESTERN RIVER MYTHOLOGY

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Abstract

Nature – the emulator, defender and the destroyer, has been the site of myth-making from the primordial period where the concept itself plays the initiator and Man literally becomes the performer of the rituals called 'myth'. The complex interplay of myth-making and structural construction of the belief system of any particular race is often accelerated by the certain perspective the dominant group seeks in them. Therefore the myths are considered to be the primal seat of the entire past as well as the future of that particular group. In this era when demand of the hour is to shift our focus from the anthropocentric whole to the Ozone holes, a comparative study of the world mythology may kindle some wisdom to perform and save our beloved and neglected earth. Be it the extinction of the Amazons, the fettered Kaveri or the Ganga lamenting for her lost luster, quest for respite can be sought through the alchemy of these river myths. The proposed paper would venture through the dense wood of Amazon and Nile and glide through the perennial flow of the Ganges, Sarasvati and Kaveri to explore these river myths and venture a comparative eco-ethical and eco-feminine study.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, myths, orient, oxidant, rivers, patriarchal oppression, feminism, nature, earth.

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O Earth, O Mother, dispose my lot
In gracious passion, that I be at ease.
In harmony with all the powers of heaven set me,
O! Poet, in grace and good fortune!
- Hymn to the Earth. (Atharvaveda.Bk 12)

Nature – the emulator, defender and the destroyer, seems to be the insignia of the trinity concept of man's greatest creation- God. This emblem becomes the site of myth-making, while the concept of 'God' itself plays the initiator and Man literally becomes the performer of the rituals called 'myth'.

But, unfortunately the 'performer' has now-a-days turned into an exploiter of the primal seat of creation. Nature's policy, 'live and let others live', is going unheard by man and leading him towards his catastrophe. Giving a justified record one must admit that nature's might when underestimated or tamed by man leads to the effacing of the cord.

Environmental ethics is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents. This entry covers:

- (1) The challenge of environmental ethics to the anthropocentrism (i.e., human-centeredness) embedded in traditional western ethical thinking;
- (2) The early development of the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s;
- (3) The connection of deep ecology, feminist environmental ethics, and social ecology to politics;
- (4) The attempt to apply traditional ethical theories, including consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics, to support contemporary environmental concerns; and
- (5) The focus of environmental literature on wilderness, and possible future developments of the discipline.

Many traditional western ethical perspectives, however, are anthropocentric or human-centered in that either they assign intrinsic value to human beings alone (i.e., what we might call anthropocentric in a strong sense) or they assign a significantly greater amount of intrinsic value to human beings than to any nonhuman things such that the protection or promotion of human interests or well-being at the expense of nonhuman things turns out to be nearly always justified

When environmental ethics emerged as a new sub-discipline of philosophy in the early 1970s, it did so by posing a challenge to traditional anthropocentrism. In the first place, it questioned the assumed moral superiority of human beings to members of other species on earth. In the second place, it investigated the possibility of rational arguments for assigning intrinsic value to the natural environment and its nonhuman contents. It should be noted, however, that some theorists working in the field see no need to develop new, non-anthropocentric theories. Instead, they advocate what may be called *enlightened* anthropocentrism (or, perhaps more appropriately called, *prudential* anthropocentrism).

Although nature was the focus of much nineteenth and twentieth century philosophy contemporary environmental ethics only emerged as an academic discipline in the 1970s. The questioning and rethinking of the relationship of human beings with the natural environment over the last thirty years reflected an already widespread perception in the 1960s that the late twentieth century faced a “population time bomb” and a serious environmental crisis. Among the accessible work that drew attention to a sense of crisis was Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1963), which consisted of a number of essays, earlier published in the *New Yorker* magazine detailing how pesticides such as DDT, aldrin and deildrin concentrated through the food web. Commercial farming practices aimed at maximizing crop yields and profits, Carson speculates, are capable of impacting simultaneously on environmental and public health.

