

# EC(H)O-NARRATING STORIES

## Ecological Thought and Metanarrativity in Folktales

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**Abstract:** This paper studies the ecological discourse constructed in folktales, looking at the relationship between folktales and the human-nature-culture paradigm. By closely examining select folktales collected by folklorist A. K. Ramanujan, this paper looks at the metanarrativity of tales and argues from a narratological perspective that folktales deploy nature metaphors to establish a close relationship between nature, women and culture. This, it is argued, is made possible only in the conservation of stories for, in conserving a story, the message of conserving cultures and their artefacts (an ecological metaphor) is spread. The story is conserved; however, not in hoarding it but quite contrarily in transmitting and letting it go. The paper also critically examines how female subjects, through the use of nature metaphors and symbols of fertility and femininity speak of their consciousness in these ‘woman-centred tales’ in a space characterized by the absence of the Phallic Other but inevitably speak the patriarchal language of feminine inscriptions. Using folkloric research of A. K. Ramanujan as well as ecocritical frameworks, this paper looks at the narratological dimensions of folklore to understand metanarration as a crucial aspect of folklore and ecological conservation. Therefore the lessons of conservation lie not only in the content of the folktales but also in their very *telling*. The ecological aspects in and of the tale must necessarily be echoed multiple times to enable the tale’s transmission, and in effect, their conservation.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, ecology, conservation, folktales, metanarratives, Ramanujan, telling

### 1. Introduction

Telling tales is an activity shared by all cultures. Folktales then live in the telling. A. K. Ramanujan opens his “Telling Tales” by saying: “Even in the most urbane and westernized Indian households there exists, behind the prim exterior, another India. It lives in tales of passion and trouble, told

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to children by their grandmothers and servants as the dusk descends...”<sup>1</sup> In a context where telling tales is a habitual phenomenon, the fact these tales *tell* something is crucial. Of the many things told, folktales often speak about the significance of the *act of telling* itself among other things. This metanarrative element of folktales is central to this paper. Many of the tales collected by Ramanujan himself are what he calls ‘woman-centred tales’. The folktales, hence, will also be analysed to understand the ecofeminist thought embedded in them.

Thus, the objectives of this paper are: (1) To understand ecological thought built into folktales that comment on the tale’s (as well as the culture’s) conservation through nature metaphors that comment on female sexuality, dangers of biocentrism among others. (2) To understand how women and nature metaphors are linked to create speaking subjects of them in the absence of a Phallic Other and yet perpetuate patriarchal inscriptions of femininity. (3) To understand the *act* of storytelling, self-reflexivity and metanarration in folktales as central to conservation of nature and culture. (4) To analyse how folktales serve as artefacts articulating a deeper philosophy of ecology: that nature is not to be used for utilitarian purposes of humans, but serve a larger purpose in the ecosystem of nature-culture. (5) To look at folktales as artefacts that need to be circulated, transmitted and echoed in order for the ecological and cultural philosophy to live and be sustained. (It is in this transmission that they are conserved.)

For the purposes of this paper, we shall look at three oral tales collected by A. K. Ramanujan and transcribed into English (“A Flowering Tree”, “The Pomegranate Queen”, and “Acacia Trees”) and recognise the kind of relationship forged between women and nature in these tales. The ecocritical discourse is analyzed by reflecting on the manner in which nature metaphors are deployed to comment on cultural aspects of female sexuality. Let us now turn to understand some of the concepts and the critical frameworks utilized to read the three tales.

## 2. Understanding Folktales

Folktales have become a crucial area of study to understand several anthropological and cultural dimensions of social groups. Folktales are dependent on both the characters of the tale as well as that of the teller, the context of the telling. To begin with, folktales in general are very often not

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<sup>1</sup>A. K. Ramanujan, “Telling Tales,” in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker, Delhi: Oxford, 2004, 448-484.

in tune with the Western notions of knowledge/literatures/epistemes: they function frequently as a counter-system, to borrow Ramanujan’s terminology. Very often these folktales point towards larger questions involving indigenous philosophical traditions. In fact, folk narratives function as aesthetic expressions of the ‘little’ traditions and also serve to articulate the worldview of the folks or the populace.

