



Research Article

ECO SPIRITUAL OVERTONES OF AKKITHAM POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Akkitham Achuthan Namboothiri is a renowned, living poet in Malayalam literature (Malayalam is a regional language of Kerala, a state in India). The poetic sensibilities of Akkitham are modified by his in depth knowledge of the Vedas which abound in ecological insight. Ecology has become a major topic of discussion over a few decades as the existence of the entire planet is endangered as a result of the irresponsible attitude of humans to nature. The poet in his poems shares with the readers the ecological concerns and reminds them the necessity to revalidate the Vedic wisdom to come out of the contemporary ecological break down.

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INTRODUCTION

The planet, Earth, is living on the edge. The irresponsible attitude of the people has brought the mother earth to a situation of ecological causality which will lead not only the planet but the entire beings to an ultimate end. It is this reality that has persuaded people all over the world to think, at least, about the saving the planet. Ecological discussions have been vibrant over a few decades but just discussions will not suffice to save our Earth. It is in this context the poems of Akkitham Achuthan Namboothiri, a very prominent Malayalam poet attain great significance. Akkitham is the poet who has rocked the Malayalam literary arena in his magnum opus, *The Saga of the Twentieth Century*, a poetry collection that takes up for discussion major issues of contemporary relevance including the ecological issues which are being the burning topic of debate and discussion over a few decades. An ecocritical analysis of the poems of Akkitham in terms of deep ecology will definitely throw much light on his ecospiritual stance.

Discussion

The term “deep ecology” was coined by the Norwegian eco-philosopher, Arne Naess, in 1970. U.S environmentalists, Bill Devall and George Sessions, further developed the idea of deep ecology. The terms “fundamental ecology” and “new natural philosophy” are also used to denote the concept of deep ecology.

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The emergence of the new ecological philosophy was the inevitable outcome of centuries-old incessant and unscrupulous exploitation of nature by humans. “Earh First” is the basic dictum of radical deep ecologists. They aim at “...a philosophical and cultural revolution in human attitudes toward nature.... It proposes a militant defense of ‘Mother Earth,’ an unflinching opposition to human attacks on undisturbed wilderness” (Guha, *EKC* 281). Arne Naess places deep ecology against the shallow or reformist ecology that puts up a fight against pollution and resource depletion from an anthropocentric standpoint.

The poetic visions of Akkitham, as the poet himself has revealed, are ecologically modified by his in depth knowledge of the Vedas. Most of the Vedic hymns and verses are addressed to the elements of nature, viz., earth, water, fire, air and sky. The Vedas uphold the doctrine of total and unselfish dedication to nature: “O, Fire, this is not mine, but thine” [The holy rituals are not for my sake, but for the sake of others or for the prosperity of the entire universe]. Fire is an expression of universal power or energy on understandable human level. The oft-quoted Vedic dictum that “I am the Brahman or the universe” shows the ancient insight of seeing each individual as part of nature, the abode of the ultimate truth. The five elements of nature, viz., earth, water, fire, ether and space, are invoked both at home and in temple during religious rituals [*pujas*] in India. Holy water, fire, flowers, grains, fruits, etc., are common things used for all religious ceremonies held from birth to death of a Hindu in India. The Hindu biocosmology with its plethora of gods, goddesses and rituals renders a holistic worldview in which nature and the divine merge together with humans, which gives an ecological

comprehensiveness. The Indian tradition believes in the natural emergence of humans on the earth which, in turn, is related to water, fire, air, sky and finally to the voice or Pranava, the Ultimate truth [Brahman]. This traditional concept of evolution of the universe underscores the ecological principle of interdependence and interrelatedness. It is this ecological principle of unity in nature that is emphasized by the Vedas. The time-honoured Vedic wisdom looked at nature not as a source of exploitation but as a nourishing nurse to be respected.

In the observation which Akkitham makes in *Akkithathinte Lokam* [*The World of Akkitham*] that his poetry is his autobiography, the poet is visualizing the inseparability of life and poetry (13). Hence, a search for an ecological insight in the poems of Akkitham would lead to the fundamental attitudes of the poet, which have their base in virtues like love and compassion. The poet resists all forces that stand in between humans and nature as well as humans and their fellow-beings. The poet understands that it is universal love and compassion that make life worth living. For the poet, "love, god and poems are the same. Dharma, truth, liberty, equality as well as many other words also convey the same idea" (*TWA* 16).

Starting his poetic career as a communist sympathizer, Akkitham participated in many reformist movements of Kerala. But he drifted away from communism gradually, when he realised that his ideals based on human love and concern could not find room in the communist principles. "All important poems of Akkitham are stories of human soul refined by sad experiences and modified by unconditional love" (P.M.Narayanan 17). The poet is immortalizing the concept of unconditional love when he says that love is both beauty and truth. Also, he regards love as the strength and mission of his life. In the poem, "Irupatham Noottadinte Ithihasam" ["Saga of the Twentieth Century"] he extends this unconditional love and compassion to all beings in the world:

Unconditional love becomes
The strength by course.
This is truth, this is beauty;
Keeping this is my mission. (715-718)

