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MEDIUM AND ECOLOGY: ADAPTATION, GENDER, AND ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION IN A *FLOWERING TREE*

Monami Mukherjee

Assistant Professor, Hingalganj Mahavidyalaya, Hingalganj, Basirhat, West Bengal, India

Abstract

This article examines the changing ecological imagination of A Flowering Tree as it moves from a South Indian folk narrative, retold by A. K. Ramanujan, to its film and operatic adaptation by John Adams. In Ramanujan's narrative, the relation between the female body and the tree is marked by restraint, silence, and everyday survival. This reflects a folk-ecological understanding in which human and vegetal life exist as part of a continuum. Girish Karnad's film Cheluvu presents these relations visually, exposing the protagonist's bodily transformation and situating the environment as a framed, ethically charged space, where intimacy and vulnerability are made perceptible through camera gaze, lighting, and spatial composition. The operatic adaptation, in contrast, reconfigures ecological intimacy through sound, voice, and embodied performance, producing relational experience through gesture, music, and staging rather than visual realism. By reading prose, film, and opera together, the article argues that medium decisively shapes how ecological vulnerability, gendered labour, and human–nonhuman relationality are perceived and felt. This comparative analysis highlights that ecological relations are not fixed within a story but are continually reshaped through processes of cultural and formal translation.

Keywords

Ecocriticism, Folk Narrative, Adaptation Across Media, Gender And Ecology, Ecofeminism, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Folk narratives often carry within them a dense network of ecological knowledge, not presented as theory but embedded in habit, rituals, and everyday practice. These stories do not usually separate the human from the non-human world; instead, they present nature as a lived presence that structures social relations, labour, and moral order. *A Flowering Tree*, as retold by A. K. Ramanujan from a South Indian folk tradition, articulates this narrative mode, where the relation between woman and tree is neither symbolic abstraction nor allegorical excess, but part of a local understanding of symbiotic survival. The story's refusal to explain motives or assign moral judgment, allows ecological relations to appear naturalised rather than foregrounded, sustained through routine and ritual rather than spectacle.

Ramanujan's retelling is marked by restraint, both linguistic and ethical. The narrative does not interpret the transformation of the female body into a tree, nor does it elevate the episode into mythic transcendence. Instead, the story remains grounded in domestic space and social consequence, where the act of becoming a tree is closely tied to labour, fertility, and the management of resources. Such narrative containment is central to the ecological logic of the text. The environment is not staged as landscape, nor is it isolated as a site of wonder. It functions as part of everyday life, governed by silence and discretion, and it is this understated treatment of nature that invites an ecocritical reading attentive to form as much as to content.



The afterlife of *A Flowering Tree* across media, however, raises questions about how such ecological relations are preserved or disrupted when the story moves beyond narrative prose. Girish Karnad's film *Cheluvi* (1992), based on the same folk tale, provides a useful point of departure for examining this shift. Unlike the written text, the film necessarily renders visible what is left implied in the narrative. "Undoubtedly the novel has means of its own — language not the image is its material, its intimate effect on the isolated reader is not the same as that of a film on the crowd in a darkened cinema — but precisely for these reasons the differences in aesthetic structure make the search for equivalents an even more delicate matter, and thus they require all the more power of invention and imagination from the film-maker who is truly attempting a resemblance." (Bazin, 67). Landscape, season, and bodily transformation are placed before the viewer, mediated through the camera's gaze. The forest is no longer an assumed presence but a framed environment; the act of becoming a tree is no longer concealed but observed. This movement from narrative restraint to visual exposure alters the ethical relation between body and environment, raising questions about vulnerability, control, and spectatorship.

Alongside the film, the operatic adaptation of *A Flowering Tree* by John Adams offers a further point of comparison. Opera introduces yet another mode of ecological expression, relying on sound, voice, and performance to construct relations between the human and the non-human. While the narrative text depends on silence and the film on visual realism, the operatic form amplifies emotion and presence through music and staging.

By reading Ramanujan's text alongside *Cheluvi*, and by briefly engaging with the operatic adaptation, the article seeks to demonstrate that ecology in this context is relational, contingent, and mediated by form. The focus, therefore, is not on nature as an abstract category but on how relations between body, environment, and community are negotiated through narrative, cinematic, and performative structures (Buell, 7).

