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# The Nature-Culture Interface in Andal's *Thiruppavai*

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U. Sumathy

“Nature and culture do not exclude each other but be entangled with each other in multiple ways,” writes Cheryll Glotfelty in her Introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture. This essay aims at tracing such symbiotic relationships in Andal's *Thiruppavai*. Though *Thiruppavai* celebrates the penance undertaken by Andal in order to become the divine consort of Lord Krishna, the verses are based on the fundamental premise of man-nature coexistence.

Andal is one among the twelve *Alvars* who comprise the poetic voice of *Vaishnavam*. Written in the ‘*Pavai*’ poetic form, *Thiruppavai* is a collection of thirty verses meant to be sung in the Tamil month of *Margazhi*, which is supposed to be the queen among Tamil months. Andal exhorts the young maidens who are her companions to rise with dawn. Time and again she indicates the hour of the day: “The small hours of the morning—*sitram siru kalé*” (29) and also “We are assembled in thine yard/ In the dripping fog—*panith thalai veezha nin vaasar kadai patri*” (12). This custom of early rising which is still followed in the month of *Margazhi* is an ecologically healthy practice as one gets to inhale the ozone rich unpolluted air in that hour. The allied custom of drawing *kolams* in front of the house with rice flour is meant to be a goodwill gesture towards the ants which eat the rice flour.

The wee hours of the morning being the backdrop for the poem, Andal with a keenly observant eye records the magical moments by which night changes into day. Describing the scenery around, she catalogues the flora which includes lotuses and lilies; the fragrant *tulasi* occupies an honoured place. The song of the birds is the dominant sound. Andal

wakes up the sleeping maidens by referring to the bird song: “Did you not hear the alternate twittering of birds making loud noises—*pullum silambina kaan*” (6), The chirping of black birds of the morn which sounds like a talk between them—*keesu keesu enru aanai chaaththaan kalandhu / pesina pecharavam kettilaiyo*” (7), “The birds are making a lot of sound —*pullum silambina kaan*” (13) and also “The hens are up and are calling / Many sorts of cuckoo birds are singing on top of the trellis—*pandhal mel pal kaal kayilingal koovina kaan*” (18). While some strains of deep ecology have stressed the need to listen to the nonhuman world, Mircea Elaide points out, “All over the world learning the language of animals, especially of birds, is equivalent to knowing the secrets of nature” (qtd. in Manes 17). There is a tendency to relegate such ideas to the realm of superstition and irrationality but Andal has reiterated the idea in a matter of fact manner by recording the bird sounds in as many as four verses.

The bird song is punctuated with the mooing of cattle and the incessant buzz of the bees. The natural world is perceived as being articulate and it interacts with the humans. These animal sounds go hand in hand with the human sounds—the chanting of the name of ‘Hari’, the blowing of the conch, the tinkling of pendants and the jingle of the bangles worn by the women when they churn curds—a sonorous reminder of the negotiations between the human and the non-human. This is in sharp contrast to the modern beliefs where nature is thought to be silent and “the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative” (Manes 15). In fact, the voice of Andal in conversation with her companions, comes across as a subset of the speaking world.

The pastoral tradition associated with Lord Krishna occasions Andal to imagine herself and her companions as cowherds. They belong to the *Ayarkulam* and they live in *Ayarpadi*. The pastoral imagery which runs as an undercurrent in *Thiruppavai*, not only presents a picture of an ideal, fertile land but also prays for one. Verse three entails such a dream:

Then world there be at least three rains a month,  
 And the red paddy plants would grow big,  
 And in their fields would the fish swim and play,  
 And the spotted bees after sipping honey,  
 To their heart’s content,  
 Would sleep in the flowers themselves  
 And the cows with big udders  
 Would fill milk pots to the brim,  
 And healthy cows and never diminishing wealth,  
 Would fill the country

The same image is repeated in verse 22. In verse 12, it gets slightly modified: the bellowing buffaloes yield milk out of compassion for the crying young

calves which makes the whole yard swampy with milk. That the life of the cowherds is intermingled with that of the animals is indicated in verse 28 where the cowherds follow the cows and eat after reaching the forest “*Karavaigal pin senru kaanam serndhu unbom*”. In such a lifestyle there is no trace of the anthropocentric arrogance or dominating attitude towards nature. Man is here a part of nature, not an exploiter of nature.

Andal shows a selfless all-encompassing concern for the world and fellow creatures which characterizes *Thiruppavai*. Her invocation of rain in Verse Four stands testimony to her selflessness. This verse is a scientific treatise in a miniature form as it narrates the process step by step—from the formation of the dark rain-clouds to the resultant hail and thunder:

Oh Rain god who comes from the sea,  
Enter the sea and bring water to your fill,  
And with zest and sound take it up,  
And like the god of the deluge become black,  
And shine like the holy wheel  
And rain without stop like the arrow storm  
To make this world happy.

As one probes into the dialectics of animal imagery in *Thiruppavai*, it is seen that animals take demonical as well as divine forms. While there is a mention about demons who took the forms of a stork, a calf and a horse, the valour of Lord Krishna is also explained in terms of animal imagery: “Just like a brave lion sleeping inside a mountain cave comes to his senses, opening his eyes like fire, shaking his mane, bending his body, stretching it into shape and roaring, you please come out,” she says. “*maari malai muzhainchil manni kidndhu urangum / seeriyā singam arivutru thee vizhithu / veri mayir ponga eppadum perndhu udhari / moori nimirnthu muzhāngi purapattu*” (23). This juxtaposing presence of God and devil in the same form indicates the common source from which they have originated.

Cultural connotations abound in *Thiruppavai* which is primarily a reassertion of the concept of togetherness. The solidarity of the maidens, the light banter that characterizes their talk, highlight the need for collective effort. Together they undertake a strict penance and together they rejoice at the end: “All of us together will enjoy- *koodi irundhu kulirndhelo*” (27). Andal makes it clear that the essence of penance is not in renunciation of physical comforts but in leading a disciplined and compassionate life: They will give up ghee, milk, collyrium to the eye and flowers to their hair. More importantly, they will not do any act that is banned, they will not talk ill of anyone, they will give alms and do charity and try to relieve others from sorrow. “*neyyunnom paalunom naatkaale neeraadi / maiyittu*

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*ezhuthom malarittu naam mudiyom / seyyaadhana seyyom theekkuralai chenrodbom / aiyamum pichaiyum aandhanaikum kai kaati*" (2). Here is a prescription for a universal code of conduct.

"Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is by religion" (White Jr. 9). True to this concept, the elements of nature are conceived in terms of their relation to the Lord in *Thiruppavai*. He is described as the one who measured the three worlds: "*ongi ulaglandha uththaman*"(3). In verse 17 He is shown as the one who split open the sky, became a giant and scaled the world : "*ambaram ooda aruththu ongi ulagu alandha umbar komaane*" (17). In verse 22 the sun and the moon are shown to be His eyes: "*Thingalum aadiththanum ezhundhaar pol / am kan irandum . . .*" The phrase "*aalin ilaiyaay*" in verse 26 evokes the image of Lord Krishna on a banyan leaf during the apocalypse. Reverence to the earth and the other elements is ingrained in this culture though the message is covered in the religious garb.

There is a pointed focus on place and time in *Thiruppavai* which lends itself to ecocritical analysis. Such a reading accentuates a homogenous world where man shares an equivalent relationship with the flora and fauna and Andal in a sweeping stroke covers the entire ecosphere where everything is connected to everything else. It also represents a culture that lives in tune with nature and it is in this medieval culture that man's roots lie.

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