



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism***Ecological consciousness and ecosophical participation in Ki. Rajanarayanan's *Pinjugal***M.S. Siddharth Prabhu<sup>1</sup>, & D. Praveen Sam<sup>1</sup><sup>1</sup>Department of English, Sri Sivasubramaniya Nadar College of Engineering, Chennai, India\*Correspondence: [siddharthprabhu2350409@ssn.edu.in](mailto:siddharthprabhu2350409@ssn.edu.in)**ABSTRACT**

Ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary field, seeks to understand the intricate connections between humankind and the biosphere as represented in literature and other cultural artifacts. It ultimately calls for a shift from human-centric lifestyles toward ecological harmony. Rooted in textual analysis and theoretical synthesis, the present study draws on insights from ecocriticism and its allied fields – ecosophy and ecofeminism – to examine the ecological consciousness expressed in *Pinjugal* (1979), a Tamil children's novella by the acclaimed writer Ki. Rajanarayanan. The analysis interprets the value of nonhuman entities—particularly the rural landscape and its life-forms—that gradually guide the young protagonist Venkatesu (a dropout schoolboy) toward active ecological participation and ultimately towards eco-wisdom. The study also explores the eco-ethics held by the characters (though marked by inherent contradictions) that demonstrate their heightened awareness of the natural world. *Pinjugal* is thus posed as a testament to the potential of indigenous children's literature to instill eco-ethics and sustainable living.

**KEYWORDS:** children's literature, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, eco-literacy, ecosophy

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## 1. Introduction

Long-term modernist shifts in human beliefs and knowledge have demoted Nature to a mere source of raw materials and an “aesthetic commodity” (Ahamed, 2021). The ecological crises emerging from these worldviews call for epistemological renewal across all disciplines, including the humanities. Once confined to the natural sciences, the concept of ecology (“learning organisms in their habitats”) has evolved into an expansive theoretical paradigm due to its “proximity to the elements of the social sciences”, giving rise to domains such as ecofeminism and ecolinguistics (Ahamed, 2021).

Within literary studies, this paradigm has necessitated (re)reading literary works by foregrounding their representations of Nature and humanity’s place within it. The field of ‘ecocriticism’ emerged as an interdisciplinary response to this intellectual and ethical need. William Rueckert (1996) first defined ecocriticism as “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (p.107). The field has since evolved to encompass “a range of critical approaches” examining literary and cultural representations of human-nonhuman relations, predominantly from “the perspective of anxieties around humanity’s destructive impact on the biosphere” (Marland, 2013, p. 846). The approach reveals political and cultural impacts of humankind on the biosphere, and the enduring “contradiction, hostility, friendship, and harmony between nature and humans” (Ahamed, 2021).

Ecocritical readings of children’s literature are particularly significant in this context. They possess the potential to nurture environmental consciousness and shape “the next generation’s relationship with the natural world” (Ismail, 2024, p. 140). As Morpurgo (2018) remarks, the “best hope” for the survival of humanity and the planet depends on children’s responsibility to “confront evil” and to “restore and protect all that is good in the world” (p. xi).

The present paper explores this potential through *Pinjugal* (“Tenderlings”), a novella brought out in 1979 by the iconic Ki. Rajanarayanan (also known as ‘Ki.Ra’; 1923 – 2021). Rajanarayanan was a pioneer in “narrating the ethnography of Tamil literature” and in writing Nature with “elegance and literary quality, having children [as characters]” (Sivasithu). His iconic contribution – predominantly as a novelist and folklorist – earned him the position of Professor of Folklore at Pondicherry University.

The story narrates the life of a rural boy who transcends illness, personal loss, and self-imposed truancy to attain maturity through sustained contact with his natural surroundings, ultimately resuming school. Tamil critic K. Panchangam (2018) regards *Pinjugal* as an autobiographical fiction, noting that Ki. Ra. saw himself in the antics of his son ‘Prabhi’, and his own father Krishna Ramanujam in his (Ki. Ra.’s) failure to formally educate Prabhi. The present study moves beyond this interpretation and examines the story under an ecocritical lens, foregrounding the emergence of ecological consciousness and ecosophical participation. Specifically, by tracing Venkatesu’s formative journey through lived eco-experiences, the analysis aims to contribute to the evolving interdisciplinary dialogue between ethnic literature, children’s fiction, and the environmental humanities.