Contributions of Stuart Blackburn, Allan Dundes, Vladimir Propp among others in the field of folkloric research is immense. Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* is a seminal work in the field that analyzes Russian folktales.<sup>2</sup> However, his tale types do not lend themselves to the same structural reading in the Indian context. Hence, drawing from aspects of narratology like metanarrativity, Ramanujan’s folkloric research as well as his theoretical reflections on storytelling, this paper looks at select folktales to understand how the nature of storytelling is emphasized through ecological symbols and metaphors thus articulating a larger philosophy of cultures. In this paper, we shall look at the philosophical and moral underpinnings of cultures and their worldviews as disseminated through the tales. It is important to bear in mind that these tales are context-sensitive<sup>3</sup> (to borrow Ramanujan’s idea) and, hence, cannot be used as universal symbols. Ramanujan remarks that nature is a part of the human reality and worldview that can bear significant implications to the human life beyond the immediate control of humans. This kind of reality (whether it is a girl turning into a tree, being reborn as a tree or a fruit and telling her tale as seen in the three tales to be discussed in this paper) cannot be rationalised:

It can only be accepted or watched, laughed at or sidestepped and bypassed by human ingenuity. In these tales, reality is not reasoned, but faced. Here actions, even human actions, are seen as events. They have causes, not reasons. By enduring them, and watching for a moment of change that is the apt moment for action, and then acting – usually by speaking out and telling one’s story – one comes through. That is why many of these tales end with the heroine telling her story

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<sup>2</sup>Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968.

<sup>3</sup>Ramanujan uses this term in his essay “Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay” to argue for an impossibility of generalizing Indian thought (unlike the universalizing discourse of Western philosophy) and emphasizing the significance of the context to understand a particular idea in Indian philosophy. See Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays*, 34-51.

to the ‘significant other’ (often through a device, such as a talking doll or lamp), resolving the crisis, enduring her separation, reuniting her with her husband and her kin. The tale has now become her story. Till then she had no story to tell. The tale is the tale of her acquiring her story, making a person of her, making a silent woman a speaking woman. This may be why it is crucial that stories should be told.<sup>4</sup>

The motif of conservation, let us remember, does not always play out literally as ecological conservation but as conservation of culture through dissemination of the tale with nature-metaphors built in them. The paper, as pointed out in the objectives, also critically examines the relationship established between ecological metaphors and women in particular to understand the construction, transmission and sustenance of culture. The problematics of this kind of construction that creates specific kinds of speaking female subjects is also studied here.

### 3. Folktales and Metanarrativity

Tale-telling is cyclical, a pattern sometimes analogous to seasonal time and experience. Folktales are essentially stories and a specific nature of all tales is in the telling of it. A folktale lives precisely in its transmission. For example, the folktale “Barber’s Secret” is a good illustration among many others of the way in which a tale travels. The story goes about a king who has been hiding the fact about his ‘donkey ears’ from his subjects. A barber who discovers the ‘ugly truth’ is threatened not to reveal the same to anyone. However, unable to hold the secret back, he shares the secret with a tree which is later transformed into a drum and comes back to the King’s court to make the secret public every time it is beaten. Thus, each time the tale is recounted by a new teller, and a new listener carries the tale further to be told to another listener. Every time the tale is retold, it gets a new life. It is never the same tale, because the context – the teller, listener and other circumstances of the telling – are important. Although the ‘tale’ remains the same, the meaning drawn from the tale changes depending on the context of each teller as well as each listener of the tale. Thus what each teller gives, and each listener takes from a tale is different. This alters the tale in that its nuances and semantics change while retaining the same narrative content.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Ramanujan, “Towards a Counter-System” in *The Collected Essays*, 2004, 437.

<sup>5</sup>This can be understood better through a phenomenon called ‘textual refraction’ where a text ‘refracts’, much like a ray of light that passes through a prism, into prismatic layers depending on the context (the prism) that alters the tale. For an understanding of the concept of textual refraction see Andre Lefebvre, “On the

This paper carries the aforementioned argument forward to show that the ecological discourse constructed in the folktales point towards sustaining culture and civilization, and maintaining cultural harmony reiterated through the conservation of stories themselves for the message to survive. Using an ecological metaphor like conservation to understand the nature and function of stories is therefore central to the concerns of this paper. Let us closely look at some interesting narratological aspects of storytelling.