Paula Gunn Allen in his essay “The Sacred Hoop” has significantly commented:

“The notion that nature is somewhere over there while humanity is over here or that a great hierarchical ladder of being exists on which ground and trees occupy a very Low rung, animals a slightly higher one, and man (never woman)-especially “civilized” Man-a very high one indeed is antithetical to tribal thought. The American Indian Sees all creatures as relatives (and in tribal systems relationship is central),as offspring Of the Great Mystery, as co- creators, as children of our mother, and as necessary parts Of an ordered, balanced, and living whole.(246)”

This opinion connects the eco-ethical perspective to that of ecofeminism. Zhang Shu-Chien Lai (2004) illustrates the term thus:

"The term "ecofeminism" combines ecology with a feminist concern for the presentation of women and nature in literary texts, the influence of female characters and domination in ecological awareness, and most importantly, the oppression of women and domination over nature in an industrial culture and a utilitarian society. Ecofeminism insists that conceptually and historically linked, urging the elimination of both kind of oppression to save the planet from ecological disaster."(145)

This paper would attempt a comparative study of the eastern and western river mythologies and try to find out how the mythemes around the perennial entities of nature responds to the eco-ethical structures and ask for a universal holistic approach towards nature.

"Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context- they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they're not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but- and this is fortunate- never set so hard they cannot be changed again." (Warner, 14)

Marina Warner in her book *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of our Time* (1994) aptly comments that myths are the most fluid narratives and are meant to be adopted according to need of the present. Myths will always need retelling and reinterpreting, and reinterpreting, and the women's movement, feminist and postfeminist, has made striking contributions to this process. (Coupe, 190)

The present scenario, indeed, is helplessly asking for a reinterpretation. Going beyond mere theorizing is the need of the hour. We must start understanding the fact that just because these rivers have been hailed in myths for their purifying powers, we must not cross every limit and pollute it. William .G.Doty writes in *Myth: A Handbook* (2005):

"Myths are seldom fantasy constructions; more frequently they are the backbones of practical ways of living realistically. Yet even though mythic patterns of heroines and heroes appear to be almost beyond daily comprehension, careful attention reveals that their contents touch less on fantasy than on everyday questioning of quite realistic development issue."(Introduction, 3).

Women and nature have to be sinned against and also bear the burden of our sin. Are not we asking for too much? The burden which we are placing on our planet and women/ our planet and therefore on women / women and therefore our planet, would someday extinguish our very existence.

The four river myths to be discussed here, are-Sinan (the seeker of knowledge), Sarasvati (the lost river), Amazon (the warrior goddess),(Ganga (the spirit of India),Anuket (the Egyptian river goddess) and Kaveri (the daughter of India). The terms used within parenthesis mirror the essential reflection of these rivers as well as their relationship with our earth.

A close study of these river myths demonstrates that it does not only promote the ethic of respecting nature but also worships it as the retriever, restorer and redeemer of the human senses. Myths are indeed an open place where uncountable significance generates through eternal play of deconstruction. It never restricts itself to what its 'author' intended.

Encyclopædia Britannica records the much discussed myth of Amazon:

Amazon, in Greek mythology, is member of a race of women warriors. The story of the Amazons probably originated as a variant of a tale recurrent in many cultures. The ascribed habitat of the Amazons necessarily became more remote as Greek geographic knowledge developed. When the Black Sea region was colonized by Greeks, it was first said to be the Amazon district; but when no Amazons were found there, it was necessary to explain what became of them. Traditionally, one of the labours required of the Greek hero Heracles (Hercules) was leading an expedition to obtain the girdle of Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons, during which he was said to have conquered and expelled them from their district. Penthesilea led an army of Amazons to fight for Troy against the Greeks, but she was killed by Achilles, who later mourned her.

Subsidiary tales grew up to explain why, if the whole nation consisted of women, it did not die out in a generation. The most common explanation was that the Amazons mated with men of another people, kept the resulting female children, and sent the male children away to their fathers. In another tale, Theseus attacked the Amazons either with Heracles or independently. The Amazons in turn invaded Attica but were finally defeated, and at some point Theseus married one of them, Antiope. In Hellenistic times the Amazons were associated with Dionysus (the god of wine), either as his allies or, more commonly, as his opponents.

According to some accounts, the Amazon River was so-named by the 16th-century Spanish explorer Francisco de Orellana for the fighting women he claimed to have encountered on what was previously known as the Marañon River.

Dr.S.K.Lal notes how Ganga got attracted towards the king Mahabhisa and finally married him after her descent on earth. The king was then born as the son of Pratipa and was named Santanu. This marriage has another curse-story attached to it. The eight great Vasus, (archangels), were punished by a sage and were supposed to take a mortal birth.

Their curse could only be redeemed by Ganga's grace. She agreed to help the 'Vasus' by taking them as Santanu's sons. But the marriage was not entirely out of her obligation; rather she was deeply interested in the relationship. In spite of that, she did not lose her self-esteem and set an example for others.

