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## **Ecocritical Concerns in Lakshmi Kannan's Short Stories "Muniyakka," "Nandanvan," and "Because"**

**Dr. C. Isaac Jebastine**

Professor and Head Department of  
English, Bharathidasan University  
Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu, India

**Mrs. K. B. Karthiga**

Ph. D, Research Scholar  
Department of English  
Bharathidasan University  
Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu, India

### **Abstract**

The relationship between nature and mankind has been inextricable since time immemorial. Writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world have presented nature in its splendour and beauty. Hence it becomes important to study how literature represents the essential human relationship with nature and also the role of nature as a nurturer. This paper attempts to examine how nature and environment appear as tropes in three short stories of Lakshmi Kannan namely "Muniyakka," "Nandanvan," and "Because." These stories have been translated from Tamil into English by the author herself. The paper aims to highlight the ecocritical vein that runs through these selected short stories in the light of the theory of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary study that aims at analysing texts that illustrate environmental concerns and it examines the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. The paper further argues that the relationship between nature and mankind is one of reciprocity.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Nature, Nurturer, Semineologism.

This paper discusses the various definition of the term *ecocriticism* and in the light of this theory this paper analyses, from various perspectives, the ecocritical concerns manifested in the three short stories of Lakshmi Kannan namely "Muniyakka," "Nandanvan," and "Because."

Lakshmi Kannan is a renowned Indian writer who has penned a novel, poems, and short stories in both English and Tamil. She has written four collections of short stories in

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BY

Dr. C. Isaac Jebastine & Mrs. K. B. Karthiga

Tamil under the *nom de plume* Kaaveri. These stories have been translated into English by herself. The stories taken for study “Muniyakka,” “Nandanvan,” and “Because” are from the collection *Nandanvan and Other Stories* published in 2011.

Ecocriticism is the study of literature and the environment and it is an interdisciplinary study that aims at analysing texts that illustrate environmental concerns and it examines the various ways literature treats the subject of nature. The word *ecocriticism* is a semineologism. While William Rueckert might have been the first person to use the term *ecocriticism* in his 1978 essay entitled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (Barry 240), it was only in the 1990s that ecocriticism emerged as an independent discipline. The major proponents of ecocriticism include Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, Simon C. Estok, Harold Fromm, William Howarth, William Rueckert, Suellen Campbell, Michael P. Branch, and Glen A. Love.

Ecocriticism works on the premise that “man (woman) always exists *within* some natural environment or, according to Buell, there cannot be *is* without *where*” (Tošić 44). This view is further strengthened by the following statement: “Human beings have a natural quest to find their ‘roots’ and be a part of the natural environment that they belong to” (Sahu 23). Another aspect of relationship between nature and humans that is taken into consideration is how “man feels *vitally* threatened in the ecologically degraded world. Overexploitation of natural resources and man’s disregard of the air, water and soil that sustain him have given rise to the question of the survival of both man and the planet (Earth)” (Tošić 44).

Nature and literature have always shared a close relationship. Writers down the ages in almost all cultures of the world have presented nature in its splendour and beauty. Ecocritical approach to the study of literary texts focuses on nature imagery, gender construct, feminism, man-woman relationship, and the like.

In the story “Muniyakka,” Muniyakka is a servant class woman. She earns her living by working in households and also cleans the temple for money and satisfaction. She has worked for years in Rama Rao’s family and is allowed to build a hut in their garden. Being deserted by her sons, she relies on herself. Muniyakka tries to cope with the feeling of loneliness by indulging in soliloquy in which she curses her dead husband, Bairappa, and her worthless sons.

Muniyakka, after concluding her day’s work, seeks solace in nature. After finishing her meal earned in exchange for her hard labour, she takes a piece of jaggery and comes out of her hut to sit in the lap of nature. While peering into the inky darkness around her, she feels one with nature. “To Muniyakka’s eyes, the coconut trees seemed to sway around with their ‘hair’ flying loose in the breeze, dancing the dance of the devil in the darkness of the night .... Her heart quickened as it learned to keep pace with the devil’s beat outside .... Muniyakka could completely identify herself with this” (*Nandanvan* 79). Muniyakka is an

independent woman with an indomitable spirit. Though she is forced to live a life of minimal existence, she dances with the devil and emerges as a supernatural female force.

Though Muniyakka feels thrilled at her present state of loneliness, she has complaints about her sons who have deserted her in her old age. She regrets as follows: “Today I have three useless sons in whom I once had a deep, implicit faith. I visited their homes so eagerly, but not one of them would give me even a single, tepid bowl of broth” (*Nandanvan* 81). This situation leads to the question which Eswari Prabhu raises: “When such sons cannot even think of their mother will they ever care for Mother Earth and treasure her for generations” (4).

Disappointed with her sons, Muniyakka lavishes her motherly love towards nature. Muniyakka is very much fond of the garden and “the trees and plants looked like children who had been brought up with care and affection” (*Nandanvan* 79). Muniyakka’s sense of being can be associated with her sense of connectedness towards nature. As averred by Pauline Das, “Muniyakka’s back breaking effort to water the garden, her solemn love for the green vegetation, the breeze brushing past the trees and the trees making a hissing sound are presented as the pulsating rhythm through which her very being is identified” (106). Lakshmi Kannan skilfully conveys the sense of an old woman living in a hut, on the margins of a large house. The trees in the garden, signifying beauty and order to its owners, are an entirely different entity to Muniyakka.