Methodology:

The approach adopted in this article is comparative and form-sensitive rather than theory-driven. It brings together close reading of Ramanujan's prose retelling, scene-based analysis of Girish Karnad's *Cheluvi*, and a selective engagement with the operatic adaptation to examine how ecological relations are shaped by different representational modes across cultures and languages. Instead of applying an external ecocritical model uniformly across texts, the analysis proceeds inductively, attending to narrative restraint, visual framing, and performative excess as formal conditions that mediate the relation between human and non-human life. This method allows for an examination of ecology as a relational practice produced through medium, visibility, and sensory emphasis, while remaining attentive to the cultural and gendered contexts in which these forms operate.

Folk Ecology and Narrative Restraint in Ramanujan's *A Flowering Tree*:

In A. K. Ramanujan's retelling of *A Flowering Tree*, ecological relations are seamlessly embedded within the routines of everyday life rather than presented as symbolic or allegorical abstractions (Ramanujan, 42). The tree, along with the act of transformation, is interwoven with the practical rhythms of life, suggesting an ecological worldview in which human and nonhuman worlds are continuous and interdependent. Unlike literary narratives that foreground nature as a site of symbolic excess or aesthetic wonder, Ramanujan emphasizes ordinary, even banal, aspects of the environment: the management of household resources, the maintenance of gardens, and the care of familial obligations (Merchant, 270). Nature is present, but not ornamental; it shapes action, provides sustenance, and mediates social relations.



This grounded approach is reinforced through narrative restraint. Ramanujan's style—marked by brevity, quietness, and selective description—resists elaboration or moralization. He does not dwell on the miraculous qualities of the tree or the female protagonist's transformation; the story offers no explicit commentary or interpretation. Knowledge of transforming from human to tree is not put under rational scrutiny. The connection between women and nature, especially in Indian context, is always considered as intimate and instinctive:

Ecological ways of knowing nature are necessarily participatory. Nature herself is the experiment and women, as sylviculturalists, agriculturists and water resource managers, the traditional natural scientists. Their knowledge is ecological and plural, reflecting both the diversity of natural ecosystems and the diversity in cultures that nature-based living gives rise to (Shiva, 40).

Ecological relations are conveyed indirectly, through silence, omission, and suggestion. Such restraint functions ethically as much as aesthetically: it protects the intimacy of the narrative world, allowing readers to perceive human and vegetal lives in proximity without imposing external judgment. The story's ethical economy reflects a form of ecological ethics in which secrecy, discretion, and measured speech are central. The woman's transformation to a tree is observed only after she attains puberty. However, this fact is mentioned only in passing, without any elaborate commentary at all. The young woman's transformations must be kept hidden; her labour in the forest, her cultivation of the tree, and her interactions with family members are private acts. Concealment thus operates as an ethical mode of engaging with both human and nonhuman life, preserving balance, reducing vulnerability, and respecting boundaries between self and environment. Interestingly, the woman is referred to as the daughter, wife, sister-in-law and even "the thing", but the readers never get to know her name. The namelessness provides the central character with a universality that reinforces her kinship with nature.

The connection between the female body and vegetal life constitutes another site of ecological intimacy. The transformation of the woman into a flowering tree is depicted not as a violent rupture but as a seamless continuity between human and plant forms:

The younger sister sat down and thought of the Lord. The older one poured water from the first pitcher all over her sister. At once, her sister changed into a great big tree that seemed to stretch from earth to heaven. The older sister plucked the flowers carefully, without hurting a stalk, or sprout, or leaf. After she had enough to fill a basket or two, she emptied the second pitcher of water over the tree—and the tree became a human being again, and the younger sister stood in its place. She shook the water from her hair and stood up. They both gathered the flowers in baskets and brought them home. The flowers had a wonderful fragrance. They wove them into garlands (Ramanujan, 45).

The woman's body is both the source of the tree's beauty and the instrument of its labour; it embodies the generative and regenerative capacities of nature itself. This continuity challenges dualistic distinctions that separate humanity from the natural world: the female body is intertwined with the tree, suggesting a worldview in which human and nonhuman life co-exists within cycles of care, growth, and replenishment. Gendered labour is central to this ecology: the woman's work—both in domestic and natural spheres—is intimately linked to environmental flourishing, creating a reciprocal relationship in which care and survival are mutually constitutive. The story,



therefore, presents ecological relations not as abstract ideals but as concrete practices embedded in bodily experience.

