

## **Reclaiming Immanent Singularities: An Ecosophical Reading of A. K. Ramanujan's 'The Striders'**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The concise poetic expression of the poem, 'The Striders' by A. K. Ramanujan, persists through its imagist-minimalist form, to observe our much ignored natural habitat. The obscure figure of an insect, a water-strider, is depicted to have an existential self which is manifested by its conscious choice to be an indispensable part of nature. By applying Félix Guattari's idea of 'ecosophy' and deriving from it 'an ecosophical reading practice', Ramanujan's poem reveals the crucial interdependence between human and the natural world, and presents the correlation between social, mental, and environmental ecologies at work. In this way, the crisis of a generalized passivity could be traced on the part of the masses which are insensitive to constant flux of nature and who represent increasing homogenization of our thinking minds. This paper attempts to demonstrate that the two stanza units of the text, when read ecosophically, signifying the 'essence' of the strider's conduct, allow us to substantiate potential immanent singularities on the individual and collective levels.

**Key words:** ecosophy, singularities, heterogeneity, environment, essence

*We must ward off, by every means possible the entropic rise of a dominant singularity.*

– Félix Guattari<sup>1</sup>

The poem, 'The Striders' by Attipate Krishnaswami Ramanujan unfolds as a literary prospect to enhance the consciousness of the generations of readers who find themselves struggling to come to terms with the man-made atrocities on the natural fabric of our planet. The tight structure and conciseness of expression, the economical use of words, in an ecologically loose world, rather forces the eye of the beholder to 'see' beyond the four walls of a cityscape.

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<sup>1</sup> Félix Guattari, The Three Ecologies (Athlone Press, 2000) (68).

At one level, the poet attempts upfront to raise the awareness about ecological life, focusing in particular on a water bug which one would ignore from one's attention towards daily life. The choice of the subject in the poem especially serves a dual purpose. First, it brings to the center the much ignored natural habitat, specifically the miniature-form macro natural world. An inconspicuous insect such as the 'strider' comes to serve that end. Second, the behavioural patterns of the insect manifest philosophical underpinnings of existential proportions for the human observer as the conceptual constructs of the text are dealt with later. In an aesthetic turn of events, the human subject who has chosen to depart from the dreary 'dream' of the metropolitan existence and comes in first contact with an obscure but essential form of the natural habitat.

In this paper, through an ecological reading of the poem, it is argued that Ramanujan's poetic discourse allows a textual analysis from the point of view of ecology and the generation of philosophical meanings around the literary text. Since there is a strong reference to the choice and a singular-subjective action of the strider as an act of existential import, the ecological treatment the text apparently purports, has the potential of its translating rather into an 'ecosophical' discourse proclaiming a sort of heterogeneity present in terms of what the French philosopher, Félix Guattari calls as three ecologies<sup>2</sup>. Also, by doing an ecosophical reading of 'The Striders', the readers are enabled to participate in a shift from an anthropocentric approach wherein the human is in the centre, to an ecosophical awareness of the multiple interrelations, complexities and interdependences of the human and natural world. In the light of these early impressions, it could be argued, drawing on the notion of an 'ecosophical reading practice' of the text, that Guattari works while it deals with issues such as environmental degeneration and regeneration, could be appropriated and applied to reading practices of texts like poetry, especially with a narratorial element present. It could initiate, apart from broadening semantic horizons, ecologically-oriented signification.

As the point of departure, it could be asked how in the socio-cultural context, ecocritical thought is taking roots in diverse modern discourse. It would be pertinent to contextualize the term, 'ecosophy' here first. Many of the writings on ecology by Guattari

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<sup>2</sup> In his essay, 'Remaking Social Practices', Guattari proposes the idea of 'ecosophy' as a 'remedy' to the late 20<sup>th</sup> c. modern condition, which requires "a new conjunction of environmental ecology, social ecology and mental ecology" (266).

reveal the presence of the notion of ‘ecosophy’, among other thinkers<sup>3</sup>. According to his theory, “economic regimes have invaded the environment and the human psyche” (Conley 122). In addition to describing the ways in which economic regimes impede human ability to attend to social and environmental challenges, Guattari’s ecosophy also discusses how to negotiate these impediments so that humanity is in a position where it can deal with those challenges. In ‘The Three Ecologies’, Guattari maintains that our culture is adversely affected by a ‘post-industrial capitalism’, which he terms as ‘Integrated World Capitalism’<sup>4</sup> (31).

