

Exploring the Inter-relationship between Humans and Nature: An Eco-psychological Study on  
Silas House's *Clay's Quilt* and Ki. Rajanarayanan's *Gopallapuram*

Vaishnavi C. S.

Full-time Research Scholar, Reg. No: 241131802008,

Department of English, Sree Ayyappa College for Women, Chunkankadai,

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abhishekapatti, Tirunelveli.)

Email: vaishnavicsv@gmail.com

Dr. R. Janatha Kumari

Research Supervisor and Associate Professor,

Department of English, Sree Ayyappa College for Women, Chunkankadai,

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abhishekapatti, Tirunelveli.)

ABSTRACT

Culture, tradition and environment are interconnected to each other, for it explores the identity of a particular group of people. The Appalachian region is filled with rich and varied cultures that narrate the traditions of the Appalachian Mountains that have become an abode of livelihood for distinct groups of people. The region is abundant with natural resources, and the Appalachians have woven stories about their lineage through their environment. The paper does a comparative analysis of Karisal literature with Appalachian literature. The Karisal land is a plain region which encompasses a group of people with multiple cultures and traditions. Karisal literature is a specific fusion of land and distinct cultural narratives. The objective of the study is to throw light on the inter-relationship between humans and nature by

reflecting on the changes that occur in nature with that of the disorderliness of the human psyche. By examining Ki. Ra's *Gopallapuram* and Silas House's *Clay's Quilt*, the paper unravels the significant role of nature in the life of contemporary American Appalachians and people of the Karisal land, who are affected with urban encroachment activities and personify natural environment by considering it a real witness of their history. The paper has used Eco-Psychological theory as a tool to explore more of the disturbed psyche of humans and their way of finding solace in nature.

Keywords: Culture, Traditions, Appalachians, Karisal, Eco-psychology, Human psyche.

The Appalachian Mountain ranges were formed with the collision of North American plate and the Eurasian plate. The mountain ranges were formed over 1.2 billion years ago which starts from the Island of Newfoundland in Canada and ends in Central Alabama in the United States. The Appalachian Mountains were initially inhabited by Native Americans. Several people lived below the mountain ranges of Appalachia. The Cherokee tribe took hold of the better part of the mountains and started to rule over them. The advent of European settlers marked the replacement of American Indigenous tribes (Yarnell). The Northern part of Appalachia has the Alonquin and the Iroquis tribes, while the southern part of Appalachia has Cherokee tribes.

The Karisal land is a black soil region of Tamil Nadu. Even though soil has water retention capacity, scarcity of rainfall leaves the place with draught. Caste issues, gender discrimination and superstitious beliefs prevail in the Karisal region. The people rely more on agriculture and farming. "The soil had never been fertile and their life never had been with abundance. The life of small farmers revolved around crisis throughout the year, but their hearts are filled with love. Karisal literature brings out all these elements and the changes their lives had gone through", said Mr. Ramakrishnan, a recipient of Sahitya

Akademi award. (The Hindu Bureau) They attach themselves totally with that of nature. Thus, nature has become one of the strongest portrayals in Karisal literature.

Appalachian literature explores the nature bound areas of The Appalachian Mountains, that has become one of the major sources for carving identity to the Appalachians. They spend most of their lives farming and gardening and associate their lives with that of nature. They consider the mountains the witness to the lives that they have been living throughout. They hear the voices of their ancestors through the mountains. Meanwhile, in Karisal literature, natural environment plays a pivotal role in the lives of the people. Even though they suffer due to harsh climatic conditions, they rely more on nature, worshipping and making themselves resilient enough to accept things well. Thus, with the concept of nature and its association with the psyche of humans, both Appalachian and Karisal literature go hand in hand. The problems that people have been facing are the same, even though the geography is different.

Silas House is one of the most famous Appalachian writers who comes up to address the problems of the Appalachian region. He has raised his voice against the mountain top removal activities and has expressed his deep connection to the natural environment. House was raised by listening to the stories about Appalachia and is thus aware of the importance of nature in the life of Appalachians. In one of his interviews, House describes the way his grandmother's tomb was destroyed in the name of coal mining activities. Like Silas House, Ki. Rajanarayanan is one of the most prominent contributors in Karisal literature. When Perumal Murugan, a famous Tamil writer came to inaugurate an exhibition on Karisal literature, he praised the contributions of Ki. Rajanarayanan (The Hindu Bureau).

In *Clay's Quilt*, Silas House explores the overall journey of Clay, son of Anneth, raised by Easter and other family members after her death. House has shown Clay as a person who is not aware of the secret behind his birth. The study uses Eco-psychological theory to analyse the tormented psyche of Clay, when he goes on his search for identity, by delving deep into the changes that are reflected in the natural

environment. Ki. Rajanarayanan's *Gopallapuram*, explores the life of the immigrants from Andhra to Tamil Nadu, when they escape from the cruel rule of Telugu and Muslim rajas. The novel paves way to analyse the psyche of the characters and their connection with their environment. The paper, using Eco-psychological theory, shows the process of gaining 'ecological ego' and 'ethical responsibility' (The Principles of Ecopsychology, by Theodore Roszak – IES) for future generations to instill consciousness about their ecology.

