

THE RELEVANCE OF ECO-CRITICISM IN INDIAN REGIONAL LITERATURE: AN ECO-CRITICAL READING OF K. P. POORNACHANDRA TEJASWI'S SELECTED WORKS

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ABSTRACT

This research article examines the significant relevance of eco-criticism in Indian regional literature through a focused textual analysis of the works of the influential Kannada writer K. P. Poornachandra Tejaswi. Situated within the geographical and cultural context of the Western Ghats (Malenadu), Tejaswi's literature departs from traditional anthropocentric narratives to construct an integrated worldview in which non-human subjectivities, including animals, insects, plants, and ecosystems, possess active agency. By analyzing his major novels, Carvallo and Chidambara Rahasya, as well as his descriptive accounts of the natural world, such as Parisarada Kathegalu, this article demonstrates that Indian regional literature provides a nuanced alternative to Western deep ecology. Whereas Western eco-criticism frequently idealizes nature as a pristine wilderness distinct from human civilization, Tejaswi depicts a complex socio-ecological network,

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where agrarian vulnerability, scientific inquiry, marginal livelihoods, and biological ecosystems converge. This study employs key concepts from eco-criticism, such as the critique of the Anthropocene, material eco-criticism, and environmental justice, to argue that regional literatures serve as essential sites for diagnosing environmental crises and envisioning local, sustainable models of coexistence.

KEYWORDS: *Eco-Criticism, Anthropocene, Sustainable, Co-Existence, Regional Literature.*

Introduction:

The current ecological condition of the planet, often referred to as the Anthropocene, necessitates a fundamental reassessment of human relationships with the non-human world. Within literary and cultural studies, this examination is advanced by eco-criticism, an interdisciplinary field that investigates the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Eco-criticism, initially established through a Western perspective in the late twentieth century by scholars such as Cheryl Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell, and Jonathan Bate, emphasized the celebration of pristine wilderness, romantic nature poetry, and Anglo-American transcendentalist thought. However, this classical framework frequently exhibited a dualism that separated human culture from external nature.

When applied to the socio-cultural realities of the Global South, particularly India, this dualistic framework is insufficient. Indian eco-criticism must address the inseparability of the natural environment from human survival, social stratification, colonial histories, and post-colonial developmental concerns. Environmental historians such as Ramachandra Guha have argued that environmentalism in the Global South

constitutes an “environmentalism of the poor,” where resource degradation directly threatens the livelihoods of marginalized communities. As a result, Indian regional literature becomes a crucial and highly relevant site for eco-critical inquiry. Regional literatures document the live experiences of specific geographies, localized ecological knowledge systems, and immediate environmental crises with both documentary precision and creative empathy.

K. P. Poornachandra Tejaswi (1938–2007) is recognized as a pioneering figure among Indian regional writers who anticipated ecological consciousness before the institutionalization of eco-criticism in India. Writing primarily in Kannada, Tejaswi left the urban literary circles of Bangalore to reside, farm, and write in Mudigere, located in the Malenadu region at the foothills of the Western Ghats (Sahyadri). His extensive oeuvre, encompassing novels, short stories, travelogues, and popular science books, provides a sophisticated model for indigenous, materialist eco-criticism. Tejaswi’s prose rejects the romanticization of nature, offering a nuanced and precise observation of the biophysical environment instead. His works demonstrate that the regional landscape functions not merely as a backdrop for human activity, but as an active and dynamic network of biological agents. This article situates Tejaswi’s literary contributions as critical texts that challenge anthropocentric assumptions, critique the shortcomings of modern developmental paradigms, and exemplify an embedded, harmonious ethic of coexistence.