After about half a century after its publication, Ramanujan’s poem could be re-read ecosophically for it relates to the relevance of the level of climate ignorance we face at present. It compels to search and observe the largely ignored life forms, the flora and fauna and invigorate a sensitivity towards the ‘bugs’ of our ecosystem, both literally and figuratively. The attempt to read the poem with respect to the contextual gravity of Guattari’s ecosophical approach allows visualizing the interrelations of the otherwise binarily opposed or even polarized entities of our natural and cultural world.

The values perpetuated by ‘integrated world capitalism’ encourage the masses toward a pacification of the forms of resistance and a passivity rendering them unwilling to engage with their immediate or distant surroundings sociologically or psychologically let alone creatively. The television screen of yesterday is being gradually replaced by smart screens which are being possessed by users whose accountability towards their social and democratic responsibilities is getting increasingly problematic. What results from the passivity derived from a mass media culture, without encouraging opinion and scrutiny, is leading to an obliteration of alternative thinking or critical engagement with our surroundings.

Ramanujan’s poem from the onset is an outcry to ‘attend’ to Nature by pausing the incessant activity borne out of a passive modern life: “Put away, put away this dream”. It is the human passivity which wouldn’t let him break away from the so-called ‘dream’ of the mechanically efficient culture that is underlined at the beginning of the text, before the other pressing issues emerge.

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<sup>3</sup> Norwegian philosopher, Arne Næss employed the term ‘ecosophy’ in 1973 (Drengson 110-11). Whereas Næss’s movement of ‘deep ecology’ emphasizes a biocentric approach, Guattari’s ecosophy adopts a model of heterogeneity by involving the socio-cultural, economic and human dimensions.

<sup>4</sup> As argued in the work, mass-media, television are depicted as the challenge for independent enquiry by human agencies in the context of a globalized world capitalism. Guattari’s premise of the book is based upon a larger threat he believes there is to the tripartite paradigm of the individual, social and environmental ecologies.

Guattari's ecosophy could be understood as apprehending chiefly a cultural source of environmental problems, as well as offering a remedy to them. It purports an approach that envisages a critical engagement with a crumbling ecological health, an engagement with our surroundings and, for once, displaces the discourse of a post-industrial obligation, thus fostering an aesthetico-ethical point of view rather than exclusively economical one. Hence, putting "away this dream" is rendered necessary to act on something different than one's status quo deems as well as in order to cultivate a system of heterogeneity. For Ramanujan, the 'dream' is an ironical modern promise of attainment being sold as a form of liberation from one's daily woes. Instead, the 'dream' covers the eyes like an opiate that induces a passivity which prevents one to 'see' and reduces oneself to an uninvolved witness to the homogenization of our thinking minds. This paper attempts to contextualize the poetic rendition by Ramanujan about an issue of modern human condition which emphasizes a brazen overlooking of our environment.

### **Theorising Ecosophy**

The premise of 'The Three Ecologies' lays stress on the word, 'eco', which is 'oikos' in Greek, meaning home, habitat or environment (Merriam-Webster). According to Guattari, we are nearing the risk of an 'ecocide' (Pindar and Sutton 3). But the ecology that concerns us all is effected by a world that is increasingly relying on mass media for overall movement of life. We find a certain similarity in the patterns of the way we think, like the way everyone else thinks; taking us towards a strong propensity of passivity not to think on our own.

In 'The Three Ecologies', Guattari focuses on the idea of a 'singular event' in one's life that has a catalyzing power to turn oneself into a new direction. Human endeavour has produced significant results by taking advantage of the singular moments when they reckon one's attention (Pindar and Sutton 10). The concept of 'praxis', which in Greek emphasized on 'doing', suggests action rather than philosophical speculation; while for Guattari it means 'effective practices of experimentation' (*The Three Ecosophies* 34). The ecosophical example indicates the lines of reconstruction of human praxis in the most varied domains. Interestingly, as Guattari stresses the role of poets and artists in providing deep insights into the human condition, and the process termed as 'aesthetico-existential', the 'catalyzing

power<sup>5</sup> that comes with art initiates us into meaningful conscious doing: ‘And search for certain ... water bugs’. The poetic device of repetition employed in the first line of the text initiates the subject into an effective doing; putting a thought ‘away’ coincides with searching or seeing and finding the creature.