## 2. Literature Review

At the global level, Nature-oriented children’s literature initially functioned as a tool of moral instruction, using natural elements as metaphors of ethical ideals. This tendency is evident in folktales, classical works such as Aesop’s fables, and early modern religious-didactic works like John Bunyan’s *A Book for Boys and Girls* (1686). Gradually, however, children’s literature began to foreground the child’s aesthetic—rather than purely moral—engagement with the world. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) epitomises this shift by embracing curiosity, whimsicality, and imaginative navigation of environmental realms. In the Russian writer Yuri Nagibin’s story *Winter Oak* (1979), a schoolmistress accompanies a schoolboy to inform his habitual lateness to his mother. The snowy forest that they navigate manifests as a “different, enchanted realm of peace and quiet” (Nagibin, n.d.). The boy demonstrates an intimate knowledge of the landscape by drawing his teacher’s attention to elk behaviour, warm springs beneath snow, and the titular ‘winter-oak’ he had mentioned earlier in class. Confronted with this lived environmental knowledge, the schoolmistress recognises the superficiality of her formal pedagogy and realises that “the most wonderful thing about this wood wasn’t its winter oak, but this little man, this wonderful and enigmatic citizen of the future...” (Nagibin, n.d.).

With the advent of the environmental movement in the 1960s, children’s literature began to address ecological degradation and the need for human course-correction. The predominant themes were

“interdependence, resourcism, anthropomorphism, stewardship (caretaking), and harmony/balance” (Holton & Rogers, 2004, p.151).

Stories like Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax* (1971) distinctly emphasise the need to cease unsustainable human actions. Parallel to this trend, classic naturalist works began to be adapted for children, often through illustrated narratives. Notable examples include *Rachel Carson and Her Book That Changed the World* (2012) and *Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species* (2019).

A comparable trajectory can be traced within Indian literary traditions. The Panchatantra is a classic collection of didactic tales that often uses animal characters and imagery to impart social values. In modern Indian English writing, Ruskin Bond’s works frequently describe animals “interestingly, humourously, and amusingly” (Valliappan, 2020). Works like Bijal Vachharajani’s *A Cloud Called Bhura* (2019) feature child protagonists contributing to environmental activism.

Tamil children’s literature has its origins in rhymes celebrating animals, birds, and other natural entities. In recent decades, the domain has expanded through translation and original writing. As Prabhu (2025, pp. 59-60) observes, a wide range of contributors—including ecologists, wildlife photographers, activists, scientists, and marine biologists—now write directly for children. Forest-centric fictions, such as Ko. Ma. Kothandam’s *Kattukkulle Isaivizha* (2011), draw on firsthand experiences of the Western Ghats during the 1960s and 1970s. S. Ramakrishnan’s *Ulagin Migachiriyai Thavalai* (2016; the story of a frog fighting to protect a lake), Vishnupuram Saravanan’s *Otrai Siragu Oviya* (2019), and S. Balabharathi’s *Aamai Kaattiya Arputha Ulagam* (2020) are notable recent works that reflect the growing prominence of ecological themes.

The Tamil corpus of children’s eco-literature has also been notably enhanced by the influx of translations. Yuma Vasuki has translated about a hundred books, including *Aasavin Mannezhuthugal*, a book that navigates themes such as eco-crisis, unchecked growth, and social injustice. Eco-journals such as *Thulir* foster writers like Narayani Subramanian and Ganeshwar (Valliappan, 2020).

Valliappan (2020) advocates three ideals in Tamil eco-literature for children: scientificity, reflection of “a long tradition”, and facilitation of easy understanding. These ideals provide a useful basis for reading *Pinjugal* in relation to its negotiation of ecological knowledge shaped by the simplicity of lived rural experience.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in ecocriticism – a dynamic approach that examines the nature-literature relationship, with a view to elucidating the ill effects of human-centredness on the biosphere and enabling the liberation of nature, life-forms and humans alike (Ahamed, 2021).

