

## THE BROKEN PROMISE TO NATURE: A STUDY OF RAJAM KRISHNAN'S *WHEN THE KURINJI BLOOMS*

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“The forest is a continuous living story, witness to ups and downs of the civilization”

-Singh.

Nature is a selfless entity who has unfolded all her wealth and beauty, to both human beings and animals equally, for their survival and well-being. During ancient times, there seemed to be a mutual promise between man and Nature. Nature allowed man to make use of her boundless wealth, looked after him by rewarding him for his hard work and man respected mother Earth, taking only what he needed for his survival. Initially, there was no trace of breach of trust between man and Nature, but man, the superior race, later, turn out to be treacherous towards Nature. He broke the unwritten promise to Nature, by plundering her in the name of progress, to satisfy his insatiable greed for wealth. This paper aims at exploring man's contribution towards eco-destruction and the deep impact of these changes in the lives of tribal people whose world revolves around Nature. The lifestyle changes that takes place in the tribal life of the Badaga tribes, when there is a disturbance caused to Nature, is studied through Rajam Krishnan's *When the Kurinji Blooms*, which throws light on the life of the Badagas of the Nilgiris.

Rajam Krishnan was born in 1924, at Musiri, Tamil Nadu. She spent her childhood on the banks of the river Kaveri and led a peaceful life. Though Rajam Krishnan received very little formal education, she was a voracious reader and a keen observer of people's nature. She was married to Krishnan, a Central government employee, at an early age of fourteen. The constant transfer in her husband's job gave Rajam Krishnan ample opportunity to travel to various parts of India, and have a kaleidoscopic view of Indian culture, ways of life and various attitudes of people. Hence, her writings reflect the realities of life, and the characters of her works possess a lifelike dimension. She has written forty novels, twenty plays, two biographies and several short stories in Tamil. She was also the recipient of various awards including the 'Sahitya Akademi', 'Thiru-Vi-Ka' and the 'Saraswathi Samman' awards. A few of her famous novels are *Lamps in the Whirlpool*, *When the Kurinji Blooms*, *Water for the Roots*, *The Blooms of Thorn*, *Salty Pearls*, *People of Slush*, *The Eye of the Storm* and *Land of Mothers*.

The novel, *When the Kurinji Blooms*, highlights the changes that occur in Nature and the life of the Badaga tribes in Nilgiris within a span of three generations of life. It brings out the changing attitude of man towards Nature, and his fellow human beings. It throws light on man's greed and his race for power and money, which results in the plundering of the luscious beauty of Nature. Rajam Krishnan talks about the impact of urbanisation on the tribal communities and the destruction caused to Nature in the name of progress. She portrays the pollution that permeates into the minds of the tribal communities and Nature. Swarnalatha Rangarajan in her essay “Engaging With Prakriti: A Survey of Ecocritical Praxis in India”, explains that:

With factors like rapid urban growth, industrialization, and population boom, environmental conflicts have become more pronounced and revolve around competing claims. Sites of struggle range from forests, unethical mines, dam projects and displacement of tribals and agriculture-dependent poor people to land and resource depletion, pollution, decimation of biodiversity, and species threat. (527)

The novel is set in the hills of Nilgiris, which is the abode of the Badaga tribes, whose way of life is an expression of sincerity and oneness with nature. They are basically herdsmen and simple cultivators, who cultivate to sustain their lives and not to hoard wealth. The novel, *When the Kurinji Blooms* portrays the lives of three generations of a single village or settlement called Maragathamalaihatti. The story revolves around Lingayya, his son Jogi and grandson Nanjan. Lingayya is a kind hearted man, who has exceeding love and respect for Nature. He lives a simple and contented life with his wife Madhi and son Jogi, who tends to the grazing herds. As a young man, Lingayya has the opportunity to lead a life of tranquillity in the midst of Nature, free from the pollutions of urbanisation. Lingayya represents the past generations who had lived an amicable life, in harmony with Nature. The Badaga lifestyle was intertwined with Nature and the people were contented with simple pleasures. Nature shared her bounty with the tribal people and taught them unity, sharing and simplicity. They lived in unison and helped each other during adversity. Lingayya was satisfied with the harvest produced in his small field and tended to his buffaloes with love and care. His elder brother Madhan did not take care of his household and so Lingayya took care of his elder brother's son Rangan as his own. The kind hearted Lingayya always believed in helping his fellow-beings and living a peaceful life. He tells everyone that, "Wealth and money are not important. Life has meaning only when you work hard on the land with your hands, share your food and live in amity with everyone"(136).