Oral storytelling practices further reinforce this ecological sensibility. Ramanujan's retelling preserves the rhythms, patterns, and implicatures of the folk narrative, retaining its episodic qualities. Oral traditions often carry embedded knowledge about local environments, encoding information about seasonal cycles, plant uses, resource management, and spatial awareness in ways that are not overtly didactic. In *A Flowering Tree*, the brevity of description and reliance on suggestion mirror these oral strategies, allowing readers to apprehend environmental knowledge implicitly. The story's structure—the alternation of dialogue, concise narrative, and dramatic moments—reflects how folk communities communicate ecological understanding through story, gesture, and repetition rather than through explicit exposition. By maintaining these oral qualities, Ramanujan aligns his prose with local ecological epistemologies, privileging relational knowledge over analytical abstraction.

In fact, the folk ecology of *A Flowering Tree* is inseparable from the narrative's formal qualities. By embedding ecological understanding in everyday practice, bodily transformation, and oral storytelling, Ramanujan sustains a close, relational sense of nature that is both culturally specific and ethically informed. Narrative form becomes a vehicle for ecological engagement: by keeping certain elements hidden and others understated, the text preserves the subtle intimacy of human and nonhuman interaction, demonstrating that ecological closeness can be maintained not through spectacle but through subtle narrative economy.

Visual Ecology and the Camera Gaze in *Cheluvi*:

Girish Karnad's film *Cheluvi* (1992) reconfigures the ecological relations presented in Ramanujan's narrative, producing intimacy through visual mediation rather than narrative suggestion. Unlike prose, which relies on discretion, film renders both the environment and the protagonist's transformation visible, producing an ecology structured by observation and framing. The movement from prose to cinema is not merely formal but ethical, altering how human–nonhuman relations are perceived, experienced, and attended to.

In *Cheluvi*, landscape functions as both lived and interpreted space. The camera frequently lingers on forested terrain, highlighting the interplay of light filtering through leaves, seasonal variation, and the textures of earth and foliage. One notable scene shows the young woman collecting water from a stream at dawn; the camera's low angle captures her reflection in the moving water, creating a visual dialogue between her body and the surrounding environment. This subtle framing emphasizes continuity and relationality, showing that human action and ecological presence are inseparable. What is more interesting is that the first transformation is not even shown on camera. The sisters are shown to carry a great deal of flowers which indirectly imply that the transformation had been successful. In another sequence, she moves through flowering groves as petals drift around her; the slow tracking shots connect her bodily movement with natural rhythms, making the landscape appear both intimate and responsive.

Cinematic realism reshapes ethical engagement. By exposing the protagonist's transformation, the film foregrounds vulnerability and bodily presence in ways that prose leaves implied. For instance, when her arms begin to sprout flowers, the camera alternates between wide shots of the surrounding forest and close-ups of her face and hands, emphasizing both the scale of the transformation and its intimate, human dimensions. The visual juxtaposition creates tension between human fragility and the life force of nature, allowing the audience to perceive ecological relations as active and ethically charged.

Temporal and seasonal variation is also highlighted in the film. Rain, sunlight, and wind are not mere backdrops but part of the narrative rhythm, punctuating moments of labour,



transformation, and reflection. The forest is alive with sound and movement: leaves tremble, branches sway, and water ripples, creating a sensory ecology that complements the protagonist's bodily engagement. Through these techniques, the audience experiences the passage of time and the cyclical rhythms of the environment, echoing the subtle ecological awareness embedded in the folk narrative.

Gendered vulnerability is central to the film's ecological dynamics. Where Ramanujan's narrative conceals the female protagonist's transformations, the camera makes them visible, creating an ethical encounter for viewers who witness her exposure. In scenes where she cultivates or nurtures the tree, the camera highlights the labour involved, emphasizing the intimate link between human effort and ecological flourishing. Her body becomes both medium and message: the flowering arms, the careful tending of plants, and the interactions with family members show the continuity between human life, labour, and ecological cycles.