Within this broad framework, the study is primarily informed by Ecosophy, coined by Arne Naess to denote “any articulated philosophy of life in harmony with ecocentric values” (cited in Drengson, 1997, p.2). Central to ecosophical thought is the idea of Self-realisation (with a capital “S”), understood as the “identification of finite part with the infinite whole” (Ramapriya, 2007, p.228). This strand of thought is particularly valuable for exploring children-centred narratives that evoke eco-consciousness through lived sensory experiences, rather than abstract moral instruction.

The study also draws selectively on ecofeminism as a complementary ethical lens. Ecofeminism observes fundamental interconnections between the “exploitation and degradation” of Nature and the “subordination and oppression” of women (Mellor, 1997, p.1). The concept emphasises women’s relationships, experiences, and views concerning the natural environment (Allison 2017), while also calling for an analysis that is “inclusive of the many related forms of domination” (Kalita, 2011, p.33). In this regard, it envisions the biosphere as a family-like “community of beings” (p.15). This scope extends naturally to children’s texts, which are, in the words of Dobrin and Kidd (2004), a “crucial place in which to detect and combat cultural hegemony” (p.9); accordingly, “any ecocritical look at children’s literature must include ecofeminist perspectives” (p.10).

Taken together, ecosophy and ecofeminism respectively offer a possible interaction between metaphysically inclined ecological consciousness and materially grounded ethical relations.

### 4. Methodology

Guided by the eco-perspectives discussed above, the study undertakes a close textual analysis of *Pinjugal*. This endeavour examines aspects underdiscussed in existing readings of the story, namely the narrative’s construction

of ecological consciousness, the protagonist's immersive learning of the rural biosphere, and the formation and development of his ethical worldview. The analysis is offered as a contribution to contemporary environmental discourse and eco-literacy.

All translations of quotations from this source are the authors' own. The same applies to some of the secondary sources cited.

## 5. *Pinjugal*: Ecocritical Analysis

*Pinjugal* narrates the experiences of Venkatesu, a young boy growing up with his family in Kumarapuram, a village in southern Tamil Nadu. During his early schooling, Venkatesu forms friendships with Senthivel (the son of a priest in the village temple), Asok, and Mohanadas (Asok's elder brother, an Indian Air Force cadre on vacation). When Venkatesu is nine years old, he and his mother contract smallpox (a disease often treated inadequately in the rural regions of the time). Venkatesu survives, but his mother dies. After recovery, Venkatesu searches for his mother but is told that she had gone on a visit to another place. The narration highlights the tragic loss of maternal warmth through olfactory imagery: "There was no scent of [his] mother in his bed. As his mother regularly gave him company as he slept in that bed, it had gained such a scent. Now, [there was] a bitter scent - a mixture of neem and turmeric..." (p.451).

His misery is amplified by the transfer of his benevolent mathematics teacher, Thangam, and an instance of unwarranted corporal punishment from his imprudent science teacher (for asking a naïve question). He drops out of school and spends his time roaming around the village, frequenting the Kurumalai mountain. He also gains the friendship of Thirurvedhi an experienced farmer-turned-hunter, who provides him with knowledge of many bird species. A year after Venkatesu quit school, Mohanadas – impressed by Venkatesu's knowledge of Nature – encourages him to continue his studies. The narrative concludes with Venkatesu obtaining his father's consent and leaving the village to study in Palayamkottai alongside Asok.

The following subsections examine the story's articulation of ecological consciousness, ethical systems, and personal maturation in a context of lived rural experience.