Tales make people and their cultures. The word ‘narrative’ is etymologically drawn from the Sanskrit word ‘*gna*’ which means ‘to know’. Narratives, or simply tales are then used to weave cultures. Storytelling is, therefore, a very significant and natural form of cultural expression. It gives cultures the space to ask questions, seek answers and make meanings about themselves as well as others. Tales thrive on being told and heard, providing new meanings to the culture of the listener in which they are received *for the nonce*. The teller-listener relations are crucial to understand the dynamics of the narrative process, the potency of stories, and the cathartic effect of telling and listening to them. (We shall see how this is significant in the context of the folktales studied in this paper).

A. K. Ramanujan’s *Folktales from India* (1991) and *A Flowering Tree* (1997) show that there are separate tale-types for stories *about* stories to emphasize the significance of stories in our lives. This is because stories change their course in telling and also *affect* the teller and the listener. When they remain *untold*, they feel stifled and stifle, in turn, those who keep them. One such story is “Tell it to the Walls”. The poor widow in this story has none to listen to her woes and hence, she keeps them all to herself and grows fatter. She wanders outside one day and goes to a ruined house and tells her stories to the walls. On hearing the stories, the walls come crashing down. She stands amidst the ruins of the house feeling much lighter than before: she has changed, unburdened of her sorrows. The walls have changed too. Ramanujan observes that such stories tell us *why* stories have to be told: a story lives in its transmission and should never be stifled or hoarded by one listener. In effect certain cultural practices also get shared among the members of the community.

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Refraction of Texts” in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Mihai Sparisou, Philadelphia: John Benjamin’s Publishing Company, 1984, 217-237. See also Gaana Jayagopalan “Textual Refraction: A study of the Sandman Narratives” Dissertation, University of Hyderabad, 2011, for the significance of textual refraction in/for folktales and storytelling.

#### 4. Tales as Cultural Artefacts

Ramanujan associates this idea to the larger cultural practice of giving and receiving of gifts. He observes how “these are *danas*, or gifts, that in accordance with their nature must be given and received. Stories are no different. Communities and generations depend on such exchanges and transfers.”<sup>6</sup> The cultural transaction of a tale is crucial for its dissemination and life. In each place it comes to be told differently and thereby earns a new life. Ramanujan speaks of this in the context of folktales: “A folktale is a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds new meaning with each new telling.”<sup>7</sup> Some of the folktales under discussion here are those that make certain cultural points only in the contexts of their telling. Tales about incest taboos (like the one discussed in this paper, for instance) cannot be made universal but are culture-specific because different cultures have different norms governing incest taboos. Reading this folktale in today’s context, locating it within the discourse of (post)modernity would lend to a completely different understanding – one that might not critique the incest taboo per se but the system that circulates the same (as is done in this paper). Some tales may also be read as those perpetuating certain gendered stereotypes. However, the point would be lost if these tales were not to be considered as those told in specific contexts by particular tellers and listeners. Similarly, these tales could merely be read as tales about social roles and responsibilities, or as metaphors for ecological thought. Understanding the articulation of ecological thought through certain symbols is the focus of this paper. So, let us now briefly turn to the next framework of this paper – ecocriticism.

#### 5. Ecological Studies and Folktales

Ecocriticism is a recent phenomenon. This field of enquiry has now branched to be known by other names including ecological literary studies, and green cultural studies because ecocriticism invites a rather deep ecology-oriented approach to its readings. It closely analyses the representation of the environment in literature. This emerging field of investigation addresses the human-nature interface by treating the duality as a binary, *and* problematizing the binary itself. *The Ecocriticism Reader* defines ecocriticism as “a study of the relationship between literature and

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<sup>6</sup>Ramanujan, “Introduction” in *Folktales from India*, Delhi: Penguin, 1992, xxxiv.

<sup>7</sup>Ramanujan, “Introduction” in *Folktales*, xi.

the physical environment.”<sup>8</sup> The *Reader* explains in its introductory chapter that the basic premise of this philosophy is that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it. Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature.”<sup>9</sup> The human attitude towards environment as expressed in the cultural artefacts is thus at the heart of ecological studies – literary or cultural. One school of ecocriticism – *deep ecology* – emphasizes the connectedness and the symbiotic nature of the relationship rather than merely highlighting the uniqueness of the human species over nature. Deep ecology becomes crucial to understand the ecological thought in folktales primarily because nature in folktales is not ‘used’ for a utilitarian purpose but is built into the cultural consciousness of communities to reiterate the symbiotic relationship that exists between nature and culture and not establish the binary dualism of nature/culture.

