

Arun Kolatkar's *Ajamil And The Tigers* – An Ecocritical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The poem Ajamil and the Tigers by Arun Kolatkar is considered a political satire, as indicated in the Woven Words, an English literature textbook for Class XI, published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). However, this study re-examines the poem from an ecocritical perspective, manifesting its deep ecological and environmental themes. By using a qualitative and conceptual research methodology, the study makes a textual analysis of the poem, revealing how Ajamil's actions are not driven by political cunningness but are guided by an inherent understanding of ecological harmony. Ajamil, a shepherd, does not represent the modern corrupt politicians, nor do the sheep represent the people of weaker sections. After the re-analysis, Ajamil instead emerges as a wise shepherd who understands the interdependence of species in an ecosystem. His decision to release the tigers and offer them food, rather than killing them all, points out his knowledge of maintaining ecological balance. The study correlates his actions with real-world ecological principles, including the role of predators in controlling herbivore populations, preventing overgrazing, and sustaining biodiversity. Comparisons are drawn between Ajamil and real-life shepherds, particularly those in Rajasthan's Jawai-Bera region, who coexist with leopards without resorting to exterminating them. The study argues that English literature textbooks, such as those prescribed by the NCERT, have the potential to promote environmental awareness among students. The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 gave great emphasis to the importance of environmental education. And so, this paper recommends that the NCERT revise its textbook exercise of this chapter to reflect the poem's ecological aspects rather than limiting its interpretation to political satire. By doing so, Ajamil and the Tigers can contribute meaningfully to environmental education and reinforce the need for ecological balance and human responsibility towards nature. This research thus reclassifies the poem as an ecology-based literary work, opening up new possibilities for interdisciplinary studies at the intersection of literature, ecology, and education.

Keywords: English Textbook, NCERT, Ecology, Environmental Education, Literature Textbook.

Introduction

The Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) 1986 in its document, the *National Policy on Education NPE 1986* stressed the need for providing environmental education effectively to all the sections of the society starting with the children. Through the educational system in schools and colleges, the environmental concepts are to be inculcated deep into the students' understanding. Moreover, it emphasised the significance of integrating environmental education across various subjects rather than treating it as a separate discipline. MHRD (1986) stated:

"There is a paramount need to create a consciousness of the environment. It must permeate all ages and all sections of society, beginning with children. Environmental consciousness should inform teaching in schools and colleges. This aspect will be integrated in the entire educational process."

To execute the directions of the NPE 1986, NCERT (2005) in its document, the *National Curriculum Framework NCF 2005* stated, "Awareness of environmental concerns must permeate the entire school curriculum." It also stated, "Environmental education may be best pursued by infusing the issues and concerns of the environment into the teaching of different disciplines at all levels while ensuring that adequate time is earmarked for pertinent activities."

Similarly, the Ministry of Human Resources Development MHRD (2020), in its latest policy document, the *National Education Policy NEP) 2020*, stresses “concerted curricular and pedagogical initiatives” in various fields, including environmental education. Thus, we can conclude that environmental education is to be provided through all the subjects of the school, and not just through Environmental Studies subject and Science subject. Consequently, English subject must also have some chapters based on environmental awareness or education. (McGuinn & Naylor, 2024) highlight the importance of incorporating environmental themes into language arts education, suggesting that literature can be a powerful medium for exploring ecological issues and human-environment relationships. It advocates for interdisciplinary learning to foster a holistic understanding of environmental concerns. Thus, English literature textbooks, too, can play a significant role in fostering environmental awareness and providing environmental education to students in schools through various means like reading, discussing, debating, playing, etc. Some chapters of literature textbooks may contain environmental themes and motifs. These chapters can be based on plants and animals, wildlife, forest, pollution, etc, and thus explore nature, ecology, and human-environment relationships. They can expose students to environmental issues in a convenient and engaging way. Such chapters, both in prose and poetry, must definitely be included in English textbooks.