The model of ecosophy envisions our being as a tripartite entity – pertaining to ‘an individual and / or collective resingularization’ (Guattari, *The Three Ecosophies*<sup>34</sup>) that could be understood as an interconnected phenomenon constituted of ‘social ecosophy’, ‘mental ecosophy’ and ‘environmental ecosophy’<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the concept of ‘ecosophy’ specifically champions ‘ethics and aesthetics’, and cultivates a heterogenous interaction by promoting “a new conjunction of environmental ecology, social ecology and mental ecology” (Guattari, *Remaking Social Practices* 266). Subsequently, the ‘remedy’ to the problematics of global environmental crisis involves “changes in mental ecology that include processes of subjectification and in social ecology that bring forth the creative power of the social are the prerequisites to improving environmental ecology” (Conley 121).

A. K. Ramanujan, as an artist, gives poetic expression to the (coming together) of these ecosophies through the utterance of the fascinating creature, a water-strider, in a quaint relation with and under an astute observation of the speaker, the existential being who is urged to carry out the necessary doing. Taken as it is to an uninhabited natural space in order to manifest the observing eye which registers the being of the ‘striders’, the poet deems the cultivation of what Guattari calls a ‘dissensus’, and within the seeking-searching vision of the human subject, a “radically dissensual approach ... the collective production of the unpredictable ‘dissident subjectivities’ rather than a mass movement of like-minded people” (Pindar and Sutton 14).

In the two stanzas that constitute the textual construct, Ramanujan, instead of building on homogenized ‘grand narratives’ of capitalist collective subjectivity, employs a rather ethical and aesthetic approach to visualize the nature-culture dichotomy. The putting away of the ‘dream’ and imbibing the ‘search’ for the otherwise marginalized existence of creatures

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<sup>5</sup> Read the Introduction to *The Three Ecologies* by Pindar and Sutton pp. (1-20), where they reiterate Guattari’s insistence on aesthetic paradigms rather than purely scientific that helps to redefine the role of poets and artists in tapping into the existential nature of life.

<sup>6</sup>Guattari states that whereas social ecosophy consists in developing the ways in which we live in an urban setting, mental ecosophy with respect to the functions of an artist shall assist us in resisting the modes of standardization and the ‘manipulation of opinion’, and the environmental ecosophy highlights the deteriorating human relations with ‘nature’ and a general passivity towards environmental pollution. For a more detailed understanding, read pp. (34-41).

of nature is the ethical stance that the poet opts for. These would be the first steps in claiming the singularization of human activity in relation to and around the ecology of the environment. Insufficient in itself, the ethical point of view is essentially manifested in juxtaposition with aesthetic manner of 'seeing' the surroundings. As depicted in the second stanza, the poetic yet palpable 'tiny strip of sky' enables to resingularize our subjectivity towards and provide the human-nature relationship a more nuanced context.

### **Ecosophical Reading of 'The Striders'**

#### **THE STRIDERS**

Put away, put away this dream.  
And search  
for certain thin-  
stemmed, bubble-eyed water bugs.  
See them perch  
on dry capillary legs  
weightless  
on the ripple skin  
of a stream.  
No, not only prophets  
walk on water. This bug sits  
on a landslide of lights  
and drowns eye-  
deep  
into its tiny strip  
of sky.

'The Striders' could be read as an ecosophical expression for the conjunction of the above mentioned three ecologies. It renders the three essential dimensions significant for each other's sustainable development. The central metaphor in the figure of a 'strider', a water-bug, an organism of nature, when given a poetical treatment, stands for human beings striving, striding towards their singularized individual and collective selves. Before we look

into this interrelationship, it is imperative to let the conceptual constructs emerge out of the text through its thematic juxtapositions.