In this regard, folktales become important spaces to be analysed in order to understand ecological discourses in practice. Folktales are cultural artefacts that often carry environmental consciousness in them. “A Flowering Tree”, for example, collected by Ramanujan relates the idea of a woman transforming into a tree and consequently being treated as a commodity, causing physical and emotional pain to the girl. The tale shows how to be sensitive to the ecology as well as to women. This tale may be read from an ecofeminist perspective, for instance.<sup>10</sup>

By looking at select folktales collected by folklorist Ramanujan, this paper argues that the conservation of the tale enables us to transmit the nature-culture relationship. The telling conserves the story and in turn establishes the relationship between literature and ecology. The folk narratives become strategies to tell stories about the relationship between man and elements of nature-culture. They function as critiques of the anthropocentric view of nature and urge the development of an anthropocentric view of nature. Instead of looking at nature as a giver, the philosophy of folktales articulate how nature becomes an important space to establish a community’s ‘culture’ and the community learns of it by disseminating (in effect, conserving) the folktales. Let us look at this idea closely below.

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<sup>8</sup>Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold From in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996, xviii.

<sup>9</sup>Glotfelty in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xix.

<sup>10</sup>See A. K. Ramanujan, “A Flowering Tree: A Woman’s Tale” in *A Flowering Tree and Other Folktales from India*, Delhi: Penguin, 1997.

## 6. “The Pomegranate Queen”

This is a folktale about a *gowda* who kills and buries his younger daughter for having refused to marry any of the suitors brought by the family. The wife, who is at the older daughter’s house visiting, is unaware of the death of the younger daughter, returns from her visit to be told that the daughter died of an illness and that the father had to bury her. Over a few months a pomegranate tree grows at the place where the girl was buried. She mysteriously comes to live in a large flower on the tree that blooms only during the night and turns into a bud during the day. In it she plays mellifluous music on the vina. The *gowda* and his wife listen to the earthly music in the night but do not know of its source. However, the music reaches the heaven and one of Indra’s sons comes in search of the source of music. He finds the girl inside a flower. He is enchanted both by the music as well as her beauty and falls in love with her. He expresses his desire to marry her after seeking his mother’s consent. The mother, too, visits the garden to see the girl and the narrator describes:

The flower slowly opened and they began to hear the strains of vina music. His mother looked at her beauty and she too fell in a faint. The woman in the flower looked like a blaze of light. She shone like the sun and the moon together. She was indeed more beautiful than any *apsara* woman in heaven. The mother regained her senses very soon and said to her son, ‘You’re absolutely right. I’ve never seen anyone as beautiful,’ and went to the Pomegranate Queen, talked to her, and took her with them into the sky-world, where the two were married in great style.<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, the tree begins to wither and dry and finally crumbles days after the girl leaves. One day the *gowda*’s wife stares at the crumbled tree wondering what is wrong with it when the daughter suddenly arrives with her husband. No sooner does she set foot in the yard then the dried sticks and branches come back to life. An amazed *gowda*’s wife notices that the tree had again put out one flower. In it she sees her young daughter. The daughter narrates her story to the mother and the mother is elated to know that her daughter is alive, married and living happily.

One cannot miss the gendered reading here. Blossoming of the flower is equivalent to the blossoming of the girl, fertile and fit to be married. By metaphorically representing the woman’s femininity and fertility through symbols of the landscape, tree and blossoming flower, the

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<sup>11</sup>A. K. Ramanujan, “The Pomegranate Queen,” in *A Flowering Tree*, 136.



tale draws attention to the ‘cultured’ representation of the demure, virtuous woman as opposed to the aggressive untamed woman.