Finally, *Cheluvi* demonstrates that visibility can enhance relationality without reducing intimacy. Close-ups of hands touching soil, water, and leaves, or of her expressions of concentration and care, invite viewers to participate imaginatively in her ecological world. The framing, editing, and spatial composition work together to produce a cinematic ecology in which ethical attention, human–nonhuman connection, and environmental care are perceptible, even when mediated by the camera. In this way, film translates the hidden relationality of the folk narrative into a visually perceivable, ethically engaging, and affectively rich ecological experience.

Performance, Sound, and Ecological Spectacle: A Brief Note on the Opera:

The operatic adaptation of *A Flowering Tree* foregrounds performative, multisensory ecological engagement. Unlike prose or film, opera emphasizes sound, voice, and embodied performance, producing intimacy through enactment rather than narrative or visual framing. The audience of opera is different from readers of text as they are subject to two types of experience: one as recipient of a story, and the other as recipient of sensation of sound. A song offers “a direct aural [...] performance experienced in real time” and also, though far more briefly than a novel or short story, the capacity “to describe, explain, summarize, and expand” (Hutcheon, 13).

Sound functions as a central medium for ecological knowledge. Musical motifs, vocal inflection, and orchestral textures convey seasonal cycles, forest life, and the transformation of the protagonist, substituting for the silence central to Ramanujan's narrative. For example, during the scene where the young woman transforms into a flowering tree, the soprano's elongated notes mirror the slow unfolding of the tree's blossoms, while the orchestra's gentle strings imitate the rustling of leaves and the subtle movement of branches. Through this auditory layering, the audience perceives the natural rhythms and processes of growth, rather than being shown the transformation visually. The use of voice and music thus reproduces the temporal unfolding of ecological processes, preserving a sense of relational intimacy even as the story becomes performative.

Staging and movement further amplify ecological relations. The opera frequently positions the performer at the center of a sparse, symbolic forest set, allowing her gestures to indicate interaction with the environment. When she bends to water an imagined sapling or raises her arms as branches stretch toward the sky, these choreographed motions communicate the entwined human–tree relationship in a physical, embodied manner. Lighting enhances this effect: warm, diffused lighting signals daytime labour in the forest, while cooler, dimmer lights indicate private, intimate moments of transformation. By combining movement and lighting, the opera transforms ecological relations into a visible and shared experience, dramatizing the continuity between human and nonhuman life.



Opera also reshapes gendered and ethical dynamics. In the narrative, the protagonist's transformations are private, requiring secrecy to preserve balance between human and nonhuman life; in the operatic form, these transformations are performed for an audience. For instance, in the climactic scene where the young woman reveals her blossoming form, the audience witnesses both her vulnerability and her beauty simultaneously. The staging conveys that ecological engagement is not only about what is observable but can also be experienced communally, eliciting ethical attention and affective response from viewers. The audience's awareness of her bodily exposure heightens modes of engagement: they are implicated in the ethical dimension of her transformation, much as the forest itself is implicated in the unfolding of events.

Comparisons with film illuminate further distinctions. Whereas *Cheluvi* makes the tree visible through camera framing and editing, the opera emphasizes temporal and embodied continuity through performance. The same scene that in *Cheluvi* relies on visual cues—close-ups of the flowering limbs, slow pans over the landscape—is in opera expressed through the performer's sustained posture, vocal timbre, and interaction with minimal props. In this sense, the opera creates ecological presence without relying on literal representation: the audience perceives the tree and its life cycles through human embodiment and musical resonance, rather than visual realism.

Finally, the opera demonstrates that ecological relations can be experienced collectively. While prose offers private intimacy and film mediates it visually, opera produces relationality in the shared temporal and auditory experience of performance. The cyclical return of musical themes mirrors the rhythms of planting, blossoming, and nurturing, and the ensemble voices during the final chorus evoke a communal sense of ecological interdependence. The integration of voice, music, and gesture allows spectators to feel environmental cycles and ethical relationality, showing that human–nonhuman connections can be enacted and perceived through affective, sensory modes rather than textual description alone.