The poem *Ajamil and the Tiger*, composed by Arun Kolatkar, is included in the NCERT textbook of English literature for standard 11. This eight-stanza humorous poem is very interesting and holds the reader’s attention and curiosity till the very end. It is a story of a shepherd named Ajamil. He keeps a new sheepdog to protect his sheep from the tigers. This new sheepdog is highly talented and has several incredible skills. It is ‘quick as lightning’ that it can fight with all the 51 tigers at a time. It beats the tigers very well and then ties all of them together with a string or rope and flings them in front of his master, Ajamil, so that he can give a suitable punishment to all of them. The sheep dog must be expecting his master to give a suitable punishment to the tigers so that they may never ever dare to hunt any sheep. However, to the very disappointment of the sheep dog, Ajamil cuts the tigers loose and even offers them dinner. He proposes a long-term friendship treaty with the tigers. Not only this, but he also gives gifts of sheep, leather jackets, and balls of wool to the tigers.

This poem can be labelled as a moral story because it does give us a moral. It has animal characters, so it is a fable. Moreover, there are two levels in the story, a literal level and a figurative level. Thus, it is an allegory. The Textbook Development Committee of the NCERT has considered this poem as a political satire. But it has an ecological and environmental perspective, too. This study aims to conduct a comprehensive critical analysis of the poem from an ecological perspective, examining its thematic detail and environmental implications.

The Poem – Ajamil and the Tigers

The NCERT has presented this poem as a political satire. It is a chapter in the English literature textbook for standard 11. The poem starts without any introduction. After the end of the poem, the poet, Arun Kolatkar, is introduced as a contemporary Indian poet. However, no details or comments are made regarding the poem, its theme, or its moral. Thereafter, some questions are prescribed for understanding the poem. Here, it is clearly mentioned that this poem has a literal level and a figurative level, i.e., it is an allegory. The next question it asks is what facet of political life the behaviour of Ajamil illustrates. In the last question, it mentions that the poem is a satire against the present political class. It is clear from this that the NCERT has considered this poem as a political satire. However, what the NCERT has missed is that it has a deep ecological and environmental aspect also.

Objectives

- To reanalyse the poem with an ecological point of view.
- To re-categorise the poem as an environmental poem instead of a political satire.
- Through an ecocritical analysis, justify Ajamil’s decisions not to exterminate the tigers and to form a peace treaty with them.
- To recommend that NCERT modify the exercise questions of this poem to better utilise it for environmental education.

Methodology

This research is conceptual research, and it employs a qualitative approach in reading the poem and then doing its textual analysis. It focuses on understanding the meaning behind the actions and behaviours of the characters in the poem, mainly Ajamil. It provides insights into the socio-cultural aspect

of being a wise shepherd and his relation to the natural environment around him. The study uses an ecological outlook to critically analyse the poem. Through the textual analysis, it dissects the last part of the story in the poem so as to reveal its ecological perspective.

Analysis

The story of the poem is about the problems shepherds living in the outskirts of forests face. The shepherds living near forests continuously encounter a unique set of challenges because of the predators like tigers, leopards, or lions living there. These predators pose a significant threat to their flocks. Forest-dwelling predators like tigers see sheep as easy prey. Protecting their flock from these predators is a difficult task. It requires constant vigilance – day and night, often necessitating the use of sheep dogs, fences, and their own presence at all times. Constant vigilance may not always be feasible. This is what must have necessitated Ajamil to keep a new sheep dog that was far stronger than all the fifty-one tigers taken together. This part of the poem has elements of exaggeration and humour.

When the sheepdog beats the tigers very well and ties all of them together with a string or rope and flings them in front of Ajamil so that he can give a suitable punishment to all of them, the readers feel a sense of achievement and satisfaction because of this. They too feel, like the sheep dog, to punish or kill all the tigers once and for all; and to provide freedom to the sheep, Ajamil and the dog forever. But since Ajamil is “a good shepherd,” he releases the tigers. Ajamil is “good” in the sense that he has a deep understanding of the ecology of the forest, which can come only through life experience and accumulation of knowledge from several generations of the shepherd tribe.