This tale is a reverse of another folktale “The Flowering Tree” collected by Ramanujan for which he has provided extensive notes. This folktale chronicles the transformation of a girl into a flowering tree that produces flowers as warranted by the occasion. It is a gift that she guards as a secret. She lets in her sister on the secret to enable the family alleviate from poverty by selling more flowers. After this, her gift is known and she has no longer control over her ability: She is forced to produce flowers as and when warranted. Ramanujan notes how of the five times she becomes a tree, the first and last ones are out of her own volition.<sup>12</sup> Her husband coaxes her to turn into a tree in their bedchamber on their wedding night, almost becoming a sexual ritual for them to consummate their marriage on the flowers from the tree. This is followed by her curious sister-in-law coercing her to become a tree to show her off to her other friends. The tale chronicles how the girl is abused on becoming a tree and literally transformed into a thing, a spectacle. Her vulnerability is at its peak when she is a tree.

While both the tales use the tree as a motif, “Flowering Tree” shows how a girl transforms into a tree and is treated by her husband and his family as a commodity and is harmed and exploited for her utilitarian value while “Pomegranate Queen” shows how the rebirth of the girl in the tree does a world of good to her. Although the feminine landscape trope is seen in “Pomegranate Queen” there is no violation of the landscape as seen in “The Flowering Tree”. Instead the tree and the landscape are portrayed as requiring the girl’s presence in it for it to remain fertile – in her absence it withers and turns barren reiterating the woman as a symbol of fertility (which is a cultural symbol seen through Mother Goddess fertility cults in several cultures). The tree is not treated here as a commodity. It becomes a metaphor for female sexuality, fertility and most importantly a woman’s subjectivity. The pomegranate tree also gets noticed only when the daughter plays music during the night. Her subjectivity is gained through the tree. In living in the flower – a symbol of fertility – the girl finds a suitable match which was not otherwise possible for her in her life as a girl. Curiously enough, the father is absent when her tale is recounted and the mother is elated to see her daughter happily married. The absence of the father is symbolic of enabling the woman being heard. The fertile female symbols of the tree, garden, pomegranate flower are all enabling

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<sup>12</sup>Ramanujan, “A Flowering Tree: A Woman’s Tale” in *A Flowering Tree*, 425.

spaces of female subjectivity. However, what she says falls within the patriarchal inscriptions of the role and position of a woman: fertile, virtuous, bearer as well as carrier of ‘culture’ and ‘civilization’. Quite paradoxically, nature is not exploited in this tale to sanction and authorize patriarchal views, unlike the case of “The Flowering Tree.”

Interestingly, Ramanujan has classified certain tales as ‘women’s tales’ referring tales told by women and those centred on women. In “Towards a Counter-system: Women’s Tales”, Ramanujan discusses with examples to show how women’s tales often function as those that exhibit an alternate system to the mainstream systems of culture. In “Pomegranate Queen”, we see how the young girl is killed by her father for having refused to marry any of the suitors brought forth by him. However, she is reborn in the pomegranate tree as a girl who lives in the large flower, unnoticed by the day concealed in the bud and heard during the night, playing enchanting music. The allure of the woman is closely connected to the nature image of the flower as a symbol of fertility and female sexuality.

## 7. “Acacia Trees”

In yet another folktale that uses the nature imagery to make comments on female sexuality deemed right by the culture, “Acacia Trees” shows how nature metaphors and symbols become important conduits through which cultural interrogations and negotiations are made. The folktale “Acacia Trees” chronicles how the brother’s love towards marrying his own sister, Putta, translates as punishment leading eventually to both of their deaths. The brother who gets killed is buried in a mound and turns into a thorny bush, while the sister who dies is buried in a field to take birth as a ‘Bullock’s-Heart’ tree (a fruit-bearing tree in India known popularly by the name ramphal, named after the mythic character Rama who stood by Dharma and asked his wife to pass the *Agnipareeksha* or test of virtue to douse suspicions about her virtue after being abducted by Ravana). It is only days later that her sister-in-law gets the fruit and wishes “The fruit is so lovely, lovely as a girl. How I wish it were a girl.”<sup>13</sup> Her ‘moralistic’ story of the effects of harbouring an incestuous feeling towards one’s sister gets transmitted when the harvested fruit from the tree turns into a girl to narrate her story as well as the philosophy behind the punishment: Nature as ecological metaphor is clearly used to articulate the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ as deemed appropriate in marriage by a community that shares this tale.

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<sup>13</sup>Ramanujan, “Acacia Tree” in *A Flowering Tree*, 5.