Rangan, who was twelve years old, has an immense desire to settle down in the nearby town called Othai. He considered the town as a place filled with opportunities for job and handsome earnings, which was absent in the hills. The young are often lured by petty pleasures and unhealthy lifestyle of the town and being no exception to it, Rangan runs away to the town, after stealing money from his uncle's purse, only to be lost from the tribes for a long period of years. The people of hatti or the settlement, assume that Rangan was killed by the tiger that was lurking around, and mourn his absence. Rangan represents the tribal people, who are lured by the towns, with empty promises of job, money and pleasure. Jayanta Sarkar who observes the destruction of tribal culture due to the interference of urban culture, points out in his essay, "Becoming Endangered Tribes in the context of Larger Societies: Some Observations" that:

Development of infrastructure, especially communication brought the Scheduled tribes in diverse contact situations with the people of plains. Depending upon the nature and extent of these contacts the scheduled tribes had different types of reactions. While the tribes having larger populations evolved some social, economic and biological mechanism to sustain the multiple pressures of different cultures of the plains, a few of them particularly those who were small in number found it extremely difficult to cope with the ever increasing pressures on their societies. In consequence of such technological, social and physical pressures many of these tribes became biologically and/or culturally endangered. (247)

Rangan symbolises the people, who abjure the call of Nature, which offers a peaceful life, and prefer a tinsel world of unhealthy pleasures. He also represents the tribal people who dislike Nature and are ignorant of its importance, whereas, ironically the people of the town often travel towards Nature, to repair their lost strength and vitality.

Jogi, the son of Lingayya, is sent at the age of nine, to the village temple, to serve as a priest instead of Rangan, who had been chosen by the Badaga clan. He serves as a priest for twelve years before returning home due to his father's illness. When Jogi returns home, he is shocked to see the poor condition of his household. Lingayya, who was sick and bed-ridden, was unable to work and hence led his life at the charity of the village people, who supplied him with food grains. Jogi, who had been confined in the village temple for many years, finds that "here and there the landscape was dotted with tea bushes" (96) and perceives that change had begun to set in the surrounding Nature and the people. He finds that Nature had been cleared to make way for tea, coffee and potato plantations, which had destroyed the beauty of the

hills.

Soon, the hatti people find a new way to become rich. They abandon their old methods of simple cultivation and adopt the new method of attaining quick wealth. They destroy most of the surrounding forest and replace it with plantations. The mountains are bereft of beauty and are replaced with coffee and tea plantations. Nature which helped man to survive, struggles for survival. The absence of forest in the hills lead to the absence of grazing fields, and less pasture for the cattle, hence, the cattle stray into the cultivated fields and pave way for quarrel among the tribal people, who had once been living in unity and brotherhood. Greg Garrard argues that man cannot destroy the Earth but only ends up destroying the amicable atmosphere that surrounds him. He says that “Gaia is well beyond our capacity to 'destroy' - although we are making it horribly uncongenial for ourselves, our symbionts and other organisms we love” (Garrard, 205).