The poet says, “Ajamil wasn't a fool.” This, too, denotes the ecological understanding of Ajamil. He understands the importance of predators like tigers, leopards, lions, etc., in maintaining the ecological balance in an ecosystem. Ecological balance is crucial for the sustenance of the ecosystem, or in other words, to sustain all the plants and animals in an ecosystem. According to Verma, A. K. (2017), “ecological balance is a state of dynamic equilibrium within a community of organisms in which genetic, species and ecosystem diversity remains relatively stable.” In the study of ecology, it is known that if the predators are absent from an ecosystem, it will disrupt the delicate balance in several ways. This will have cascading effects that can affect the entire ecological community. Some of them are discussed below:

First of all, the population of herbivores will increase considerably unless predators like tigers control their population by preying upon them (Terborgh et al., 2001). This increase in population will lead to overpopulation of herbivores and further will lead to overgrazing, damaging vegetation and altering habitat structure. Consequently, other species which depend on that vegetation for food and shelter will also suffer. This will lead to decline in biodiversity.

Secondly, if the predators do not keep the populations of herbivores in check, the herbivores will consume more vegetation and will reduce habitat quality for smaller animals and insects. Thus, it will disrupt the trophic cascades where change in one trophic level affects the other trophic levels and the whole of the food chain (Estes et al., 2011). This will lead to population decline or local extinction of some species.

Then, if the predators are killed, it will alter the behaviour of prey species. In absence of the threat of predation, prey species will become less vigilant or alter their foraging patterns. This can affect vegetation and ecosystem dynamics (Ripple & Beschta, 2004).

Moreover, the nutrient cycles within the ecosystem will also change in the absence of predators. Since the predators control the prey populations, they also influence the distribution of nutrients through their activities like hunting, feeding, and scavenging. If the activities of the predators are disrupted, it will affect the nutrients available and the nutrient cycles within the ecosystem (Schmitz et al., 2010).

It is doubtful if Ajamil knew these things in detail like an ecologist would know, but he must have had a gist of the concept of ecological balance. He knows that killing tigers will affect the forest and the grassland negatively. This would indirectly and eventually mar his livelihood as a shepherd. For this very reason, “he knew that even tigers have to eat some time. A good shepherd sees to it they do.” And as a result of it, he shall be free “to play a flute all day”.

“A good shepherd sees to it they do” signifies the importance of a special type of sacrifice that farmers and shepherds do. This sacrifice is indeed a type of *yajña*, as described in the Bhagawat Gita. This might look to us like a religious moral duty. But this, too, has an ecological perspective. For instance, when the crop is ready to be harvested, the farmers try to protect their crop from birds and rodents. But they never try to kill all such birds and rodents. They, in fact, understand that some amount of grain must be sacrificed to the birds and rodents. They, too, are important for the ecosystem. This sacrifice is natural too. They cannot avoid it completely. So, instead of complaining, they accept it and get accustomed to it.

It becomes their way of life. They partake of the food after a small amount is first offered to God (through nature). According to Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (2008), "The devotees of the Lord are released from all kinds of sins because they eat food which is offered first for sacrifice."

The story of Ajamil and his sheepdog is imaginary. But the sacrifice of Ajamil is in no way imaginary. One can find many such shepherds who perform such sacrifices in real life. The incidences of the shepherds living in the vicinity of Jawai Dam in Rajasthan are particularly famous among ecologists. The book *Leopards and Shepherds of Jawai* by Shatrunjay Pratap and Shivang Mehta describes the coexistence of leopards and shepherds in the Jawai-Bera region (Pratap, S., & Mehta, S., 2019). According to (New Indian Express, 2019), "The recently released *Leopards and Shepherds of Jawai* is about the incredible relationship between man and predator in the surreal landscapes of the Jawai-Bera region in Rajasthan". Thus, every shepherd in this region is indeed a real-life Ajamil. The action of Ajamil is scientifically appropriate from the ecological perspective. Moreover, his action is justified when we read what NCERT (2005) states: "But as environmental degradation proceeds at an unprecedented pace, we are beginning to realise the importance of taking good care of our habitat."

