

**AN ECO-CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *THE HOLY WATER*: A CULTURAL TRANSLATION OF J.M.SYNGE'S *THE WELL OF THE SAINTS***

Dr.S.Kumaran  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
University College of Engineering Tindivanam  
Melpakkam,Tamilnadu  
India

J.M.Synge's *The Well of the Saints*, written in 'Irish English,' was first translated into Kannada (entitled *Jogibhavi*) by Dr.Basavaraj Naikar and the success of the Kannada translation made him to translate the Kannada version into 'standard English' as *The Holy Water*. Dr.Naikar translated the play not only linguistically but also culturally. In spite of the differences between Irish culture and Kannada Culture, Dr.Naikar managed to adapt the play so as to suit Kannada culture: "The Christian saint was transformed into a Lingayat Swami. The blind couple, Martin Doul and Mary Doul was transformed into Chennamalla and Chenni respectively. Timmy and his fiancée Molly were transformed into Manappa and Malli. The Irish village is transformed into Naragund, a small town in Dharwad district of Karnataka. The well of the Christian saints was transformed into *Jogibhavi*, i.e. the well of the *jogis* or *yogis*" (The Holy Water, viii). As *The Well of the Saints* has been transformed into a new work of art with the 'rich flavor of Kannada culture' it was re-titled as *The Holy Water*. This paper explores *The Holy Water* to bring out the principles of ecology.

The play revolves around the couple Chennamalla and Chenni, who are blind and in their 50s. Though they are blind, they have learned to interpret the voice of nature and reveal its sanctity. The setting of the play is a village where the people revere nature and obey its cycles. William Rueckert (1996) in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" underlines the urgency of balance in the interaction between humans and nature thus: "We are violating the laws of nature, and the retribution from the biosphere will be more terrible than any inflicted on humans by gods. In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric ... (as opposed to biocentric) vision and his compulsion to conquer ... exploit every natural thing" (113). The people in the village correspond with nature and renew their bond with it every day. Chenni discloses that the sole occupation of the village people is farming. They are not interested in whiling away their time in revelry rather "They are taking their carts and cattle to their fields to attend to their work" (The Holy Water, 1). Moreover, they could predict the healthy impact of the course of nature on humans. Chenni has good knowledge about the influence of weather on humans and rightly remarks: "This biting cold and lashing wind will make your voice hoarse. But I have heard such cold weather is very good for our health and gives the colour of oranges to our body" (The Holy Water, 2). She considers nature as the harbinger of all lives and chides people who do not care for its beauty. As she believes in the intrinsic value of nature, she always urges her counterparts to "notice the beautiful trees and creepers, hills and dales and people" (The Holy Water, 3). Through their actions, the characters in the play proclaim the inherent worth of nature and also reflect nature as a part of themselves.

Most of the natural resources are depleted because of humans' neglect of preservation and their habit of wasting the resources. Humans must learn to preserve non-human environment in order to make their survival possible in this world. The life of humans is interconnected with the physical environment and the disturbance to the ecosystem will ruin the continued existence of humanity. Due to humanity's disconnection from the natural world some of the recognised environmental disasters pointed by Love (1996) are:

the threats of nuclear holocaust, or of slower radiation poisoning, of chemical or germ warfare, the alarming growth of the world's population, mounting evidence of global warming, destruction of the planet's protective ozone layer, the increasingly harmful effects of acid rain, over cutting of the world's last remaining great forests, the critical loss of topsoil and groundwater, over fishing and toxic poisoning of the oceans, in our own garbage, an increasing rate of extinction of plant and animal species (225 – 226).

In the play, Chennamalla points out the necessity of conserving natural resources. Through the words of Chennamalla it is known that there is a gap, through which water gets wasted, in the check-dam in the village and it threatens the eco-system. When Manappa tries to reveal a miracle that is going to happen in the town, Chennamalla overwhelms: "Will they fill the gap in the check-dam and build a wall beside it? That will be a very good service to the people" (The Holy Water, 5). Moreover, the people in the village acknowledge the necessity of non-humans for the sustenance of human life.

Religion propagates mysterious and holy aspects of nature. Water forms the core component of nature and it is the origin of all lives. Contamination of water is the most serious problem being faced by people across the globe and it is predicted that countries will engage in war with one another for water in future. Amidst these alarming situations, the play focuses on the water in an old-well. "There is an old well behind the monastery. If a few drops of the holy water from that well are sprinkled on the blind people, they are going to get the eye-sight instantly" (The Holy Water, 6). The villagers retain with them a clever way to educate the humans about the sanctity of water. As they have understood mental pollution is the root cause of the contamination of the physical environment, they circulate the belief: "The holy water becomes desecrated if it is touched by sinners. Those, who go to fetch the holy water, never go or return with a pure mind" (The Holy Water, 7). The people even associate the well-water to religion and worship.