It is therefore interesting to note that opera extends ecological engagement by transforming narrative intimacy into performative, multisensory experience. Through music, movement, and stagecraft, it preserves relational closeness and vulnerability while offering a mode of ecological perception distinct from both prose and cinema. Where Ramanujan relies on concealment and *Cheluvi* on visual mediation, the opera enacts human–nonhuman relationality, demonstrating the flexibility of folk ecology across media.

Comparative Reflections: Medium, Form, and Ecological Perception:

The movement of *A Flowering Tree* across prose, film, and opera demonstrates how medium shapes ecological perception and ethical engagement. Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2nd ed., Routledge, 2013) is the definitive book on how adaptations across media—including opera from novels—fundamentally transform stories through changes in form, audience engagement, and cultural context. Hutcheon analyzes opera as a prime example of intermedial adaptation, showing how novels' interiority and narrative depth become operatic spectacle, emotion, and musical temporality. She speaks about “transcoding”, “a process of creation” and “process of reception” in her discussion on definition and process of adaptation (Hutcheon 8,9). In Ramanujan's prose, ecological intimacy is maintained through narrative restraint, secrecy, and suggestion, allowing the reader to inhabit the relational space between human and vegetal life. In contrast, *Cheluvi* translates these relations into the visible realm, where camera framing, lighting, and movement reveal both the protagonist's bodily transformation and the responsive environment, producing a mediated yet ethically engaged viewing experience. The operatic adaptation emphasizes performative and auditory presence, using voice, gesture, and music to construct ecological relations that are temporal, embodied, and communal rather than visually



literal. One may even feel that the opera is closer in essence to the original tale that had transmitted through oral narratives as performance and not as written word.

Across all three media, the ecological imagination is inseparable from the gendered dimensions of labour and transformation. In the narrative, the female protagonist's work—her cultivation of the tree, care for household and forest—is embedded within cycles of care and secrecy, rendering her labor both ecological and ethical. In the film, her labour is made visible and framed, exposing vulnerability and relationality simultaneously. In the opera, her actions are performed for an audience, transforming private ethical labour into a shared affective experience. Each medium emphasizes different aspects of ecological knowledge: prose privileges discretion and subtlety, film foregrounds visual and spatial intimacy, and opera enacts sensory and temporal continuity.

These differences suggest that ecological relations are not fixed, but contingent upon the modes of representation. The same story produces varying forms of ethical and affective engagement depending on whether it is read, viewed, or seen as live performance. Prose preserves relational intimacy through concealment and suggestion; film invites observation through mediated visibility; and opera cultivates multisensory understanding through enactment and communal experience. The comparative reading highlights that ecological knowledge is performative and culturally situated: it emerges from the interaction between medium, perception, and ethical sensibility.

Conclusion:

The analysis of *A Flowering Tree* across prose, film, and opera demonstrates the transformative power of medium in shaping ecological imagination and ethical attention. Ramanujan's narrative constructs an intimate, ethically attentive ecology through restraint, silence, and embedded practice. Girish Karnad's *Cheluvu* translates this intimacy into visual and spatial experience, foregrounding bodily vulnerability, relationality, and ethical engagement through the camera gaze. The operatic adaptation, by contrast, amplifies sensory and temporal dimensions, enacting ecological relations through voice, gesture, and performance.

The study shows that ecological knowledge is not merely transmitted but continually reshaped as stories move across cultural and formal contexts. Concealment in narrative, visibility in cinema, and enactment in opera demonstrate the ethical and aesthetic multiplicity of ecological relations. Furthermore, the gendered labour and bodily transformation of the female protagonist remain central in each medium, highlighting the interplay between human vulnerability, care, and environmental interdependence.

By tracing these shifts, the article highlights the critical role of medium in mediating ecological understanding. Folk ecology, as presented in *A Flowering Tree*, is relational, embodied, and contingent: it exists not only in the story itself but in the ways it is narrated, performed, and visualized. Across narrative, film, and opera, the story invites reflection on how humans relate to the nonhuman world and to each other, emphasizing relational practice, ethical attention, and the role of medium in shaping perception. By situating folk narratives within a cross-media ecocritical framework, we can better understand how ecological knowledge is transmitted, transformed, and reimagined in contemporary cultural contexts, offering a model for reading other stories that move beyond the page into the lived, performed, and sensorially experienced world.

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