Akkitham's attitude of seeing oneness around him as well as his unconditional love towards all beings of this world without any distinction makes him the first major eco-poet of the post-Independence Malayalam literature. Nature is represented in Akkitham's poems not as the realization of his romantic dreams. Rather, the poet considers nature as an existing reality with its own identity. The words of Akkitham bear testimony to his deep faith in "Advaita" philosophy and its influence on him in modifying his ecological vision. He declares: "I admit the physical and spiritual phenomena of life.... Truth has a thousand faces. All movements and things of this universe are mutually interconnected. When they are so, they become strong and beautiful.... I hate all sorts of spiritual and physical exploitation" (*TWA* 272). Thus the doctrine of "Advaita" makes him see and accept an undivided world where everything is connected to everything else in an ecological reality. He dreams of a new world where humans live happily and peacefully without mutual exploitation. The "Advaita" philosophy enables him to see all beings of the world as part of the divine one. It was also the vision of oneness in Karl Marx which attracted Akkitham to Marxism in his youth. The Vedic

vision of oneness has left an indelible imprint on the poet's mind, which in turn helped him develop an ecological comprehensiveness of the world. Akkitham remembers how the Vedic "suktas" or verses caught hold of his mind as a student of the Vedas. Even as a boy, Akkitham noticed the repetition of the word "samanam" (togetherness) ten times in the "Samvada Suktas", a part of *Rig Veda*.

"Saga of the Twentieth Century", a written in 738 lines by the poet, addresses a wide range of social and psychological concerns of the mid-twentieth century. "Saga of the Twentieth Century" begins with the poet's expression of his unique happiness as he sheds a tear for others. The poem highlights his love and compassion for his fellow beings as well as nature. Akkitham arrives at the conclusion that "the only driving force of life is unconditional love" (*TWA* 31). Also, it is love and care for others that give the poet happiness and contentment. "Saga of the Twentieth Century" starts with the poet's compassion for others:

Thousand Suns dawn
In my mind,
When I shed a tear
For others;
When I pass a gentle smile
For others,
Eternal full moon
Rises in my mind (1-8)

The poem, "Saga of the Twentieth Century", as a whole symbolizes urbanization and its consequences which distanced humans from nature. He seems to say that the present social unrest results from the unethical urbanization posing irreversible damage to nature. The poet refers to "unecological" life emerging out of the urban dreams of the modern society. The conflict between an ecological past and antiecolological present forms the unifying thread of the poem. The modernity is manifested in the form of exploitation of others. Nature is exploited by humans; similarly physically and financially weaker sections of the society have become the victims of unscrupulous exploitation by the stronger. Modernity has victimized both the weaker sections of humanity and nature as a whole. Innocent girls fall prey to the lust of the rich. The poem written in 1952 becomes more and more relevant in the contemporary society as the world is witnessing the magnified form of the gruesome sights represented in the poem. The heartbreaking sight around him forces Akkitham to tell the future generation "Light is sorrow/ Darkness is bliss" (335-336). In an interview, Akkitham has given a spiritual dimension to this oft-quoted couplet of the contemporary Malayalam poetry. He thinks that the spiritual enlightenment hidden behind the brightness of the physical world is more comfortable in the present world of hysterical modernity. The poet is voicing the deep ecological message that the lack of spiritual insight of the people will take the world to infinite physical progress devoid of any peace of mind. Akkitham's "de-humanist" attitude acknowledges the limitlessness, mystery, divinity and uncontrollable nature of the natural world. It is this realization that modifies the ecological responsiveness of the poet.

The poet initially showed affinity to communism; but he moved away from it as he realized that there is no space for human emotions in communism. He thinks that any ideology that does not consider basic human feelings is useless for the

world. The speaker of the poem regrets his own wrong doings as a follower of the communist idealism:

Out of bookish knowledge
I, the devil of the nether world,
Made my men cut humans
As cutting plantains (651-654).

The poet is indirectly hinting at the bloody revolution led by Stalin in Russia. The poet comes to the realization that the universe is beyond human comprehension irrespective of his revolutionary ideologies:

I misunderstood that
I can put
the Universe
On my palms
As an egg.(655-658)

He remembers with respect the great spiritual masters Valmiki, Vyasa, Buddha, Ranti Deva, Ashoka, Sankara, Jesus Christ and Muhammed Nabi, who practised love and humility. Humility makes him say that the masters of the past are immortals and that he is a mortal. Akkitham also remembers the great philosophers like Confucius and Gandhiji for their enlightening ideals. The reference to them is ecologically significant as these men upheld the doctrines of mutual love, non-violence and greedless life. The poet realizes the strength and value of unconditional love which he wants to make the mission of life:

Unconditional love
Becomes strength gradually
And this is truth, this is beauty
Making this a habit is the moral duty. (715-718)

Conclusion

The poet advises people to turn away from their act of making deadly weapons like guns and swords. Instead of making weapons, they had better make ploughs. The atomic energy, which is now used by people to make bombs, should be used to illuminate the world. He concludes the section with the message of undefeatable love and universal peace. The "Saga of the Twentieth century" becomes the core of Akkitham's ecological visions as he highlights the need of establishing peace, humility, harmony and compassion in the world. Also, his stand against modernity, weapons and war is manifested in the poem. It is the poet's ecological sensibilities modified by spiritual insight that find expression in the poem. To sum up, it can be said that an ecocritical reading of the poems of Akkitham opens up a new vistas of ecological wisdom with its foundations on the Oriental scriptures, especially the Vedas.

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