A tiger or a lion and a sheep or a goat drinking water together from a pond might seem to us a very unlikely scene. But it is not that unbelievable. We have already heard of such things in moral stories, especially based on the moral messages of nonviolence and righteous ruling. One such picture, depicting a lion and a cow drinking water while standing opposite each other, can be seen at the Shwetambar Jain Temple, Gouribari, Kolkata (Rang, 2021). But this can happen only when the tigers are "well fed" and the sheep are "fat," as mentioned in the poem. The tigers in the story are actually starving due to the interference of the new sheep dog. The sheep dog cramps the tigers' style and won't let them get within a mile of meat. In such a case, the population of the sheep would also increase soon. This would put stress on the grassland due to a limited availability of grass. Ajamil has to balance the ecosystem; for this, his sacrifice is necessary. Once the ecosystem is balanced, the tigers will be "well fed" and the sheep also will be "fat". There will be no excessive or untimely hunting by the tigers. Then, Ajamil will be free "to play a flute all day".

Discussion and Conclusion

As this poem has been presented as a socio-political satire, an attempt has been made to look at it from a different point of view. Through this critical analysis, this study has attempted to reveal the ecological implications of the poem "Ajamil and the Tigers". Its usefulness in the contemporary environmental discourse and its potential to provide ecological awareness and education are also discussed. It also reveals the possibilities of limitations and ambiguities in the interpretation of the poem, opening avenues for further research.

Ajamil does not represent the people holding high social status exploiting the weaker section, nor does he represent the corrupt politicians who play double games with the oppressed subjects. Ajamil is, in fact, a typical shepherd who has learnt and understood the intricate relationships between living things in the natural ecosystem. Ajamil represents a typical shepherd rearing his flock outside a forest. The sheep are the sheep of the shepherds, nothing else. The sheep dog represents a person who wants to help the shepherds solve the problem of their flocks being hunted by the tigers. He may be a well-wisher of Ajamil or an activist wanting to help shepherds like Ajamil. People like the sheepdog are carried away by their anger and frustration, so they want all the tigers to be killed.

Thus, this poem has a great significance as a literary work that engages with pressing ecological concerns like hunting tigers or killing other wild animals. This analytical study proves the presence of an ecological theme in Arun Kolatkar's poem and also shows how English literature textbooks have the potential to foster environmental awareness and education. This study enhances the comprehension of Arun Kolatkar's poetry and its significance within ecological discourse, providing novel insights into the intersection of literature, ecology, and society. And finally, it attempts to re-categorise this poem from a socio-political satire into an ecology-based poem.

Recommendation

The NCERT should change the questions given under the heading "Understanding the Poem" in the exercise part of the chapter. The given questions suggest that the poem Ajamil and the Tigers is a political satire. The questions should be rephrased or changed in such a way that they suggest that the poem has an ecological aspect. By doing so, it will be one more feather in the NCERT's cap because they shall have one more chapter that helps integrate environmental education into the English literature textbook, and thus, complying better with the provisions, strategies, and directions of the NPE 1986 and the NEP 2020.

Limitations of the Study

This study examines whether the poem qualifies as a socio-political satire. Furthermore, if it can be re-evaluated and demonstrated that it constitutes an ecological and environmental poem. For this reason, only the last part of the story of the poem is re-analysed. This part is in the last two stanzas, i.e. the seventh and the eighth stanzas. The stanzas from the first to the sixth are not ambiguous in nature. The intention of Ajamil is still not revealed to the readers that he is going to release the tigers and sign a pact with them. Till this part, the poem is very interesting because of its humour. The overconfident behaviour of the tiger king and his embarrassing failures, the extraordinary skills of the sheep dog to fight with all the tigers at once create humour, though it is highly exaggerated and looks melodramatic.

The NCERT has ascribed the genre of political satire to the poem based on the last two stanzas. Therefore, only the last two stanzas are re-analysed.

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