Ecology is a branch of science that deals with studies related to the environment. It focuses on the various kinds of organisms and their survival. Eco-Psychology is an analysis based on both ecological and psychological principles. Vladimir Antonov, a Russian Ecopsychologist opines,

After all, man is not only a body, but also, and primarily, a consciousness or soul. And man lives not only in close contact with air, water, soil, animals, plants, viruses, and bacteria... We also interact with non-embodied individual consciousnesses (spirits of people and animals) and – which is the most important of all with God. This is the subject of the science ecopsychology – as the most important branch of ecology (8).

Antonov further posits that one has to have a good knowledge on their 'lives on earth' (Antonov, *Ecopsychology*). An individual has to understand his/her role in the 'evolution of universal consciousness' (Antonov, *Ecopsychology*).

The subject of Eco-psychology is applied in Silas House's *Clay's Quilt* and Ki. Rajanarayanan's *Gopallapuram*. In *Clay's Quilt*, all the psychic ailments of Clay are getting healed with his constant exposure to nature. The Appalachians suffer due to poverty and the bad consequences of coal mining. Thus, most of the time, they seek guidance from their age-old natural environment. They consider the mountains to be the only witness and proof for their history and believe that the spirits of their ancestors reside there. In *Gopallapuram*, Ki. Rajanarayanan explores the issues of poverty, after their land gets

abducted by colonial powers. He compares the earlier prosperous times with that of the days of adversity, when nature comes as an aid for the immigrants from Andhra to Tamil Nadu. Both people of Appalachia and Karisal consider nature as their moral guide and thus their conscious activities depend on the changes that occur in their surroundings.

Theodore Roszak, one of the major eco-psychologists, in his work, *Eco-Psychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, has explained the concept as,

Ecopsychology concerns itself with the foundations of human nature and behaviour. Unlike other mainstream schools of psychology that limit themselves to the intrapsychic mechanisms or to a narrow social range that may not look beyond the family, ecopsychology proceeds from the assumption that at its deepest level the psyche remains sympathetically bonded to the Earth that mothered us into existence. Eco-Psychology suggests that we can read out transactions with the natural environment – the way we use or abuse the planet – as projections of unconscious needs and desires, in much the same way we can read dreams and hallucinations to learn about our deep motivations (5).

Roszak has posited that humans have considered the environment as a platform for them to work on their will. For them the environment is like a 'blank psychiatric screen on which the neurotic unconscious projects its fantasies' (5).

In *Clay's Quilt*, Clay, a young man of twenties, even after so many years, remembers the day of his mother's murder by his stepfather. While they travel, a few moments before the incident, Clay locates the harsh weather conditions that foretell the upcoming danger. "They were all accustomed to seeing hills laid out before them but there was something about this day, something about how silently the mountains lay beneath the snow" (6). Through the letters written by Anneth, Clay understands that she has predicted the upcoming danger and has rushed to protect her child, Clay. At every point in the life of Clay, the cliffs and

Cedar trees become witness of events. The rays provide a soothing effect on him. In Ki. Rajanarayanan's *Gopallapuram*, the natural environment depicts a threat to a pregnant woman who walks alone through an abandoned path. She locates a nearby waterbody with the signals that she receives from nature. She hears 'parrots screeching' (5), 'tall green Jamun trees' (6). and a 'water bird' (6). directs her to a nearby waterbody.

In *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of EcoPsychology*, Theodore Roszak has provided the principles of Ecopsychology. Roszak has posited that 'ecological unconscious' should not be repressed, rather should be given a free access to the environment around. Such kind of repression may lead one to madness in the modern world where people go behind materials for self-satisfaction. This is evident when Clay leaves the church to spend some time listening to the mountain and Cedar trees. He feels a spiritual warmth, which he has not felt anywhere so far.

In *Gopallapuram*, at Kottaiyar house, Akkayya and the other members of Kottaiyar family consider trees their family members. Their mansion is surrounded with neem trees. They personify them by addressing it 'veppamma' (20). They consider the tree pregnant, if it bears flowers and fruits. While, the Sirisa tree sheds its leaves, they say, "Look at her, she is shameless, standing here naked" (20). All these activities of creating a bond with that of their environment are not repressed.