Theoretical Framework:

To appreciate the ecological insights of regional writers like Tejaswi, it is essential to trace how eco-critical theory adapts to the Indian post-colonial landscape. Western deep ecology often advocates for a biocentric philosophy that views the human species as just one

component of the biosphere, sometimes demanding the preservation of nature by keeping human communities out. In contrast, Indian regional ecology recognizes that the landscape is populated by farmers, tribals, laborers, and marginalized castes whose lives are inextricably bound to the land. Therefore, an appropriate theoretical framework for Indian regional literature must combine elements of Material Eco-criticism, which views matter and non-human elements as possessing narrative and agential capacities, with Environmental Justice and Post-colonial Eco-criticism. As standard critiques of environmental history demonstrate, the destruction of the Indian environment is historically tied to colonial extraction, such as the massive clearance of indigenous forests for commercial timber and monoculture plantations, which continued into post-independence state-led industrialization. Regional literature captures the long-term trauma of this ecological disruption.

This theoretical synthesis is evident throughout Tejaswi's literature. His works do not portray nature as a passive, silent backdrop awaiting human interpretation. Instead, he foregrounds what eco-critical theorist Serenella Iovino terms the "stories of matter." Elements such as soil, shifting rainfall patterns, the migration of insect species, and the spread of plant pathogens actively shape his narratives. Tejaswi complements this materialist perspective with incisive social critique, illustrating how local caste hierarchies, economic vulnerabilities, and the imposition of bureaucratic green policies affect both human communities and local ecologies. By decentering the human protagonist, Tejaswi's work achieves what Lawrence Buell describes as an "environmental text", one in which the non-human environment is not merely a backdrop but a presence that implicates human history within natural history. A central tenet of regional eco-

criticism in Tejaswi's writing is the specificity of place. His selection of the Malenadu landscape as his primary creative setting is integral to his ecological perspective. The Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot, are characterized by dense forests, intense monsoon rains, intricate river systems, and varied flora and fauna. While traditional Kannada literature, especially within the romantic Navodaya movement, often idealized this landscape as an exotic paradise or a manifestation of divine beauty, Tejaswi subverts this aesthetic. In collections such as *Parisarada Kathegalu*, Malenadu is depicted as a dynamic, volatile biophysical entity defined by evolutionary struggle, decay, survival, and complex interspecies relationships. The forest exhibits an agency that frequently disrupts human aims. For example, in Tejaswi's short narratives, a sudden rainfall is not a reflection of human sentiment but a significant geological event that triggers landslides, erodes topsoil, alters insect life cycles, and destabilizes the local economy. By emphasizing the environment's concrete presence, Tejaswi dismantles the pastoral myth of the countryside, presenting the regional landscape as a domain where humans must continually negotiate for survival against an indifferent and powerful natural order. This specific focus affirms a core principle of regional eco-criticism. Ecological consciousness is most effectively cultivated through attentive engagement with the immediate biotic community rather than through abstract global rhetoric.

Tejaswi's masterpiece, *Carvallo*, remains one of the most prominent ecological novels in Indian literature. On its surface, the novel narrates the quest of an eccentric, highly respected scientist named Carvallo, who seeks to locate a rare, supposedly extinct flying lizard in the thick forests of the Western Ghats. However, read through an eco-critical lens, *Carvallo* is a profound intellectual critique of Western Enlightenment rationality and an

exploration of multi-species interconnectedness. The novel is structured around a diverse group of searchers who form an unconventional multi-species collective, including Carvalho, the Western-trained scientist with formal training in botany and zoology; the Narrator, an educated, urban-turned-rural coffee planter trying to navigate the practical realities of agriculture. Mandanna, a marginalized, illiterate village herder with an extraordinary, innate understanding of the forest; Kariyappa and Yenka, local subaltern figures, experts in tracking and woodcraft and Kiwi, the narrator's hunting dog, whose sensory world guides the human members through the dense jungle. Tejaswi uses this hierarchy-shattering collective to challenge the anthropocentric assumption that modern science holds a monopoly on ecological truth. While Professor Carvalho brings textbooks and instruments, he is entirely dependent on Mandanna's vernacular knowledge. Mandanna, dismissed by civilized society as a simpleton and an outcast, possesses a deep, non-verbal literacy of the ecosystem. He can decipher the subtle calls of birds, identify the nesting habits of unique insects, and read the movements of the forest canopy. Tejaswi elevates Mandanna's indigenous ecological knowledge to an equal footing with Carvalho's academic science. This choice aligns directly with post-colonial eco-criticism's goal of validating subaltern epistemic traditions that have long coexisted with local biomes.

