

## **FRETWORK OF TREES: ‘CONNECTEDNESS’ AND ‘ALIENATION’ IN GIRISH KARNAD’S *CHELUVI* (1992)**

**Dr. Meenakshi Pawha**  
Associate Professor  
Department of English &  
Modern European Languages  
University of Lucknow,  
Uttar Pradesh, India – 226007

My paper “Fretwork of Trees: ‘Connectedness and Alienation’ in Girish Karnad’s film *Cheluvu* (1992) explores the issue of deforestation. I have divided my paper into two parts-the first part discusses the forests being an integral part of not only Indian civilisational ethos but in other traditional societies of the world as well and the second part unravels the various nuances to the reading of the film.

Forests have been central to Indian civilisation. Forests have been worshipped as Aranyani, the Goddess of the forest, the primary source of life and fertility. The diversity, harmony and self- sustaining nature of the forest formed the organizational principle guiding Indian civilization. As a source of life, nature was venerated as sacred and human evolution was measured in terms of humanity’s capacity to merge with her rhythms and patterns intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. According to Rabindranath Tagore the distinctiveness of Indian culture comes from its defined life in the forest as the highest form of cultural evolution. In *Tapovan* he writes:

Contemporary western civilization is built of brick and wood. It is rooted in the city. But Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India’s best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees, and rivers and lakes and away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, is sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism thus became the principle of Indian civilization. (Tagore, 1)

In such a context, spirituality and the “material nature of life” cannot be separated and seen as opposing principles. A sacramental attitude to the earth and its resources is not an exotic past time- it is the source of people’s lives, it is the only hope for the world which is increasingly dependent on objectivity, on scientific rationalism and the masculine preoccupation with the production of goods and profits. A sacramental, spiritual attitude is the only hope of the world which has denied itself the poetic, the lyrical and the intuitive.

In India, the destruction of the earth's resources is taking place with such intensity and rapidity that something urgent has to be done. Our forests are disappearing, (we lose 1.3 million hectares of forests every year); soil conditions are deteriorating, water and wind erode the land (56.6 percent of India's land has suffered), periodic floods and drought are causing serious damage every year, indiscriminate use of ground water level water are causing serious shortages of water. Pollutants and wastes as well as fertilizers and pesticides are eating into the core of our environment. In such a context, the definition of words such as "ecofeminism" is not what is relevant but what is becoming increasingly evident is that we need to challenge the western patriarchal paradigm of development that has been at the root of the degradation of the earth. To do this, we have to discover our energy in the spiritual bond between humanity and nature that had existed in our society and was in fact at the core of our cultures. We have lost it and it is women particularly those "who work daily in the production of survival" (Shiva, 40) who know best and it is from their experience we have to learn and draw our strength.

Thoughts on Indian cosmology have been reconstructed by feminists to exercise the essential connectedness—that person and nature (purusha- prakriti) are a duality in unity and not a hierarchy. They were seen as:

inseparable complements of one another in nature, in woman, in man. Every form of creation bears this dialectical unity, of diversity within a unifying principle and this dialectical harmony between male and female principle and between nature and man, becomes the basis of ecological thought and action in India. Since ontologically there is no dualism between men and nature and because nature as Prakriti sustains life, nature has been treated as integral and inviolable. Prakriti, far from being an esoteric abstraction, is an everyday concept which organizes daily life. There is no separation here between the popular and elite imagery or between the sacred and secular traditions. (Shiva, 210).

However, what must be acknowledged and affirmed that this essence was also distorted by some strains of Indian philosophy by patriarchal brahmanical Hinduism. The demand to return to spiritual resources is therefore not a plea for going back into an esoteric and distant past or to harp on traditionalism and cultural relativism, but to draw from the role that nature plays in the daily lives of our people.

Vegetation and other gifts of nature play a key symbolic role in rituals and worship life, particularly in popular religious experiences of people. The Goddess of small pox, Mariamman, could be appeased only from leaves from a medicinal plant that is said to have antiseptic content. There is an ancient image of vegetation emerging from the body of the Goddess Devi-Mahatmyah where the Devi is said:

To nourish her needy people with vegetation produced from her own body. Her body is the earth, source of plant life and all that lives. As a vegetation goddess, a vital force concerned with growth of crops, the Goddess is known as Annapurna, Plenitude of food, the nourishing sap of all being... The villagers among whom mother goddesses and fertility goddesses arose continue to centre their religious life on rituals intended

to restore the force of the soil, and their earth deities are true vegetation goddesses in the ancient tradition. Since goddess-rituals handed down from a remote antiquity often centre from the springs of growth and nourishment, many plants are used in goddess worship.(Mukherjee,22)

In this context, the French socialist politician, Jacques Bugnicourt's description of forest values in India is worth a mention: "It is in those trees that our Gods frolic". This is a concern found in other societies of the world as well. In describing North-American perspectives, Callicott asserts that the western tradition pictures nature as material, mechanical and devoid of spirit (reserving that exclusively for humans), while the American Indian tradition pictures nature throughout as an extended family or society of living ensouled beings." In Canada, some old people believed that the land in Barriere was sacred while those on the Algonquin band affirmed that timber cutting would lead to killing all the herb medicines, the animals and the medicines that the animals eat and how it is going to hurt the plants growing on the ground. The notion of 'hurt' extended to trees and plants demonstrates moral consideration. And in this case the organisms listed are not being cited for their utility to humans but rather as entities in their own right.

