

Ecofemiotics and Feminist Environmental Humanities: A Critical Engagement with P. Mary Vidya Porselvi's Folktale Framework

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A Review of *Environmental Humanities in Folktales: Theory and Practice*

Environmental Humanities in Folktales by Porselvi, Mary Vidya, Taylor & Francis, 2023, Pp. 88. Rs. 676/- Paperback

Abstract: P. Mary Vidya Porselvi's *Environmental Humanities in Folktales: Theory and Practice* presents a compelling framework called *ecofemiotics*, which blends ecofeminism, semiotics, and the Tamil concept of *Akam* to analyse folktales as ecologically conscious "Gaia Care Narratives." Rooted in Tamil literary traditions such as *tinai* and *Akam-Puram* poetry, Porselvi positions storytelling as a culturally grounded, ethical act central to environmental education. Bridging theory and practice, her classroom experiments offer an ecopedagogical model that integrates ecological thought with lived learning. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives—including Indigenous relational ontology, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, and Erin James's *econarratology*—the book challenges Western-dominated environmental humanities and highlights the transformative power of traditional narratives. Though dense in theory, its decolonial and culturally specific approach makes a valuable contribution to global ecocriticism. Porselvi's work ultimately argues that folktales are not just stories of the past, but tools for cultivating ecological awareness and sustainable futures in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Ecofemiotics, Econarratology, Environmental Humanities, Anthropocene, *Tinai* and *Akam-Puram* poetry

P. Mary Vidya Porselvi's *Environmental Humanities in Folktales: Theory and Practice* "invites you to take a seat in the giant circle to revisit folktales and reweave them to nourish and nurture... the environmental imagination for a better future..." in the author's own words. Among the few names that have made it to the Indian ecocritical stage—Nirmal Selvamony, Pramod K. Nayar, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and others—Mary Vidya Porselvi's book is a timely

and insightful contribution to the growing field. The unfolding of *tinai* by Nirmal Selvamony has enabled several Indian scholars to research the ecocritical space from their own contexts of space, culture, and meaning-making, emerging from the rich tapestry of the literary traditions they affiliate themselves with.

Porselvi's ecofemiotics—a unique blend of theoretical frameworks, including ecofeminism, semiotics, and the Tamil concept of *Akam* to analyse folktales as "Gaia Care Narratives"—is innovative, and the in-depth analysis of various folktales worldwide makes this book a valuable resource for scholars and students alike. Ecofemiotics emphasises the spirit of interconnectedness, interdependence, and the intrinsic value of life. The concept of ecofemiotics can be paralleled to Erin James' 'econarratology', which is elaborated in her work *In The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narrative* (2015). James speaks of the concept in the context of postcolonial narratives, where there is an emphasis on narratological elements valuable in the depiction of the environment around us: "a theory of narrative that foregrounds the interplay between narrative form and the environmental imagination." (Caracciolo 174)

There is an intersectionality involved in the concept, where there is an interconnectedness between narratology, postcolonialism, and ecocritical elements. Ecofemiotics embodies intersectionality as well, created by the affinity of ecofeminism, semiotics, and the *Akam* concept. However, while econarratology hopes to enquire into the intricate quality of narratives and their structures, Porselvi's ecofemiotics largely emphasises the act of narrating and storytelling as gateways into in-depth knowledge of ecofeminist interpretations while bridging it with Tamil *Akam* literature, which explores the inner workings of the heart and mind. The study within this book throws light upon the human obligation of storytelling as a means to show love and care for the environment. This positions storytelling as an ethical and ecological act.

Similarly, her emphasis on interconnectedness and relationality aligns with Timothy Morton's concept of "ecological thought" in *The Ecological Thought* (2010), which also seeks to dissolve the binaries between humans and the more-than-human world. However, unlike Morton's often abstract, theoretical approach, Porselvi's work is rooted in concrete cultural traditions, giving it a grounded and accessible dimension. As the focus of knowledge genesis becomes increasingly interdisciplinary, the many hyphenated constructs used throughout—within cyclical thought frameworks like space-time, nature-culture, and spirit-matter—elevate mere punctuations as signs of the inescapable interconnectedness of the human condition with the environment. Porselvi's view of this interconnectedness is concretised by theories that posit this relationality. In the field of Indigenous studies, relational ontology is primary when studying the relationship between people and the natural environment. Cree scholar Shawn Wilson speaks about truly understanding reality, and that doing so requires first developing a relationship with that reality. When relational ontology is emphasised, the social identity of the person moves beyond the human to include a being created by the emerging relationships of a person with the land, animals, spirits of nature, and others.