The transformation of the brother into a thorny bush and the sister into a fruit bearing tree cannot be read devoid of a gendered understanding. The ‘honour’ is kept intact in her by her refusal to marry her brother. The fertility of the woman is represented through the fruit that is described as ripe and beautiful (quite similar to the fertility symbol of the flower in the pomegranate tree, yet another fruit-bearing tree). Putta’s story of virtue, safeguarding her virginity from an incestuous relationship is transmitted through the symbol of fertility achieved through ‘naturally prescribed means’, so to say, in the tree: the fruit borne through the tree. The story here is not making a discourse of ecological conservation but is constructing a discourse of virtue and fertility through trees. In effect the story’s moral itself is told by the girl who turns into a fruit, which turns into a girl, thus extending the chain of transmission of the tale.

The story of propriety, of virginity, is conserved in the symbol of fertility and consequently, the culture of the society is conserved in the telling of this tale. In fact, after Putta turns into a girl, she tells her sister-in-law “Look how things are. My brother did evil (*karma*), so a spiny bush grows on his burial ground. I kept my virtue (*dharma*), and a fruit tree grew out of mine. And I’m here.”<sup>14</sup> Her last words, “And I am here” reiterates the telling aspect of the folktale.

This must now be transmitted to another listener. The world of storytelling is created within the tale: that the story gets transmitted and the cultural ‘moral’ is shared. Thus the conservation of the story happens in its transmission from one teller to the next. The conservation here is not just the safeguarding of the girl’s virginity from incest but also conserving the honour of the society, conserving her story and the moral underpinnings. To make a point about culture – that harbouring incestuous feelings are ‘immoral’ (or evil) and in doing so, you are committing an action (*karma*) that will attract punishment; and safeguarding one’s virtue from such ‘uncivilized, immoral’ actions is virtuous (*dharma*) – the discourse of the incest-taboo is constructed through ecological metaphors like the thorny bush and the bullock-heart tree. Her virtue is protected by the tree, her story is told through an offspring of the tree and the story is protected precisely because it is told.

In fact, Ramanujan himself provides a useful insight into this incestuous bond that many folktales deal with. Traditionally, a brother professes to safeguard his sister, his own kin in his natal family as women

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<sup>14</sup>Ramanujan, “Acacia Tree” in *A Flowering Tree*, 5.

are often represented as incapable of their own protection. This pledge is also to ensure that the incest taboo is maintained. The enmity often seen between the wife and the husband's sister also stems from the threat to the bond established between husband-wife and brother-sister.<sup>15</sup>

Extending this reading into the "Acacia Trees," Putta's attempts to climb higher onto the Acacia trees is symbolic of the threat to this ritual pledge of care in the natal home. Putta tells her brother:

This mouth calls you Brother.

Do you want this to call you Husband?

I'll climb, I'll climb.<sup>16</sup>

This folktale uses the metaphor of a fruit to represent female sexuality and fertility and articulates a notion of culture prevalent within the traditional systems. The ripened fruit also echoes a typical deep ecology philosophy: the fruit that is laid aside to be cut and relished never comes to be cut and eaten. Instead it comes to serve a completely different purpose: just to tell the story of saved/protected sexuality. Quite similarly the story must be told not for a utilitarian purpose, but for the purpose of disseminating the story itself, thereby ensuring the 'culture' is maintained without threatening the incest taboo. The fruit is not eaten or nature is not exploited, but the seeds of the tale are sown for disseminating (in this context, the tale as well as the philosophy of 'good civilization' embedded in it). The fruit, therefore, represents the intrinsic value of storytelling and not its teleological value of fulfilling the human desire of being eaten.

### **7. Akam and Puram Classification of Folktales**

The folktales studies here, as established use nature metaphors to articulate female subjectivity that nonetheless falls within the prescriptions of patriarchal order. Ramanujan also has an interesting theorization of folktales. He borrows the *akam* (interior) and *puram* (exterior) classification of the Sangam poetry to classify folktales too. In typical women-centred tales, the spaces, he says, are marked by "alterations of Interior and Exterior (the *akam* and *puram* of classical Tamil poetics), by alternations of domestic and public space in which the action takes place."<sup>17</sup> When we look carefully at the folktale, we see that the girl in the

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<sup>15</sup>Ramanujan, "Towards a Counter-system: Women's Tales" in *The Collected Essays*, 230.