The central stress Ramanujan puts on the tone with which the poem opens is the sense of adventure and wonder which overrules the passive attitude of infinitude the human subject has surrendered to in the face of actions determined or largely directed by the mass culture. To put the commercialized 'dream' of success away implies an effort to wonder, explore and seek knowledge other than what our social limits determine. The two stanzas pose thematic juxtapositions whose deliberate conflict allows us to extract the vicissitudes of the existential problematics of life and its ecosystems.

The figure of the strider, its emergence on the scene, and a keen observation of its actions by a human being, enables the reader to see the flux of life, the nature of constant change in Nature or, more importantly, an existence in perpetual motion. Ramanujan's image invokes ever so strongly one of the signifying premises of the philosophy of existentialism: "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 22). The two stanzaic thematic units represent a palpable, experiential, realistic, rational, even 'samsaric' existence followed by a more intuitive, mystical, abstract, symbolic, and 'nirvanic' essence respectively. The 'certainty' of the first stanza is contradicted by the uncertain mystery of the second, albeit it is finitude affected from the search for the specificity in life which lends singularization. In a similar way, the infinitude that is only extracted from the particular is what produces the essential resingularization of being. Together, for therein lies a resolute interdependence of the two on each other, the ecologies give rise to the duality of life; in the unity of the sign and signification emanating from the simple yet striking figure of the strider.

The thematic contrast between the two stanzas built by the various juxtapositions permits to highlight the characteristics marked by the concrete, scientific, rational (Stanza 1) against the mystical, enigmatic and abstract (Stanza 2). Considered together, it depicts the duality of human beings, which is manifested by the striders. Hence, through a particular imagist perspective of the insect: 'thin-stemmed, bubble-eyed water bugs' with its 'dry capillary legs', and 'weightless', Ramanujan deliberately fuses it with a more symbolist view of an abstract presence, albeit a definite being, '(t)his bug sits' upon a singular surface of one's own existential choice, the 'landslide of lights'. From a particular image (of an insect) the speaker portrays a transcendental meaning. The 'essence' extracted in stanza 2 attempts to

raise the level of consciousness of one's existential self, while the self is deliberately equated with the figure of 'strider'.

Moreover, other than the semantic interplay of the conceptual units, the syntactical constructs of the text as well reveal the concentration on the singularization of human action due to a catalytic experience of the observation-meditation on an insect. The grammatical units as such exhibit how the mental, social and environmental ecologies depend upon and sustain from each other. The verb markers for instance, as positioned in the text, reveal the significance of critical engagement with one's natural surroundings in order for the cultural evolution to develop. 'Put away', 'search', 'see', 'perch', 'sit', 'walk', and finally 'drowns' indicate a resolute sense of sensitization on the part of the cultural being to connect with our own life source.<sup>7</sup> The opening marker 'put away' is juxtaposed with the essentially different action, 'drowns' in a manner that the poet is able to underline the human capacity to transform passive speculation into an active engagement.

Similarly, where the noun markers are concerned, the reader may observe them presented in two categories. It is from the world of the empirical reality and scientific observation that the first set of nouns is depicted ('capillary legs', 'water-bugs' with their 'bubble eyes', the bugs that are 'weightless'); whereas, the second group of signifiers deal with the domain of intuition and wonder ('prophets', 'landslide of lights', 'tiny strip of sky', and the titular character, the 'striders'). However, Ramanujan's poem, instead of projecting two different and unbridgerable entities, lays the emphasis on the conjunction or interaction between the two elements. One by one, the empirical fuses with the theoretical, the realist with the magical and imaginary; both dimensions eventually merging into an essential duality of essence, the generated and the degenerated giving way to a regenerated ecology. The 'ripple skin of a stream' (Stanza 1) coalesces with the 'tiny strip of sky' (Stanza 2). The passive 'dream' existence transforms into a proactive 'striding' as the life form of an insect initiates into an insightful process of drowning 'eye-deep' into another dimension, that is, a higher vision of imagination. At this juncture, as the strider chooses to situate itself in an attempt to endeavour into the realm of experience, the strider is able to evidence the wisdom of the prophets, which is the generation of the immanent 'essence'.