In contemporary ecocritical contexts, it is vital to acquire knowledge that does not always have to fit into a techno-scientific framework. When knowledge does not fit into this kind of framework, it is dismissed as speculative and abstract—often considered a spiritual belief or even folklore. Porselvi's central focus on folktales in her text contests this notion, thus foregrounding the invaluable insights gained through the act of storytelling, which possesses ecological erudition, for the next generation. The concept highlights 'entanglements in embodiment', where these thought frameworks like space-time, nature-culture, and spirit-matter are embodiments of experience that are entangled in order to express identities formed by the synthesis of human experiences in and with nature. Often quite contrary to each other, these hyphenated constructs are unique in finding the median in these embodiments. Nature is one of

the important medians that grants common ground to the contradicting parallels in a hyphenated construct. Through the approach of bifurcation into equal entities, the concept mimics ecocritical worldviews of rejecting a hegemonic force or primary being, like anthropocentrism, and instead adopting a more wholesome relational perspective towards humans and nature.

By integrating ecofeminist and semiotic perspectives, she provides a nuanced ‘green lens’ for examining the gendered and symbolic dimensions of environmental narratives from an alternative socio-economic order. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of how folktales reflect and shape societal attitudes towards nature, women, and their interrelatedness. In ancient Tamil society, *Tinai* was the way of life. The *Tinai* concept envisions various factors of community life that make for wholesome living. “A tinai is a landscape and genre infused with several layers of meaning and identity. The central idea of tinai is the organic linkage of time, space, landscape, and emotion.” (Alphonsa 890)

Nature is a strong element within *Tinai*, encompassing human sustenance, relationships, and learning. Within the Sangam literature, *Akam* and *Puram* topics are the two main branches of poetry writing. *Akam*, relating to the interior, consists of life within oneself—that is, pertaining to emotions, feelings, and relationships. *Puram*, relating to the exterior, consists of outward experiences, particularly in terms of war, valour, societal norms, and such. The two branches are envisioned in Sangam poetry with strong nature elements and are related through the incorporation of five ecological regions. *Ainthinaior* the five regions—*Kurinji*, *Mullai*, *Marutham*, *Neithal*, and *Palai*—relate to mountainous regions, forest areas, river and valley regions, seashores, and desert regions, respectively.

Akam poetry is skilfully crafted in such a way that the *thalaivan* (hero) and *thalaivi*’s (heroine) characters, primary characters of *Akam* poetry, experience particular emotions of love which usually pertain to each ecological region. The *Kurinji* region is portrayed with the blissful togetherness of the lovers. The *Mullai* region is showcased with the forlornness of the *thalaivi*

until her reunion with her beloved. The *Marutham* region characterises the lovers in a quarrel or disagreement. The *Neithal* region portrays the *thalaivi*'s anxiety while waiting for the return of her beloved. The *Palai* region showcases the grief and sorrow associated with the separation of lovers. This poetry can be categorised under oikopoetics, where there is an innate connection of human emotions with the natural landscape. Landscapes become symbolic of the culture, society, and general ethos of human living. Landscapes and mindscapes combine to create identities rooted in nature. By foregrounding *Akam* as an ecological philosophy, "heart," "home," and "Earth" offer a refreshing perspective on ecological interconnectedness. Further, by grounding her analysis in this indigenous worldview, Porselvi challenges dominant Western paradigms and provides a valuable framework for understanding non-Western perspectives on the environment.

The identification and analysis of "Gaia Care Narratives" is a central strength of the book. By focusing on folktales that promote ecological awareness, interconnectedness, and respect for nature, Porselvi highlights the potential of traditional stories to inspire and guide sustainable practices. Her typology of folktales—spanning celebrative to regenerative *Akam*—is an innovative framework that offers a practical model for analysing ecological consciousness. The book draws upon a wide range of disciplines, including literature, ecology, sociology, gender studies, and folklore studies, to offer a comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of the environmental dimensions of folktales. Porselvi's emphasis on the practical implications of her research is commendable. As a Fulbright scholar, the author's authentic experiences are evident in the experimental outlook toward transforming theory into practice and vice versa in her own classroom. This is a definite highlight, as it offers models for serious researchers who want to try ecopedagogy beyond being ecocritics and ecotheorists. The forty principles derived as an outcome of the pedagogical investigation are clinical in the sense of how abstract theoretical constructs can be made into pragmatic critical strategies for learners in

the classroom context. The book explores the pedagogical potential of folktales in promoting environmental education and fostering a deeper connection with nature. The inclusion of a classroom experiment further demonstrates the practical application of her theoretical framework. Moreover, her use of classroom storytelling experiments to foster ecological awareness bridges theory and practice, contributing to ecopedagogy in meaningful ways.