Roszak further claims that, by tracing one's history and by knowing more about the life led by their ancestors, one can shape his/her 'ecological unconsciousness.' In *Clay's Quilt*, after finding out more about his mother's personal life and her association with the environment, Clay starts to find a connection towards his land. He has had plans to settle down somewhere in the city. But his understanding of the relevance of his native place and his sense of connection with that has made him come back to his own land. "I been thinking that I'd like to come back to Free Creek. I've worked six year in them mines without spending much, and I've go bout enough money saved up to build a little house", said Clay. This makes Easter glad,

and she has provoked 'ecological unconsciousness' ("The Principles of Ecopsychology, by Theodore Roszak – IES") in Clay by letting him know more about his ancestors' way of life.

In *Gopallapuram*, Mangaiathaar Amaal, the great grandmother of Kottaiyar family, conveys the story of their migration. She stresses more about their refuge on the land where they reside then. She claims that it is in that land they till, grow crops, survive and have a good life with their family. She also narrates how the land helps them during their adverse times. By making individuals aware of the 'history of their time' ("The Principles of Ecopsychology, by Theodore Roszak – IES"), their 'ecological unconsciousness' can be shaped.

Once the repressed thoughts related to their environment are recovered from their unconscious mind, eco-psychology proceeds in awakening "the inherent sense of environment reciprocity that lies within the ecological unconsciousness" ("The Principles of Ecopsychology, by Theodore Roszak – IES"), said Roszak. It further helps an individual to recover from the state of alienation and tries to develop an emotional connection with that of their environment. After knowing his life, Clay's mind is soothed by the environment. On the day of his wedding with Alma, Clay spends some time on the mountain, where he used to spend some time with his mother. He feels that he owes more to the place and decides to protect it from mining activities. Anneth, in one of the letters that she has written for clay, mentions, "I came to the clearing on the mountain's top, where the yellow and purple flowers bend their heads. This is your favorite place, Clay. I pack you there on my hip all the time and lean over so you can put your face to the flowers" (211).

In *Gopallapuram*, Ki. Rajanarayanan mentions an incident in which people leave Andhra from Telugu and Muslim rulers. When they escape "the path was covered with them but not one pricked our feet" (33). Streaks of lightning help them to locate their path amid darkness. When they find difficulty in crossing the shore, they are helped by the branches of 'peepul tree' (34), that reach them for aid. They reciprocate

by considering nature as members of their family. Roszak then moves on, describing the process of the maturation of 'ecological reciprocity' to that of 'ecological ego' which gradually develops into attaining an 'ethical responsibility' to look after one's environment.

Roszak's concepts of 'ecological ego' and 'ethical responsibility' can be seen in *Clay's Quilt* and *Gopallapuram*. In the latter, each member of Kottaiyaar family is assigned roles to look after their environment. Thus 'ecological unconsciousness' of everyone should be provoked, by letting them aware of their importance in establishing a bond with the natural environment. This helps them to associate their shattered psyche with that of nature and understand the significance of nature's embrace. This can be done by creating proper awareness of the role of their environment with that of their life. As far as Roszak's view is concerned, the humans, by being conscious of their 'ecological unconsciousness', start to consider nature a 'blank psychiatric screen' (Theodore Roszak) where their psyche works. Developing such consciousness helps an individual to be reciprocal and then to develop an 'ecological ego' ("The Principles of Ecopsychology, by Theodore Roszak – IES") and 'ethical responsibility' ("The Principles of Ecopsychology, by Theodore Roszak – IES") in protecting their surrounding and treasuring them for their future generation. The objective of the paper is proved by applying the concepts of Roszak in Silas House's *Clay's Quilt* and Ki. Rajanarayanan's *Gopallapuram*, by exploring geographies of Appalachia and Karisal respectively.

## Works Cited

- Antonov, Vladimir. *Ecopsychology: Harmony of Communication with Nature*. Translated by Mikhail Nikolenko and Maxim Shafeyev, New Atlanteans, 2008.
- House, Silas. *Clay's Quilt*. Blair, 2001.
- Rajanarayanan, Ki. *Gopallapuram*. Translated by Pritham K. Chakravarthy, Penguin Books, 2011.
- Roszak, Theodore, editor. *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. Sierra Club Books, 1993.
- The Hindu Bureau. "Karisal Literature Became a Major Movement Due to Contributions of Ki. Ra. Says Perumal Murugan." *The Hindu*, 8 Dec. 2023, [www.thehindu.com](http://www.thehindu.com).
- "The Principles of Ecopsychology, by Theodore Roszak – IES". IES, 15 June 2019, [ies.bio/ecopsychology/what-is-ecopsychology/principles-of-ecopsychology](http://ies.bio/ecopsychology/what-is-ecopsychology/principles-of-ecopsychology).
- Whipple, Madison. "The History of Appalachia and Its People." *The Collector*, 6 Aug. 2024, [www.thecollector.com/history-of-appalachia-and-its-people](http://www.thecollector.com/history-of-appalachia-and-its-people).
- Yarnell, Susan L. and United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service Southern Research Station. *The Southern Appalachians: A History of the Landscape*. May 1998.