<sup>16</sup>Ramanujan, *A Flowering Tree*, 4.

<sup>17</sup>Ramanujan, "A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale" in *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India*, 425.

“Pomegranate Queen” was a silent, unheard woman within the interior of her house and is killed by her father in a fit of rage. Her father’s act of killing is a symbolic erasure of a female subject unwilling to submit to the Phallic Order. She comes back to life in the exterior in the pomegranate tree and finds a suitor. This interior-exterior classification is also interesting when we look at the time and the place of the girl’s location: during the day she lives inside the bud, invisible to the world; during nights, she comes to life inside a large flower. At all times she is invisible to her family. She comes out only when the mother remarks about the origin of the mellifluous music and reveals herself to her mother. The outside of the house at this time of revealing herself is characterised by the absence of the patriarchal father in the exterior space. It is precisely this absence that enables her to tell her story of female consciousness.

The comment on the sexuality and fertility of the woman who was ‘nipped in the bud’ with her death as a girl cannot be missed here. It is in the exterior that she gets heard. This is also seen when she becomes a speaking subject to recount her tale to her mother. Ramanujan makes an interesting point here about storytelling: the women become speaking subjects, narrating their tales to listeners who are potential tellers, (again women) to enable the conservation of the culture of female sexuality.

Similarly, in “Acacia Trees,” Putta comes back from the exterior to the interior to recount her tale. She was not heard as a girl and now, she is made a speaking subject in the act of her telling her story and there being a listener to the tale. Ramanujan remarks: “Many women’s tales end with this kind of self-story being told and being heard... It moves her from being a silent or unheard woman to a speaking person with a story to tell. Indeed, the whole tale tells the story of how this woman acquires a story through experience.”<sup>18</sup> It is the landscape of the exterior nature that finally gives the agency to women-centred tales to recount their internal strifes, joys and sufferings as the case may be, very often female tellers to female listeners: Daughter to mother; girl to her sister-in-law, etc.

Reading from an ecocritical perspective, these tales about female sexuality and culture are read as narratives of a culture configuring the role of a woman in society. While her virtue is required to be intact to uphold the virtue of a culture, the tales become agents to circulate these cultural morals of a community. However, when seen from an ecofeminist perspective, nature metaphors are used to reiterate the woman’s

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<sup>18</sup>Ramanujan, “A Flowering Tree: A Woman’s Tale,” 425.

subservient position in a patriarchal system. The woman tells her tale not of transgression but of normative adherence to the Phallic Structure of a “pure, virtuous woman” given in marriage, thus sustaining and carrying the cultural values of virtue and fertility forward.

### **8. Conclusion: Echoing the Nature Images through the Act of Telling**

These folktales comment on the manner in which select folktales intersect nature and aspects of culture (in this case, sexuality). Using such natural elements as symbols, helps in understanding how nature and culture are not treated as binaries but as a symbiotic and an interrelated category. Saving an environmental crisis is not the motive of these tales (although it may argue, quite tangentially, for the same depending on the reading) but saving a culture and its artefacts through transmission and telling the tales is at the heart of these stories. It creates a community of people who share these beliefs about female sexuality although highly patriarchal. According to Ramanujan,

symbolically speaking ... it expresses the young woman's desire to flower sexually and otherwise, as well as the dread of being ravaged that the gift brings with it. In telling such a tale, older women could be reliving these early, complex and ambivalent feelings towards their own bodies – and projecting them for younger female listeners. If boys are part of the audience, as they often are, the male could imaginatively participate in them which might change their sensitiveness towards women.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that these communities depend on deploying nature metaphors to comment on female sexuality and honour of a culture shows how these tales do not empower the female speaking subjects within systems characterised by the absence of the phallic symbolic order. A community of female tellers and female listeners who are potential tellers is created; tales and in turn culture is configured and disseminated to spread the patriarchal inscriptions of women, their role in maintaining harmony of culture by the use of ecological metaphors. What is conserved is the honour of the culture, its women as well as nature and the tale. Thus it is precisely in the self-reflexive exercise – the telling, listening and the transmission of the tale that the tale – that its culture and its articulations are saved and disseminated to remain alive. A culture's conservation is in the transmission of these tales.

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<sup>19</sup>Ramanujan, “A Flowering Tree: A Woman's Tale,” 425.