The climatic search for the flying lizard in the deep Norvegy forest showcases Tejaswi's radical decentering of the human subject. As the team penetrates deeper into the jungle, human language and social systems begin to break down. The boundaries between the observer and the observed blur. When they finally catch a glimpse of the flying lizard, the creature is not depicted as an object to be captured, stuffed, and categorized for a museum

cabinet. Instead, it is presented as a marvelous product of millions of years of evolution, existing entirely for its own sake within its specific niche. The lizard's sudden flight across the chasm, vanishing into the sunlight, leaves the researchers in a state of wonder. Tejaswi uses this ending to argue that nature contains deep mysteries which transcend human utility and intellectual containment. The flying lizard works as a powerful ecological symbol, representing the autonomy of the non-human world and cautioning humanity of its humble position within the larger evolutionary timeline.

While Carvallo emphasizes wonder and the possibility of interspecies alignment, Tejaswi's Sahitya Akademi Award-winning novel *Chidambara Rahasya* (1985) offers a darker, diagnostic look at environmental degradation. The novel operates as a microcosmic allegory of the Anthropocene, detailing how short-sighted human greed, local political corruption, and communal friction lead to the systemic collapse of an ecosystem. Set in the fictional village of Kesaruru, the narrative revolves around the rapid degeneration of the local agrarian economy and its surrounding environment. The title itself, "*The Chidambara Rahasya*" (*The Inscrutable Mystery*), serves as an ironic commentary on humanity's failure to recognize the obvious "writing on the wall" regarding environmental destruction. The real mystery is not supernatural; it is the web of ecological cause-and-effect that humans choose to ignore for short-term economic gains.

In *Chidambara Rahasya*, Tejaswi introduces the figure of Suleman Beary, an exploitative contractor who initiates ecocide by clearing vast tracts of indigenous forest for timber extraction and commercial monoculture expansion. This deforestation affects the region's delicate hydrological cycle. The soil loses its organic richness and

capacity to retain moisture, leading to an agricultural crisis. Tejaswi writes with precise material detail about how the removal of native trees depletes the soil flora and fauna, showing how techno-bureaucratic interventions regularly worsen environmental health. Furthermore, Tejaswi links ecological degradation directly to social and cultural decay. The nomadic, marginalized community known as the Gosaies, stripped of their traditional forest livelihoods due to state-enforced enclosures and deforestation, is forced into destructive survival strategies. In one sequence, they poison a local pond with toxic herbs to catch fish quickly, decimating the aquatic ecosystem. Tejaswi does not vilify these marginal actors. Instead, he draws attention to the tragic irony of human communities poisoning the very environments essential for their long-term survival. The poisoning of the pond serves as a warning for the larger socio-political conflicts in the village. As the forest disappears, Kesaruru experiences unprecedented droughts, unexpected pest infestations, and economic slowdown. Rather than dealing with the root ecological causes of their suffering, the locals turn on each other, channeling their frustrations into communal violence, caste warfare, and political assassinations. Through *Chidambara Rahasya*, Tejaswi presents a key eco-critical insight: environmental degradation does not occur in an ethical vacuum. It is deeply connected to socio-political injustice, communal disharmony, and a collective loss of ecological consciousness. The destruction of nature inevitably results in the destruction of human culture and society.