Though one cannot obliterate the prevalence of irrational practices in religion, religion proves to be a wonderful means to keep people away from polluting the physical environment. According to Skolimowski (1999), "We rarely realize that the contaminated physical environment leaves behind its shadow which is contaminated mental and spiritual environments. A true work of ecology is healing all the three environments simultaneously: physical, mental and spiritual" (1999:13). Pollution of an environment leads inevitably to the pollution of other two environments. It is only by maintaining the purity of all the three environments, the sacred web can be maintained. In the play, the villagers believe that if people commit sin, they will be punished by nature. When Chennamalla strikes at the bowl in the hand of His Holiness, the villagers urges him to vacate the village. They command "Le Chennamallya, first clear away from here. If a single man like you commit sin, all of us will have to die due to storms, tempests and famines"(The Holy Water, 53). Through the analysis it is found that the purity of the three environments can be maintained through religious rites and rituals.

Traditionally, in India, the people in villages are much dependent on sharing natural resources. They rely on wells, rivers, ponds in their villages for the purpose of drinking water and take steps to safeguard them from being polluted. As people have much faith in the scriptures and religious practices,

religion proves to be an unflinching source to ascertain the purity of natural resources that are associated with it. In **The Holy Water**, “The Swami of Shivananda Monastery will bring the holy water... His duty is to visit all the monasteries in the area. He always carries a small bowl with him containing the holy water. It is said, if he sprinkles a few drops of that holy water on the blind people, they instantly recover their eyesight. Their eyes will be as sharp as those of the eagles soaring high in the sky” (The Holy Water, 8). Moreover, the Swami relies on food in its natural form: “As far his food, he takes nothing, except two bananas and a glass of milk per day” (The Holy Water, 8). If nature is made the part of religion, people accept its sanctity and guard it from being polluted.

Most of the time, people fail to realise the prevalence of holy things around them owing to their ignorance. It is their ignorance that prevents them from becoming holy. In the play, the holy well is “located on the deserted hill” (The Holy Water, 13) and the reason for the desertion of the place seems to be the result of people’s ignorance about the sanctity of the place. Theories related to the ‘sense of place’ have a significant role in ecocritical studies. Donelle N. Dreese asserts the power of environmental factors in molding human beings in *Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures*. Humans are a part of their environment and they reflect it through their lives. The circumstances under which they gain experience determine their emotional, physical, and other significant actions. Once they are removed from their environment, they feel alien and long for the lost place. Humans’ attachment with the environment is a bond, which is renewed by interaction with their environment.

Physical environment has the power to transform the vile desires of humans into a reverential one. When the eyesight of Chennamalla and Chenni is restored, they are unhappy with each other’s physical appearance and also abuse each other. The Swami intervenes and urges them to “see the hills and dales, trees creepers, fruits and flowers and enjoy their beauty” (The Holy Water, 21). The importance of non-human environment is explained by Buell (1995) as:

1. The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (7-8)

Physical environment acts as a redeemer and educates humans about the meaning of life. After having deserted his wife, Chennamalla is found sitting in a place surrounded by trees and rose plants. The place reminds him of the hollowness of his life and induces in him the desire to atone for his sins. He says that “By sitting alone here I may lose my sense also as I have lost my eyesight. When I hear the branches of trees being broken in the wind and falling on the ground I begin to shake with fear” (The Holy Water, 38). The place makes him realise his foolish act of forsaking his wife for the mere want of beauty. It also helps him to understand the futility of lust towards women and prepares him to proclaim: “I have lost my way. O God, lead me on the right track. I shall meditate upon You day in and day out. Henceforth, I shall not wander about with any girl. I will not commit any sin” (The Holy Water, 38). He is enlightened and is united with his wife Chenni, who is also influenced by the mysterious place to pardon her husband. When both of them have decided to live happily till their death, Chenni affirms that “At that time the Festival of *Kama* will be over and *Ugadi* Festival will be coming. The ravens flock here from distant places and warble sweetly. Let us hear it happily. There will be flower-like sunlight everywhere and cold wind blowing. Let us both perch on this stone and enjoy the fragrance of flowers and fruits. Let us hear the

susurrating music of the trees and creepers” (The Holy Water, 41). It is the physical environment that has transformed the couple to relish each other’s beauty through the inward eye.