'Ganga married Santanu on the condition that she should not be prevented from whatever right or wrong she did. The couple begot seven sons. As Ganga told the Vasus, she threw seven of them into her water one by one. King Santanu could not utter a word because of the promise he made to her.' (34)

But when the turn of the eighth child came, he could not resist himself and objected. 'The promise was broken. Ganga forsook him and repaired to her abode' (34).

Among the thousands of myths these two, where we find the goddess as an extraordinarily confident lady who would never yield to something she doesn't want to, is appropriate for a model for liberation movement, both of nature and women. This exuberance of conviction, authority, self-reliance and optimism monumented against the social-obscure, obsession and prejudice is the aura of an incredible lady with a pre-defined dignity. This conviction shows how stern the principles of nature can be and how religiously they can be performed. Here, she emerges as the powerful matriarch who can renounce the phallocentric world if her honor is not cared for.

What inspires both the ecofeminist and the feminist is their sole control on her womb and pertinent projection of power on it. It must be remembered that even today, ecofeminists have to weep over the uncontrollable birth rate which simultaneously hampers the health of nature and woman. Francoise D'Eaubonne writes in her seminal essay 'Time for Ecofeminism' (1988):

'In a world, or simply a country, in which women (and not, as could be the case, a man) found themselves in power, the first act would be to limit and space out our births. For a long time, well before overpopulation, that is what they have been trying to do. The proof is the existence of anticonceptual folklore.....these conjuration rites, obviously, were never cited by the male scholars, whereas lists of opposite rites – those of fertility- exist everywhere.'

Overpopulation is the result of the extreme control of man over women's womb and results into an overtly exploited nature. We must remember that, "the men who control the exploitation of our fertility: the husband to whom we must submit, of course, but also the priest, who can only be a man, the doctor or the judge, who nine times out of ten is a man; all these civil servants of male power are males." Therefore it is very obvious that women, now, have to take the charge to protect themselves as well as the entity of nature.

D'Eaubonne proposes a definite attitude to be chosen by women in order to do so (192);

"In short, according to slogan of the Ecology-Feminism Center, we have to tear the planet away from the male today in order to restore it for humanity of tomorrow. That is the only alternative, for if the male society persists, there will be no tomorrow."

The Ganga and Amazon myths are the strongest expression of how a woman/ the nature can turn her image of a patient Griselda, all enduring giver upside down and assertively establishes her own will as the ultimate. The Celtic mythology gives is a wonderful saga of the river Shanon. Sinann is the river goddess associated with this river.

Sinann was originally a mortal woman who searched for the Well of Knowledge. In this well lived the Salmon of Knowledge, and nuts fallen from nine magical hazel trees. When she found it, in Northern Ireland, she opened the cover and the water flowed out and became the river Shannon. It also killed her and transformed her into the goddess Sinann. This death, though, is the death of death-and-rebirth that changes her into the goddess. In the ancient Celtic world, the search for wisdom was usually made by a woman who found it in a river or well. Also, she is changed by the knowledge into a new being – a goddess.

A similar note could be found in the eastern mythology also. The *Vamana Purana* (Ed. 1992) chronicles the curse on Sarasvati (188). It pictures how a easy flowing river gets mortally wound caught amidst the two great rivals- the seer king Visvamitra and the noble minded Vasistha. The sixth verse of the chapter forty reads:

'Having Summoned Sarasvati, he (Visvamitra) told her this: "You bring Vasistha, a tiger among the hermits, along with your current. I will kill that foremost sage when he comes here; there is no doubt". Having heard this, the river was indeed sorrowful. Thus ordered, she went to Vasistha and told her what she had come for. The emaciated sage consented and asked her to carry him to Visvamitra. When she brought him to the hut, Visvamitra, started to search for weapons to kill Vasistha. Having observed him enraged Sarasvati got afraid of Brahmacide and carried away Vasistha in the middle of the stream. By doing so she had diplomatically carried out the words of both of them. This infuriated Visvamitra and he said, 'O! Chief of rivers! Because you have gone away deceiving me, O auspicious one! You carry blood and be in league with groups of Rakasas (demons) (190).'

Being cursed thus, she carried water mixed with blood. Goblins, ghosts and demons drank it and enjoyed. Exploiters in all grotesque form ripped her apart. Eventually, she was 'lost'. The very fact that archaeologists, scientists, geologists and researchers, worldwide,

are concerning themselves with the trails of the 'lost' river stands as a proof to her being important, till date, in many a sphere.