A more in-depth comparative analysis of folktales from different regions and cultures could provide further insights into the diversity and universality of environmental themes and values. For instance, many Australian Aboriginal narratives illustrate how their communities position the concept of 'Caring for Country', which is primary to their everyday sustenance. Each clan, based on the land they inhabit, becomes innately connected to the landscape and its natural elements. The knowledge they imbibe is age-old and passed down through generations, who care for the land as their ancestors did. With resistance to nature exploitation at the forefront, it becomes crucial to understand natural landscapes in order to protect them. Through the 'Caring for Country' concept, the body of knowledge gained plays a crucial part in the conservation process. Many Australian Aboriginal narratives create awareness about the uniqueness of their age-old communities while also underlining the valuable knowledge they have to share towards nature preservation.

While the book effectively analyses traditional folktales, exploring how these narratives can be reinterpreted and reimagined to address contemporary environmental challenges, such as climate change and biodiversity loss, would be a valuable addition. Examining the role of technology in the dissemination and reinterpretation of folktales in the digital age could offer new perspectives on the future of these traditional narratives. You should read the book if you are interested in understanding the environmental messages embedded within traditional stories. Ecopedagogy in *Environmental Humanities in Folktales* is not just a theoretical concept but a practical strategy to nurture ecological awareness and action. Ecopedagogy, as the name

suggests, is a type of pedagogy rooted in the ecological sustainability framework. Being the need of the hour, ecopedagogy is an approach to education that is futuristic and seeks to produce global citizens who are ecocentric and resilient in their way of living. Educators Paulo Freire, Moacir Gadotti, and Leonardo Boff have been instrumental in popularising this educational approach with the aim of unlearning anthropocentric learning and re-learning a more inclusive, biocentric mindfulness. “This is a pedagogical approach that is informed by the thinking of Paulo Freire and focuses on the importance of environmental justice and planetary sustainability.” (Bourn)

Paulo Freire, in his text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, creates awareness of how, just as the human world faces oppression and domination of power, the same is experienced by the non-human world as well. Ecopedagogy works on the primary principle that power is shared and not owned by dominant hegemonies. Learning primarily happens in the lived experiences of students, so educational approaches focus on providing action-based learning that is dynamic, meaningful, and comprehensive. Within this educational approach, by using storytelling as a tool, Porselvi demonstrates how education can transform ecological ethics into a lived practice, empowering individuals and communities to contribute meaningfully to environmental sustainability.

One of the book’s most significant contributions is its decolonial approach. By foregrounding *Akam* as an ecological philosophy, Porselvi disrupts the dominance of Western paradigms in environmental humanities. Her typology of folktales—spanning celebrative to regenerative *Akam*—is an innovative framework that offers a practical model for analysing ecological consciousness. Porselvi outlines a five-stage process for eco-storytelling, which has clear practical applications in education: *Mindfulness* is the first step, in which participants are encouraged to reflect on their relationship with nature, grounding the learning experience in awareness. Next is *mediation*, where the storyteller acts as a mediator between the narrative and

the listeners, emphasising key ecological themes. *Mapping* helps in analysing folktales for motifs of interconnectedness, such as the interplay between space, time, and nature. Participants articulate their personal or collective ecological commitments inspired by the stories through a *manifesto*. The final process culminates in *mission* or actionable steps toward environmental stewardship, fostering a sense of responsibility for ecological balance.

However, the theoretical density of ecofemiotics might alienate readers unfamiliar with semiotics or Tamil poetics. This is a challenge shared by some other interdisciplinary works, such as Morton's *Hyperobjects* (2013), which can also feel impenetrable to a broader audience. While Porselvi's ambition to integrate multiple frameworks—ranging from Deep Ecology to Zen philosophy—is laudable, it occasionally overwhelms the analysis, with theoretical abstraction taking precedence over a deep engagement with individual folktales. *Environmental Humanities in Folktales: Theory and Practice* is a groundbreaking contribution to ecocriticism and environmental humanities, particularly for its emphasis on Tamil and global Indigenous storytelling traditions. By engaging with folktales as ecological narratives, Porselvi brings an essential decolonial perspective to the field, aligning her work with contemporary scholars like Joni Adamson, Greta Gaard, and Timothy Morton. Despite its occasional lapses into theoretical density, the book stands as a testament to the power of stories in healing our fractured relationship with the natural world. Porselvi's work ultimately challenges the Anthropocene's exploitative paradigms, urging readers to turn to the wisdom of ancient narratives as we strive for ecological balance. For scholars and practitioners alike, this book is a call to embrace storytelling as a vital tool in fostering a sustainable future.

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