The connection between nature and humans is crucial as exhibited in “Muniyakka.” The unexplored female psyche is explored through nature imagery in this story. Her strong sense of rootedness to the land is presented vividly:

In the afternoons, she would try to compete with the gardener and pour buckets of water for the plants, covering the entire garden even if the exercise threatened to break her back. For a while, the flowers and fruits would take on a golden hue under the Midas touch of the setting sun. Taking in the sight, Muniyakka would feel infinitely enriched, as if she had somehow inherited a vast, great wealth. (*Nandanvan* 79)

It becomes clear that “if not for her association with nature, Muniyakka would have lost her sanity. She is no brute, readers not only sympathise with her but are surprised at her optimism. She remains a hominid and a hominid—she seeks company in nature and shares her thoughts. To Muniyakka, nature is an absolute companion” (Prabhu 04).

In the story “Nandanvan,” an elderly man feels alienated from his family as his sons and daughters-in-law fight over how to apportion his property. He seeks solace in the garden at the back of his house. He listens to sparrows as they talk among themselves. The sparrows love the old man who sits among them in the garden, oblivious to the persistent invitation of his sons and daughters-in-law to go into the house for his meals.

“Nandanvan” means a legendary garden. True to the name, the garden under the care of the old man, the Thatha looks heavenly with “dense, luxuriant trees, healthy plants and so many varieties of flowers! Roses, petunias, pansies, jasmines, balsam, salvia with honeybees buzzing about. Dahlias as big as a human face, hibiscus and many, many more. He is a Grandpa with green thumbs” (*Nandanvan* 43).

In this fable, birds pass moral and ethical judgements on humans. At the end, when the old man dies, the birds carry the dead body of the old man as they are obviously outraged to find the sons quarrelling over his estate and instead of attending to the rituals his sons are busy with their fight for property. The rapport of the elderly man with the birds is so complete that birds become the most concerned mourners at his funeral. The story has an element of magic realism. In this story, it is the love and attachment for each other that represents the bond between the two different creations of ecology – birds and humans.

As opined by Celine Augustine in her review of *Nandanvan and Other Stories*, the title story “Nandanvan” takes the fable route where the sparrows, cuckoos, crows and canaries observe and indict the greedy sons of Thatha, their friend and sustenance-provider. The garden and its blossoms jasmine, roses, lily, salvia and hibiscus join the chorus. The birds teach a telling lesson by carting away the body of their benefactor even as the sons begin to squabble over property in unseemly haste. (02)

In the story “Because” which offers a stringent critique of hegemonic social institutions, Lakshmi Kannan deftly shows how nature acts as a symbol of liberation for women who are silenced in myth. She has cleverly woven the story around a little girl Kamala who, like all inquisitive children, poses questions to the elders to know the reasons for many an incident that takes place around her.

Kamala grows up listening to the mythical stories in the epics, *The Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* read by her young widowed aunt Pattu. She is intrigued by the way the mythical women restrict themselves for the sake of others. Kamala’s desire to deconstruct these myths finds expression in her dream. One night she has a strange dream in which Urmila, wife of Lakshmana in *The Ramayana*, who is bored of waiting on her mothers-in-law after the departure of her husband with his elder brother Rama to the forest, comes out of the palace in search of another palace in another country. On the way she encounters the Kaurava Queen Gandhari in *The Mahabharata*.

In the dream, Kamala “creates a fusion-epic of sorts by bringing in a female character from the *Ramayana* to meet Gandhari of *Mahabharata*” (Indra 11). At first, Urmila is unable to identify Gandhari as she is without her proverbial eye-cover which she has tied around her eyes, after her marriage to King Dhritarashtra who has been blind since birth. In the child’s dream narrative, Queen Gandhari herself explains the reason for her act of palpable outrage: “I threw away the piece of cloth around my eyes because I wanted to see the splendour of the

trees in the forest, I wanted to see the flowers and the birds. I wanted to see people too” (Nandanvan 175). Urmila and Gandhari explore the forests in the hope of having great fun and enjoyment. Even the devil assists them with their journey into nature by making way to them by pushing the fallen tree aside. When the little girl recalls this strange dream the next morning, her conventional mother is appalled. But Lakshmi Kannan has successfully projected Gandhari and Urmila as women who have asserted their positive self-construct with a cheerful love of life. Here it is worthwhile to note that both Urmila and Gandhari turn to nature and seek solace from their visit to the forest. Finally, they reinvent themselves and assert their independence with the help of nature.

To conclude, the relationship between nature and humans is one of reciprocity. In fact, nature acts as the nurturer and in many cases, the very existence of humans on earth is determined by their relationship with the natural environment as shown in “Muniyakka” and “Nandanvan.” It also acts as a liberating force as depicted in the story “Because.” Thus the scope of ecocriticism in the study of literary texts is endless as stated by Kumari Shika: “Ecocriticism gives increased attention to literary representatives of nature and is sensitive to interdependencies that ground the author, character or work in the natural system. This approach shifts critical focus from social relations toward natural relationships and views the individual as a member of ecosystem” (10).

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