"The Mahabharata does not miss the opportunity to weave a few legends around the theme of the Sarasvati's disappearance. In one of them, the wife of Utathya, a rishi, was snatched away by God Varuna while she was bathing in the Yamuna. In order to pressurize Varuna, who dwelled in the waters and ruled over that element, to return his wife, Utathya caused 600,000 lakes of the region to disappear, and commanded Sarasvati 'to become invisible', to leave this region and go to the region and go to the desert'. The epic never expect its readers (or listeners) to take its numbers literally, whether those of arrows following from Arjuna's bow or of elephants standing on the battlefield; nevertheless, this legend, if it rests on a fact, seems to hark back to a time when lakes dotted the region. And at any rate, she Sarasvati did 'go to the desert. And curiously, an astonishing number of names of towns and villages in western Rajasthan (the heart of the Thar Desert) have names ending in the word 'sar', such as Lunkaransar, with 'sar' meaning 'lake' (from the Sanskrit word saras)."

Danino counts it to be over fifty on an ordinary map. "Why should all those places be named after non-existent lakes? An unwary tourist reading a map of western Rajasthan might as well assume that the region is some kind of a Lake District!" (Danino 43).

Thus, nature, even when unseen, never goes unfelt. In the Yajur Veda, to be precise- Sarasvati, additionally, becomes the goddess of speech, the Word (vach or vak) (Danino 36). She is the incarnation of both wisdom and its expression. "Her position as Vach, the goddess of speech, finds no mention in the *Rig-Veda*, but is recognised by the *Brahmanas* and *Mahabharata* (Dowson 283).

Like Sinann, the integrated entity of Sarasvati is far beyond any fragmentation. She flows eternally as the sustainer of the Spiritual psyche of India. these blood stained bodies, trampled self-esteems, molested values, dried up marks of tear drops and howling of demonic strength is the story of just the half of this globe of nourishing nature, mesmerizing myths and rudimentary reality, the other half being composed of a completely antagonistic approach. Here one finds the broadly acknowledged perspective of the ecofeminism – that of reverence and gratitude towards nature and women

In any culture, language and semiotics are considered to be the very basis of it as it make communion possible. By conferring the title of 'Goddess of speech', these myths have actually proved that nature and culture cannot perform separately but together.

The unification of nature and culture is best felt in the rituals. These rituals are however almost always intertwined with a nature-human intimacy. The fertility rites, birth rites and

death rites – all these sacramental observations are inseparably connected to trees, earth, water or something else in nature.

In Egyptian mythology Anuket has been declared to be the goddess of the Nile cataracts. The myth of Anuket is at the heart of the festival of harvest for the common folk.

Anuket is a protective deity of childbirth and her title is "She Who Embraces". As the River Nile flowed towards the north, the annual flood waters entered Egypt by passing Elephantine and by the 18th Dynasty it became the cult center for the three gods: Anuket, the goddess of the cataracts, her mother Satet the war goddess of the flood or inundation and her father Khnum the water god who guarded and controlled the waters of the Nile. These three gods were the protectors of the River Nile and known collectively as the Elephantine Triad. Elephantine was the capital of the state and for many years was the military stronghold of the Ancient Egyptian Empire and a center of commerce and trade with the Nubians. The trading link with Nubia probably accounts for the name 'Elephantine' as there was a brisk trade in ivory at the island. As the Egyptian goddess of the treacherous Nile cataracts Anuket was particularly worshipped by the ancient Egyptian traders and sailors who left inscriptions on the rocks as a form of prayers to Anuket for their safe passage along the hazardous waters to Nubia or for their safe return to Egypt. The River Nile provided the source of agricultural wealth to ancient Egypt. Each year a torrent of water overflowed on to the banks of the Nile leaving a thick rich mud (called black silt) and alluvial soil that fertilized the land making it ideal for growing the crops that fed Egypt. The flooding of the Nile was of such importance that the Egyptians based their lives around it.

Akhet was the time of the Nile flood (June - September)

Peret was the sowing time (October - January)

Shemu was the time of harvest (February - May)

The beginning of the harvest season, Shemu, is celebrated with the Festival of Anuket in which thanks were given for the harvesting of food crops such as wheat and barley, and industrial crops, such as flax and papyrus. Celebrations during the Festival of Anuket included a magnificent river procession, in which the other members of the Elephantine Triad, Khnum and Satet, are also honored. Statues of the gods were removed from the temple and ceremoniously placed on gilded ceremonial barques, equipped with long poles that were carried on the shoulders of their priests to the bigger river boats. The massive processions consisted of standard bearing Egyptian soldiers, priests, musicians, singers and dancers. Festivals are extremely noisy with shouting people, the chants of the temple choir, the blowing of trumpets, the beating of drums, and the rattling of the sistra.