Life in the hatti becomes even more complicated with the arrival of Rangan, who had left the hills and gone to the town in search of a promising life. Rangan was always jealous of Krishnan, who belonged to a rich family, and tries to compete with him in every possible way. He demands the hand of Paru, his cousin, who was deeply in love with Krishnan. Rangan's intention to marry Paru is nothing but an act to defeat Krishnan. Paru's grandfather, who belonged to the older generation of the tribe, decides to allow Nature, which played a prominent role in their lives, to determine the groom. He asks the suitors of Paru, to lift a heavy rock and the one who succeeds in the feat, would be eligible to marry Paru. This is to imply that the man who is able to face and overcome the hardships and challenges posed by Nature is a suitable groom. The college educated Krishnan fails to lift the rock and the labourer Rangan who succeeds, weds the broken-hearted Paru. Rangan, in his competition with Krishnan, enters into plantation business and ends up destroying most of the forest area, to plant tea. Man's greed escalates to ravage and leaves Nature deprived of its beauty. The hills lose their charm and elegance due to man's obstinate greed.

The purity of Nature is defiled by man, who goes into the town and brings back pestilence into the realm of clean environment, thus polluting Nature and man with destruction, disease and unforeseen calamity. The plantation fields bring in a new demand for workers and hence, some of the tribal people abandon cultivation and begin to work in the plantations. The growing demand for workers brings in more workers from other places, and various pestilences, which had never been heard of before in the settlement, gain entry into the forest settlement, destroying many members of the tribe. Paru's world revolved around her two young daughters and the small cultivation field, which was given to her by Lingayya, before his death. For Paru, “apart from her children, nothing in life gave her as much joy as the land. The land gives life, it gives strength; it gives food. It receives the same lives into its bosom one day” (134). Paru, who had no love for her husband, loses both her young daughters to the pestilence and becomes completely shattered. After the death of her daughters, Paru completely ignores Rangan and dedicates herself to the field, which provides her with solace, as she considers the crops her children. She consoles herself saying, “This is the essence of my existence; the joy of my life; the soil, my mother, my child. This is everything. This will not betray me. Fire and disease cannot separate me from it; they cannot snatch it away. My Land!” (169). Rangan, who is steeped in his ambition to defeat Krishnan, continues to clear the forest for plantations and pays no attention to the thoroughly disillusioned Paru.

Jogi, who was married to Girijai, Paru's sister, leads a peaceful life like his father Lingayya. He had excess love for his wife and adored his fields. The pregnant Girijai is carried to the town hospital, due to lack of proper medical care in the tribal settlement and dies during childbirth, leaving the infant under the care of a shattered and grieving Paru, who was unable to forget her dead children. The infant, who is named Nanjan, becomes a new source of hope in Paru's life. Paru learns to forget her personal loss and begins to enjoy life through the eyes of her new found son Nanjan, who calls her 'mother'. Jogi, who had lost happiness in life, finds peace in cultivation of his fields and leaves Nanjan completely under the care of Paru. Nanjan excels in his studies and makes Paru proud.

Nature is also destroyed in the name of Education and when destruction to Nature is made in the name of education for the future generations, every mother would forget Mother Nature and relent. When Nanjan was in his eighth standard, Nanjan's headmaster asks Paru to donate her land to the school, in order to extend the school campus. Paru hesitates in the beginning saying "How can you understand our anguish Ayya? Is this mere soil? Isn't this the essence of our being?" (185), but later decides to sacrifice the land for the sake of Nanjan's education, when the headmaster says, "This is a good opportunity for your children to study, for your children to progress" (185). Education was unable to teach children, the balance between progress and Nature, and later, along with progress, comes in greed, jealousy and plunder. In the essay "Globalisation in the Scheduled Areas" Samata and Mines state that:

Mining industries, power projects, dams and other industries projected as 'development' projects have been avariciously eyeing the abundant natural wealth. They take advantage of the poverty and illiteracy of the *adivasis*, their inaccessibility to information and lack of political voice, which helps in avoiding exposure of atrocities and violations, committed by the industries in these remote areas, to world outside, and thus provides the opportunities for committing ecological havoc with impunity. (498)