A distinguishing feature of Tejaswi's eco-criticism is his fascination with the small world of insects, spiders, fungi, and micro-organisms. Traditional nature writing often focuses on charismatic megafauna such as tigers and elephants, or on broad landscapes. Tejaswi, influenced by his extensive reading of Jean-Henri Fabre and his own

experiments in macro-photography, realizes that the health of an entire ecosystem rests on its smallest components. In works like Carvallo, his descriptions of honeybees, ants, and glowworms are detailed and scientifically precise. He explores how glowworms produce bioluminescence, not as a poetic device, but as an evolutionary wonder of biochemical communication. In his non-fiction and essay collections, Tejaswi often steps away from a human-centered worldview to adopt an insect's perspective. He details the complex engineering of an anthill, the chemical warfare between competing insect colonies, and the key role of pollinators in upholding regional agriculture. This focus on the small aligns with contemporary Material Eco-criticism, which challenges the Cartesian division between active human minds and passive non-human matter. By showcasing the multifaceted behaviors and survival methods of insects, Tejaswi proves that agency is distributed across the entire biological spectrum. The human species is reframed not as the master of the biological pyramid, but as an organism deeply embedded in a massive web of life. If this web is broken, whether through the indiscriminate use of chemical pesticides on coffee estates or the destruction of micro-habitats, the consequences ripple upward, eventually threatening human survival.

Comparative Analysis:

To fully understand the relevance of Tejaswi's work to regional literature, it is helpful to contrast his perspective with global eco-critical approaches. Western environmental literature, from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* to Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*, often features a solitary human observer pondering a quiet wilderness. This tradition can unintentionally reinforce a division between the human home and the natural world.

Tejaswi's regional eco-criticism rejects this separation. In his stories, humans are always present within nature—not as separate observers, but as active participants who work, struggle, and transform the land. His characters are farmers dealing with cardamom diseases, laborers gathering forest produce, and scientists walking through muddy trails. This perspective aligns with the concept of social ecology, which asserts that global ecological crises are deeply rooted in systemic social inequalities. Tejaswi's work shares thematic ground with other prominent regional writers in India, such as Mahasweta Devi, whose Bengali narratives expose how the destruction of tribal forests destroys indigenous communities; Dr. K Shivaram Karanth, whose Kannada masterpiece *Choma's Drum* explores the denial of land rights to lower castes, linking social oppression to displacement from the soil; and Ambikasutan Mangad, whose contemporary Malayalam novel *Enmakaje* documents the real-world ecological and human devastation caused by Endosulfan spraying in Kerala. Tejaswi contributes to this regional tradition by combining subaltern social realism with a deep interest in popular science and evolutionary biology. He does not view science as an inherently destructive tool of corporate capitalism. Instead, he advocates for an empathetic, observational science; a science practiced through figures like Carvallo, which values local insights, embraces humility, and seeks to understand rather than dominate the natural world.

Conclusion:

The eco-critical significance of K. P. Poornachandra Tejaswi's literature extends beyond Karnataka and the Western Ghats. In an era characterized by rapid climate change, habitat fragmentation, and biodiversity loss, his works provide a comprehensive model for environmental ethics. Tejaswi employs regional literature to illustrate that

planetary protection requires overcoming anthropocentric perspectives and acknowledging humanity's common vulnerability with the non-human world. His novels and stories position the regional landscape as a vital site for environmental analysis. By anchoring his narratives in the specific material conditions of Malenadu, Tejaswi addresses global environmental concerns through localized storytelling. He emphasizes that the earth is not merely a repository of resources for human exploitation, but a complex, interconnected web of life in which human survival is intrinsically linked to that of the flying lizard, the forest canopy, and soil micro-organisms.

Ultimately, eco-criticism in Indian regional literature, as exemplified by Poornachandra Tejaswi, advocates for a transition from an exploitative relationship with nature to a more inclusive, conscious, and sustainable mode of existence. His legacy urges readers, scholars, and citizens to closely examine their immediate environments, engage with vernacular knowledge systems, and acknowledge their responsibilities as members of a broader biotic community.

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