The air would have been full of the smell of burning incense. Statues of other gods are added to the procession as different temples are passed. The people enjoy the spectacle of the procession and celebrate with feasting. The people also give offerings to the gods by throwing such items as jewelry and coins into the Nile to honor and appease the river gods. Freya Mathews, in her essay *Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology* (1996) presents an excellent rendering of how the nature should be addressed :

"Nature, from the ecofeminist perspective, is a community of beings, related, in the manner of a family. ... to whom the proper attitude is one of familial consideration and care, born of an emphatic understanding made possible by our common origins, or our mutually defining relations, ecofeminism is able to condemn our abuse of the environment outright: this is no way to treat one's family!"

The ritualistic myths of our culture treat the nature exactly in this manner, it is nothing but family to us.

Vasudha Narayanan in her seminal essay "Water, Wood and Wisdom: Ecological Perspectives from the Indian Traditions" (2001), mentions a beautiful ritual which reprises this bonding:

"When the Kaveri is swollen after the early monsoon rains, I have heard the residents of Srirangam (a large temple town on an island in the middle of the river) say she was pregnant. This is a wonderful celebration of her life-giving potential: the surging river, rich with the monsoon waters, sweeps into the plains, watering the newly planted crops in the Thanjavur delta, and giving birth to the food that will nourish the population. On the feast of patinettamperukku, the eighteenth day in the Tamil month of *Adi* (July 15-August 14), all those who live on the banks of Kaveri in the Tamilnadu celebrate the river's "pregnancy food cravings." They take a picnic to the banks of the river and eat there; Kaveri Amman is the guest at every picnic. Just as the food cravings of pregnant women are indulged by the family, Kaveri Amman's extended family celebrates her life-giving potential by picnicking with her. In some families, the oldest woman of the family "[leads] the festival and [throws] a hand? Full of colored rice to satisfy the macakkai [food cravings during pregnancy] of the swiftly flowing Kaveri... as she hastened to the Lord's house."

This approach towards Kaveri Amman and Anuketde notes how she is far beyond being only a perennial flow of the nature and is treated as the daughter of these people. These simple gestures do not occur out of any deep philosophical musings but the deep rooted familial feelings towards the rivers. The river goddesses thus cease to be a mere power to be worshipped and become a living entity to be loved, adored and cared for.

The women-nature affinity takes its physical shape in various other customs. To quote another such practice one may allude to the general belief that ablution should not be made in rivers in Monsoon as the rivers 'menstruate' in this time. When rain water fills the river with excessive water and mud gets mixed to, many people belonging to this culture take this natural existence to be a deity on his yearly menstruation.

Carolyn Merchant summarizes the philosophy of D'Eaubonne with sensible precision (*Ecology* 11):

"Women's personal interests join those of the entire human community, while individual male interests are separate from the general interests of the community. The preservation of the Earth was a question not just of change or improvement, but of life or death. The problem, she said, paraphrasing Marx, is "to change the world...so that there can still be a world." But only the feminine which is concerned with all levels of society and nature can accomplish "the ecological revolution". She concluded her foundational essay with the telling words; "And the planet placed in the feminine will flourish for all."

The paradigm shift needed to launch this desired 'ecological revolution' calls for a mass awareness regarding the sustainable development. It would include all the valid sectors-social, cultural, environmental, religious, economic and political. Each of the participants of the earth needs to perform her/his bit of duty.

As discussed in the chapter 'Cursed Redeemers', the start should be made with the basic behavioral disparity in humans regarding this nature. We would lit lamps on the banks of Ganges, do extreme penance for the circumambulation of Narmada, hail Sarasvati as the goddess of Speech and feed Kaveri during her 'pregnancy', and simultaneously tear them apart with dams and choke them with waste – this has to be changed if we want ourselves and our planet to stay alive. Thus, both nature and women are being hurt every day, and the situation would only worsen if we still sit idle.

As already discussed, we must look at things from a different angle now. In *KurmaPurana*, a verse says:

"O Leading King, one shall deposit one's bones in that holy centre. He is born in the world again as a beautiful person endowed with riches and worldly pleasure" (41.92)

Apparently, it asks us to do sacrifice so that we can get flooded with wealth. Why should we perform such an act which does no good to our earth and gives us nothing but transitory riches? Rather, we should renounce the worry of materialist gains and start aspiring for a holistic existence.

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