Like a mother, who forgives her children, who do her wrong, Mother Nature repays her plunderers with high yield and bounty, but man's unquenchable thirst for more, puts Nature through more torture and pain "by breaking down hills, levelling valleys, damming rivers, and capturing nature's energy" (248). Her rivers are obstructed from flowing, her mountains are drilled to make tunnels, and her forests are cleared for plantations in the name of development. Jasleen Kewlani in her essay "Environmental Degeneration with Focused Reference to Deforestation and its Impact on Developmental Sustainability" feels that:

Economy can be developed by establishing more and more industries, which in turn needs a sufficient power generation. Both phenomenon destroy forests, industries replace forests; large establishments are made in these environmental entities,... Consequently a great demand for power generation emerges. For the purpose of providing power and electricity to industries, to make them function successfully, dams are constructed. Where dams have got a great potential to control floods, construction of several dams involve the eviction of thousands of families, and their resettlement at some other site. (193)

The highly intelligent Nanjan, goes to town for higher education and comes back to Nilgiris as a civil engineer, having secured a job in the construction site of the dam, that is being built across the Kumari River and waterfalls, which runs near the hatti, providing water for land irrigation. Nanjan feels that hindering the waterfalls and the river from flowing would be beneficial to the people, as Science has taught him that curbing the pathway of water produces hydroelectric energy, which would be used to illuminate the people's household. He tells Paru excitedly:

We can have electricity even in our house. You press a button, and there'll be light! ... We will dam the water from the river and the waterfall, and generate our own electricity. We will use the electricity for factories, for manufacturing machinery, for cooking and heating. There will be work for lots of people. They will have food to eat and clothes to wear. (243)

Nanjan fails to realise that such an act may at times displace the people from their lands, and render the people homeless and jobless. He represents the new generation, who have no knowledge of a tranquil life, as they were born in a world with very little Nature around them and surrounded by concrete jungles.

Steven Yearley, who highlights the role of man in destroying Nature by tampering with its suitable developmental atmosphere, points out in his essay *Environmental Issues and the Compression of the Globe* that, "Most animals and plants have evolved to cope with very specific surroundings. Their numbers decline when their source of food is damaged, when their migratory routes are disrupted or their breeding patterns are disturbed" (56). The extent of destruction caused to Nature in and around the hills can be understood when Nanjan says that he has never seen a Kurinji flower the flower which plays a



prominent role in the life of the Badagas, who measure years as “Kurinji span” (95). He says to a fellow passenger in a bus, “I myself don't know the flower, Sir. I don't remember ever seeing the kurinji” (241). The Kurinji flower, which covered the hills of Nilgiris, with its pleasant blueish hue, once in every twelve years, was lost to the Maragathamalaihatti. Paru, later when she recollects the past and compares with her present days, she grieves that, “The forest lands had now become cultivated fields and the hill slopes were covered with lush green tea bushes. Once, entire hills had been completely blue with kurinji flowers. There was not one single kurinji to be seen now!” (179). Deforestation had destroyed the Kurinji plant which was a native flower of the Nilgiris Mountains, along with the various other native flora and fauna of the Nilgiris. In the essay “Strategy for Afforestation - A Current Thinking”, N.G. Singh points out that, “the ecology of the earth, especially of India, is changing fast leading to destruction of Living beings specially plants, in some cases to complete extinction. The wooded space in urban areas and country sides is vanishing fast” (69).