### 5.1 *The Grandeur of Nature and the Role of Language*

Venkatesu is implied to have formed a deep sense of belonging with the Kurumalai mountain. His vivid nostalgic memory of the place is profoundly triggered upon hearing Senthivel's visually impaired father playing the *nayanam* (i.e., *nadaswaram*):

[The Kurumalai's] heavy silence itself was an attraction. The moss spread on its rocks like freckles, the many types of intermittent small grass, many-coloured stones, densely woven creepers that grew in dark cool places away from the sun, the noise of cicadas that went on for day and night,...the sweet fountain flowing from the *thaazhai* shrub at the foothill,...the appearance of the entire forest assuming life... 'Mountain, I take your leave. I will come again to see you...Mother will search for me back at home...without eating'. Whenever the sound of this *nayanam* floods the ear, this small boy will stagger, unable to bear it. (Rajanarayanan, 2022, pp. 457-58)

This recollection of landscape – enabled by a human-made, culturally 'auspicious' musical instrument– suggests an erasure of the conceived boundaries between the Natural, the Human/Self, and the Sacred. Thus, Venkatesu's experience is consistent with Arne Naess's framing of Ecosophy as the realisation of the self through "extension of identification" beyond the individual ego (Drengson, 1999). Further, his emotional fixation on the Kurumalai mountain is also reminiscent of Naess's attachment to Tvergastein, a mountain hut in which his 'Ecosophy T' was conceived.

Venkatesu's sustained enthusiasm for Nature also stirs Thirurvedhi, who admires the boy's collection of eggs in many sizes and colours. Their friendship becomes a watershed moment in Venkatesu's relationship and understanding of Nature. He learns about many birds: the migratory cuckoos (*porkkuyil* and *karunkuyil*), the bird of prey called *vallayathan*, *padai* sparrows, *Tēnkotti*, and mynahs. His wonder is evident when he reflects: "How many types of sparrows! *Thenchittu* [sunbird], *thattai chittu*, *poonchittu*,... this *chenchittu* is pure vermilion in colour. Like the *karunchittu*, it rarely turns up" (Rajanarayanan, 2022, p. 476). His attention to the names of indigenous species foregrounds language itself as a form of ecological preservation. Aasai (2016) interprets the story's message thus:

“Ecologists cannot save the animals or the environment of a land without knowing the terms used in a region and language for the natural environment, animals, etc.... [B]efore creating environmental vocabulary, we need to examine the words that already exist in our land.... When the name of a bird is forgotten by a community, the bird species begin to become extinct. Names are just like birds. Only if those names are flying in our language, will the birds of those names fly freely in the sky.”

Echoing this insight, Tamil writer Nakkheeran argues that if an organism living in a land disappears, the words related to that organism in the language spoken there will also disappear. (cited in Prabhu, 2025, p.58). The narrative thus makes a persuasive case for ecolinguistics as a vital tool in articulating and sustaining Nature-oriented wisdom.

Another instance of ecological sensibility in the story is a gesture of gratitude. When the Anglo-Indian driver of the daily goods train throws packets of eatables for the boys, they reciprocate by gifting him a ‘train key’ made of a *karuvamaram* [*acacia nilotica*] twig, garnished with a bunch of coriander leaves. This symbolic offering highlights the intrinsic value that the boys attribute to Natural elements in their cultural and ecological milieu.

### 5.2 Ethics with Contradictions

*Pinjugal* demonstrates “a deep understanding of Nature, birds, and a sense of right and wrong when it comes to dealing with other animals we coexist with” (@VishnuJournals). The characters in the narrative exhibit ethical approaches shaped by their ecosphere. Yet, these impulses are rarely absolute, as they are often accompanied by contradictions in practice.

Despite being a hunter, Thiruvudhi refuses to kill mynahs, asserting “Carnivorous birds which feed upon worms and insects [that ruin crops] are friend[s] of Man. We ourselves should not kill birds that do good to us” (p. 466). Also, he does not target crows, possibly realising their significant role in giving rise to thousands of trees in their lifetime (Vetry org, 2021a). Yet, when Venkatesu questions his hunting of koels, Thiruvudhi justifies it by claiming that the meat of herbivorous birds is the most delicious. He also reluctantly hits a *thenkothi* with his catapult (at the demand of some people), and crows (for their perceived medicinal value and to prevent crop damage). His approach towards birds aligns with Panchangam’s observation: “In an agrarian society, the relationship between birds and humans is one of friendship as well as hostility” (2012, p.124).