People’s communion with nature is intuitive and sublime. Though Chennamalla and Chenni are blind, their blindness does not deter them from enjoying the warmth of nature. Chennamalla yearns to get eyesight so that he can see the “whole world” with his eyes and “enjoy seeing the beauty of nature” (The Holy Water, 9). Further, he says that “Your Holiness, we used to see more beautiful things than these even when we were blind. When we sat on the edge of our hut, we used to enjoy the fragrance of flowers wafting in the air. The birds used to flap above our heads. Then we used to enjoy seeing the beauty of the wide sky, hills and dales, big lakes and rivers, mountains and oceans with our mind’s eye” (The Holy Water, 48). In the play, the trees represent nature and proclaim its innate worth. Skolimowski, (1999) asserts the dignity of nature as “Nature supports you in countless ways. You have the responsibility and duty to revere her-out of your respect for all creation, out of your respect for the divine, out of your respect for yourself. You have the responsibility to maintain the integrity of the divine. For all is divine” (19). Chennamalla goes to the extent of forsaking saints and their ways of worship in order to spend his life amidst nature. He avows that “Similarly we the blind couple have the right to enjoy our life by basking in the sun, and listening to the wind in the trees. We don’t want to suffer by wandering in the hot sun and seeing the saints. We don’t want this botheration” (The Holy Water, 52). Chennamalla and Chenni prefer nature to religion and its ritual and prove the sacred bond between humans and nature.

Women and nature are born free but are being oppressed and dominated through patriarchal notions. Patriarchy, claimed as the prerogative of western culture, maintains various kinds of dualisms. The irrational acts perpetuated by the patriarchal culture in India are massive and they pose threat to nature and affect the ecological ways of women in India. In the play, Chennamalla, as a product of patriarchal culture, always associates women with nature and propagate essentialist views. He coerces Malli: “O Malli, tell me who doesn’t go mad if a pretty girl comes near him? You keep that pitcher down. Come with me. Let’s go. I shall feel happy staring at your moon-like face” (The Holy Water, 32). Further, he believes that the existence of women is to fulfil the insatiable and vile desires of men. He always compares the body of women to nature and degrades them to the core. He terms Malli as “who wakes up blithe like a bird in the morning and walks about stylishly like a swan” (The Holy Water, 32). When he pesters her beyond her patience, Malli rightly remarks: “Look Mama, this man has gone mad. Look at him. No sooner does he open his mouth, than he begins his *purana* about girls” (The Holy Water, 33). As men and women are biologically different, men attempt to extol their features at the cost of women. Chennamalla orders Malli thus “As you are a woman, it is impossible for you to get beard on your face. Therefore, keep quiet. You have no right to indulge in idle talk” (The Holy Water, 41). Through the analysis it is known that patriarchal culture is detrimental to the welfare of women and nature.

In traditional India, women are considered the icon of the house and the managers of its whole affairs. The house includes all its members including non-human others. The women feed the humans in their houses and do not fail to nourish their cattle. According to Manes (1996), “in addition to human language, there is also the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls- a world of autonomous speakers whose intents (especially for hunter-gatherer peoples) one ignores at one’s peril”(15). Women treat non-human others on par with humans and acknowledge the law of ecology. They nurse their children and remember to offer milk to their cats. One has to assess what made the iconic status a symbol of submission. The new theory should identify the factors that devalue the activities of women. If the iconic status of women is maintained, then the condition of nature will also be improved.

As the attitude of men towards women is linked to the attitude of nature, the change in their attitude will be beneficent to both women and nature.

As patriarchy finds women's caring attitude towards nature is not congenial to its anti-nature activities, it brands women as irrational and associates them with nature. It identifies the association of women with nature convenient to their domination and exploits woman-nature connection to its advantage and intensifies it further.

By pointing out the intrinsic value and inherent worth of nature, this paper points out the futility of anthropocentrism and by revealing the interconnection among the three environments namely, mental, physical, and spiritual, this paper calls for the purity of the three environments to maintain this universe as a 'Sanctuary.' Moreover, this paper has analysed the role of religion in the commendation of nature. Further, this paper has brought out the patriarchal notions on women and nature and necessitates the replacement of the patriarchal systems that aggravate the 'twin domination.'

#### **Works Cited:**

Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, Print.

Dreese, N. Donelle. *Ecocriticism: Creating self and place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2002, Print.

Love, Glen A. "Revaluing Nature." in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. eds. Glotfelty and Fromm. London: University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp 225-226, Print.

Manes C. "Nature and Silence." in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds., Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp.15-29, Print.

Naikar, Basavaraj (Trans.). *The Holy Water: A Cultural Translation of The Well of the Saints*. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2010, Print.

Rueckert W. "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Eds., Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996, pp.105-123, Print.

Skolimowski, Henryk. 1999. *Dharma, Ecology and Wisdom in the Third Millennium*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1999, Print.