Jogi wants the dam project to be stalled, as he desperately feels that without water, the lands would dry up and agriculture would be impossible. He feels that darkness is better than hunger and showers his anger on Nanjan saying, “People living here will go without food. To give jobs to educated fellows like you, they are drilling land, ravaging Mother Earth. Men are mad after money. Can money and land ever be equated?” (243). Jogi begs the higher officials to stop the project. He also rues the fact that the dam would take a heavy toll on the hatti people, who might lose their lands and end up being homeless, jobless and displaced. He argues with Nanjan saying, “Like a predatory snake they are coming here to snatch the food from our mouths. How can we tolerate it? Who wants the dam and the electric lights? They are snatching away our food and giving it to strangers. These Governors and Collectors!” (250). Vinay Kumar Srivastava explains the plight of the tribals who allow their lands to be taken away by the Governments thinking that they would receive apt compensation and better conditions of living, only to find out that their hopes never last long. In his essay “A Note on the Tribal Situation in India”, he comments saying, “alas, their hopes were belied when development programmes, instead of ameliorating their condition, displaced them to barren lands, jeopardizing their life-support systems, and making them perpetually dependent upon the state for doles” (49). Jogi who realises that the hopes of the villagers and their belief that they would attain development, due to the construction of the dam, is nothing but the morning dew drops, which would never live to see the afternoon breeze. Jogi fights fervently and helplessly against the construction of the dam.

Paru and Jogi, plead with the helpless Nanjan, to talk to the higher officials and discard the intention of build the dam. When Nanjan tries to explain and make them understand that he is powerless and that the Government has undertaken the project, he faces the wrath of his father Jogi, who says, “As soon as you have finished your education, you are talking of giving away the land for money! Can paper currency be equated to a mother? Can one put a price on a mother?” (251). Jogi feels that education has made Nanjan insensitive towards his people and Nature. Jogi fails to realise that it is the system which has to be changed and not just a helpless individual. He laments the short-sightedness of the educated men, who are unable to foresee the destruction that would be caused to their Nature, culture and their heritage. He hates himself for educating his son, and his son, for not helping him in his crusade on behalf of Nature. Jogi comes down heavily upon his son saying, “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 raves like a mad man and tries his level best to find a way to stop the dam.

The illiterate Rangan undergoes a series of failures, in his attempt to humiliate Krishnan. He mistakes the dam project to be Krishnan's brainchild, and convenes a strike at the site, against the construction of the dam. He extends his full support to Jogi, and succeeds in creating a tense situation at Maragathamalaihatti. He gathers the workers and the villagers, for an agitation against the project. Rangan, who had always never cared for Nature, uses the pretext of fighting against deforestation to stop

the project, only to execute his personal vengeance against Krishnan. He represents the people who fight a pretentious battle on behalf of Nature, but with an ulterior motive and not as a true, concerned, well-wisher of Nature. A struggle takes place between the workers and the police, which escalates to lathi-charge and firing, to curb the agitation. The whole chaos comes to an end with the death of Rangan, who gets shot during the commotion.

The novel, tries to imply that people like Lingayya, Jogi and Paru strive hard to preserve Nature and their eco-based lifestyle. They are the crusaders of Nature, who strive their level best to preserve it and ensure that Nature is left as a legacy for their posterity to live a healthy and peaceful life. It also shows that people like Jogi and Paru are outnumbered by self-centred, heartless people like Rangan, who have no conscience and value money more than Nature. The short-sightedness of such people destroys the basic way to health and happiness, thus, bequeathing an uninhabitable world to the future generations, who are left with no options except to fight against various ailments of the mind and the body.

At the end of the novel, Jogi learns to accept progress and lives his life with the remaining existing Nature. He finds solace in his traditional cultural way of life. Though he is unable to accept the modern way of life and he spends the rest of his life in his village trying his level best to keep up the traditions and customs in every possible way. Paru finally finds peace and contentment in the love and care of Nanjan and his wife, whom Paru adores till her last breath. Paru, who considered the Earth with great respect and love, dies on the lap of her Mother Earth, while tending to her beloved field. Nanjan settles down for a modern life and is contented with his science. The novel ends with a note of peace and tranquility between Man and Nature. Has the reconciliation truly been arrived at? Only Nature can answer the question.

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