Venkatesu, too, embodies ethical contradiction. He is compassionate towards birds and admires their beauty; at the same time, his hobby of collecting bird eggs (with a philatelist-like enthusiasm) has presumably adverse implications for avian life. He also causes distress to a live rooster by hanging it upside down in a hut so that its fluttering wings may fan him in the sweltering summer heat. Later, he catches a mynah chick for Mangakka (Mohanadas’s elder sister), who has long desired one. Mangakka’s grandmother warns Venkatesu: “Leave the chick with its mother. [Otherwise], you will be born as a mynah chick in your next birth. [This chick in turn] will separate you from your mother and torment you...No matter how you care for it, would it be the same to it as it grew in the care of its mother?” (Rajanarayanan, 2022, p. 499). This warning articulates an ethical stance grounded in natural maternal care (as opposed to human impulses to substitute natural processes), and in the ecofeminist idea of a “community of beings” (Kalita, 2011, p. 15). Ironically, the grandmother had earlier remained a silent witness when Mangakka was married off at a tender age to an elderly man (who died soon afterwards). The marriage in this context reflects the orthodox notion of girls as transferable property, thus directly contradicting the tenets of ecofeminism. Thus, a tension is established here between eco-empathy and unquestioned patriarchal norms.

The mynah grows up under Mangakka’s care, serving as a coping mechanism for her loneliness. But ultimately, the pet dog of a man mauls it to death. Mangakka’s sorrow at the loss of the cherished bond makes her curse the dog, revealing a compromise of her eco-ethics under emotional strain.

When Venkatesu attempts to hatch two peafowl eggs through a hen in his house, his grandmother prevents him. Her explanation discloses the rural perception of peafowls as a menace: “If peafowls multiply, farmers will be at a loss.... Once the pearl millet shafts are ripe with milk, [peafowls] will graze them off” (p. 493). This pragmatism contrasts sharply with the commonplace perception of peafowls as religious and aesthetic icons, a perception that risks overlooking human disruptions of the food chain and peafowl habitats

that have led to the birds' notoriety in rural areas (Vetry og, 2021b). This instance supports Greg Garrard's warning that "even tropes that might potentially confront or subvert environmentally damaging practices may be appropriated" (2004, p. 9).

The ethic-contradiction pattern continues in a skit (staged by travelling folk acrobats) that Venkatesu and his friends watch. In the performance, a boy pleads with his father not to sell his beloved goat kid (that later escapes a buyer by feigning death). The skit's celebration of children's eco-ethics is undermined when the acrobats' manager traps and kills several crows. Upon learning about this incident from his friends, an angry Senthivel asserts that it is "a great sin to kill crows" (Rajanarayanan, 2022, p. 473). In another instance, when conversing with Venkatesu, Mohanadas describes a sparrow that he saw: "I was reminded of you [Venkatesu] upon seeing it...Crying 'Trrr!...trrr!', it [repeatedly] flows off and perches. Our mind too prances along with it!" His admiration is in contrast with his recollection of wanting to shoot a pair of yellow-and-green-coloured birds. Venkatesu requests him: "Uncle, don't ever do that! Then we will not be able to see such rare birds in our village" (Rajanarayanan, 2022, p. 477), indicating that his eco-ethical compass is still intact despite the inherent contradictions.

As he prepares to leave for Palayamkottai, Venkatesu contemplates the beings that would be happy in his absence, free from his pranks:

It would be a happy time for the village's parrots and wild pigeons!... Swallows will fearlessly fly low in the streets, feeding off flies and mosquitoes... Scarlet skimmers can henceforth sit on stalks and calm their weariness of flying...Butterflies can peacefully sit on *thumbai* [spiny gourd] flowers and drink honey with pleasure. (Rajanarayanan, 2022, p. 494)

He also thinks of those beings that will miss his nurture:

With no sight of her beloved little master, Sivappi [the house dog] will howl...The house cat will ... meow for its master...who will provide it with sparrows, squirrels, and delicious wild white mice... The kingly cock...will reluctantly search for his 'Manian', who would give him a feast of geckoes and lizards...The milch cow's favorite calf will yearn for the fragrant handful of *arugampul* [scutch grass]. (p. 494-95)

Both trains of thought invoke two different concerns on a planetary level: (i) the impacts of human existence on earth, (ii) the repercussions that a possible scenario of human extinction could have on nonhuman populations that depend on humans in one way or another.