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<sup>7</sup> Ramanujan's choice of verbs is contextualized by the gradual movement of human cognitive mind towards the process of experience by concrete doing, something essential to connect with overlooked the nature. Where on the one hand, putting 'away' one's fancies would help disengage from the engulfing passivity of mass-media, it would, on the other hand, render engagement with the myriad forms of life.

Guattari's three ecologies could be understood to be at play simultaneously once the two stanza units are considered in tandem. The speaker of the poem, or the observer represents the 'social ecology', by being someone who is turning away from a social space but, at the same time, stepping into the space of an 'environment ecology' and by doing so, proposing that anyone is capable of a singularized subjectivity, the 'miracle' the poet refers to, and allows for a more socially and environmentally equal and open way of living where the human individual is able to connect with the natural habitat. Conversely, the unconditional effort by the strider to grow and evolve (by its searching and seeking) affirms the inter-connectedness of various life forms. In the strider's action of sitting over the fresh waters of the stream manifests the synthesization of the four fundamental elements of matter. Water ('ripple skin of a stream'), fire and earth ('landslide of lights') and air ('tiny strip of sky') are all fused together by the magical flight and an unaffected disembarkation of 'this bug' that reclaims its immanent singularity.

However, the social and environmental ecologies integrate with each other only when the mental ecology of the singularized being gets modified in accordance with the social and environmental contexts and concerns. We could recognize the possibility and capacity for the water strider to 'walk on water' in the unique way that only it could, asserting a singularized subjectivity. We also register the nature of Guattari's idea of an ecosophy that reveals a tripartiteconceptual construct that shows profound interdependence of the social, mental and environmental ecologies on each other. As a direct consequence of these observations – from questioning the passive 'dream' to encompassing the proactive 'drown(ing)' into the 'strip of sky' – the (modern) human condition entails heterogenous interdependent ecologies which continually mediate and negotiate with each other. Guattari sees this interaction in terms of essential modification in mentalities that are required in order to effect changes in the social and environmental ecologies (*Remaking Social Practice* 264).

'The Striders' could be read in multiple ways. The strand of eco-consciousness present in the poem, however, determines the possibility of the chief argument of this paper. An ecosophical reading of Ramanujan's text lets the reader or an eco-activist understand the poet's vision and Guattari's fundamental argument which is that existing within a system of capitalist predisposition, which tends to induce a mass-passivity towards an interaction of the indispensable ecologies, the learners, the individual beings, the 'striders' are endangered by a

detrimental ‘unidimensionalizing’ value system<sup>8</sup>. What would significantly concur with Ramanujan’s thematics of the ecocritical poem about the inherent worth of every organism, big or small, Guattari’s ecosophical process strides home his idea of ‘heterogenesis’, as a process of ‘continuous singularization’, whose nature is immanent towards change (*The Three Ecologies* 90) It also reflects in the notion of ‘fluidarity’, that is a ‘fluid solidarity’ (Pindar and Sutton 15) according to which the ‘strider’ with its heterogeneously singularized subjectivity could co-exist with the collective unified social ecology.

In conclusion, it shall be crucial to reiterate Guattari’s recognition that the strength of the poet’s expression lies in the poetic form which, through the ‘ambiguity of the poetic text’, allows unique qualities to substantiate words into an ‘existential catalytic ... focal point of subjectification’ (*The Three Ecologies*44). The metaphorical significance inscribed to Ramanujan’s words and the grammatical constructs enable the reader to elicit and evoke his/her singular attention to hear, to participate and turn into co-creators of the text’s multiple conceptual constructs. The poetic insistence that ‘(t)his bug sits on a landslide of lights’ furthers our interest and curiosity to extract out of the tedious everyday function of a being, the nature of an extraordinary experience borne out of the wonder in the diversity and singularization of every being that is appropriately manifested in the ‘bubble eyed water bug’.

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<sup>8</sup> In ‘The Three Ecologies’, Guattari argues that the Integrated World Capitalism (INC) has produced or rather resulted in dividing the world into what he calls, ‘subjective poles’ like East-West, North-South, etc. (30). Eventually, the ‘mental ecosophy’ which needs to remain free from any adverse manipulation of opinion, and which must reflect ‘discourse or any discursive chain’, is put in danger of a ‘non-discursivity’ which handicaps the all-important ‘play of distinctive oppositions’ within an independent expression (38).

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