Girish Karnad,(1938- ) in his national award winning film has presented a very nuanced rendition of the alienation of man from nature due to deforestation and he does so very subtly and poetically. It is based on a very famous Kannada folk tale 'A Flowering Tree', which is the name of an eponymous short story collection by A.K.Ramanujan.

It's about a girl who has mystical powers to turn into a fragile tree but at the same time yielded some exotic and rare flowers, She would be lovingly tended by her sister, This was a secret and nobody knew the origin of the flowers, however anyone who smelled the flowers would love to buy them again and again, this happened to Kumar who was obsessed with these flowers he decides to buy the whole basket from the sisters. Kumar falls in love with Cheluvi. Kumar coaxes Cheluvi to let out her little secret. Cheluvi is reluctant but yet gives away the secret to Kumar, who takes her to the private pool (a typical South Indian setting) and tends to her as she becomes a tree, her flowers drop into the pool but the flowing water carries out the flowers along with them and the children of the house also witness her becoming a tree. The children later force her into the forest, and break her branches when she becomes a tree. And run away abandoning Cheluvi. She is unable to regain her human form due to the missing branches. A poor wood cutter notices her plight in the forest and carries her home. Kumar misses his wife and is depressed, Cheluvi requests the wood cutter to place her in front of her husband house, People witness the freak of nature, And finally Kumar realises that it is his wife lying in the courtyard. Cheluvi says that she will be able to regain her human form if he is able to find her missing branches. Overjoyed Kumar decides to take her into the forest, but to his despair many trees are felled and he is unable to get her branches. There is sadness on their faces and the movie ends.

This movie has a strong message against deforestation, (also about essence of a woman, her nature of giving, Cheluvi would earn a living with her sister by selling these flowers yet she lived for her sister. When she married she gave herself to her husband letting out her deepest secret and to the level of sharing this with the little children who promised to take care of her but on the contrary abused her. It's about the different roles a woman plays, But ultimately portraying her giving nature. There are metaphorical connotations as well.)

The opening up of natural resources in the different parts of the country ( Orissa, Karnataka to name a few) have had both, ecological as well as social implications. Several

industrial plants spread across the various states, have polluted rivers, streams and wells that are the lifeblood of tribal people who have depended on these sources of water and forests for generations. The setting up of industrial plants in these regions has resulted in huge areas of forest cover being lost. This has also led to displacement of tribal peoples. Displacement itself comes with visible and invisible costs. The visible costs can perhaps be addressed with monetary compensations. The invisible costs, which include, emotional, cultural, social, and spiritual dislocation, are complex, incalculable and cannot be repaired with any material replacement. Similar to the predicament of Cheluvi, such displacement often creates a state of vulnerability for these peoples, as their sense of self and identities are uprooted and they are reduced to the status of outsiders in the land to which they belonged and that they knew and understood. They are further dislocated through displacement from “resource rich” to “marginal lands”. Most of the indigenous peoples have an innate of connectedness with their environment.

In conclusion, what Karnad seems to be saying in *Cheluvi* is that humanity's alienation from nature lies at the root of the ecological crisis. Ironically, it is our very separation from the physical world that creates much of this pain, and it is because we are taught to live so separately from nature that we feel so utterly dependent upon our civilization, which has seemingly taken nature's place in meeting all of our needs. As a result, we internalize the pain of our lost sense of connection to the natural world, we consume the earth and its resources as a way to distract ourselves from the pain, and we search insatiably for artificial substitutes to replace the experience of communion with the world that has been taken from us.

### Works Cited

Karnad, Girish. *Cheluvi*. 1992.

Ramanujan, A.K. *A Flowering Tree : A Woman's Tale*. Print.

Servaes, Jan. Ed. *Sustainable Development and Green Communication: African & Asian Perspective*. New York: Palgarve Macmillan, 2013. Web. 2.11.13.

Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989. Print.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *Tapovan* (Hindi). Tikamgarh: Gandhi Bhawan, undated. Print.

Wesley, Cragg, Allan Greenbaum, Alex Wellington ed. *Canadian Issues in Environmental Ethics*. Ontario: BRAD Ltd, 1997. Web. 21.7.13.