Reflecting on the ethical tensions, R. Sivasithu (2020) observes: "Our simple life involves such minor contradictions. [Hunting] is...for the sustenance of Thirivedhi (*sic*)...Venkatesh also likes this hunt like the children of that period. At the same time, it is from that point that Venkatesh begins to love birds instinctively". This observation underlines that ethical contradictions are not necessarily abhorrent anomalies but natural features of human survival in the biosphere.

### 5.3. From Innocence to Maturity

When he was still at school, Venkatesu's science teacher explained that all clouds are composed of steam. Venkatesu naïvely wondered, "How will steam come out if the water does not boil? Won't all fish die if the ocean's water boils?" (Rajanarayanan, 2022, p. 490). Presumably, in a mentality of rote teaching, the man interpreted the boy's inquisitiveness as insolence and subjected Venkatesu to corporal punishment. Disillusioned, Venkatesu dropped out of school, regarding the village itself as his "school of wisdom", with "the pond, river, tree, forest, etc. [as] his playgrounds" (Panchangam, 2018). This departure deepened his ecosophic bond with the biosphere.

Venkatesu's experiential knowledge of Nature fascinates Mohanadas, who urges him to resume his formal education: "At your age, I was not one with such knowledge....All that you will have to study in schools will be just a little; [in fact] schools will have to study a lot from you" (Rajanarayanan, 2022, pp. 478). Feeling guilty for wasting his time, Venkatesu obtains his father's consent to study in the city alongside Asok. Around this time, Senthivel narrates stories about the so-called temple cobra, including its reputation for producing a

gem. When Venkatesu asks Mohanadas about the same, the latter says, “I am a boy of this present time. But you are a boy of the future. Don’t believe such baseless empty stories” (p. 487). Also, Thiruvethi advises him, “A student must concentrate on studies alone” (p. 505). These two statements underline the reality of the material(istic) world and the rational way in which Venkatesu must adapt to it. The bunches of chilli seedlings that Venkatesu sees on the railway subtly symbolise this journey from naïvety to responsible citizenship in society and the planet: “It is unclear whether this too is about to board a train or has already disembarked from one. A plant born and raised in some remote seed-bed being taken to be planted somewhere else.” (507). As Sivasithu (2020) observes, “the outer shell that protects Venkatesu’s juvenile world spontaneously breaks”, implying the young protagonist’s potential to mature and play his role in the wider world.

Taken together, the analysis establishes *Pinjugal* as a narrative that articulates ecological consciousness as a vibrant ethical establishment. This system is molded by sensory experiences and emotional bonds, while also coming into tension with moral paradoxes. The text, by mapping Venkatesu’s transformation, presents the rural ecosphere as a formative educational realm.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has examined *Pinjugal* from ecosophical and ecofeminist perspectives to foreground its articulation of children’s ecological imagination and ethical complexity. The text traces the protagonist’s movement from an instinctive admiration of Nature to an emergent sense of eco-citizenship. In doing so, the narrative enables readers—young and adult alike— to internalise indigenous knowledge and a consciousness of the diverse, interconnected biosphere. By locating environmental care within everyday experiences rather than abstract instruction, *Pinjugal* suggests how children’s literature can function (and be examined) as a critical pedagogic space, one that initiates a vision to sustain the natural world for upcoming generations.

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**Authorship and Level of Contribution**

The first author prepared the initial draft of the manuscript through research and textual analysis. The second author provided supervisory guidance and critical suggestions to refine the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version.

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