FROM POT TO DAM: MEDIA ECOLOGY IN LITERATURE

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Media ecology limits itself to the study of the effects of the media environment on humans. I would like to expand the scope of media ecology to include the study of the impact of technology on the natural environment. There can be no printing press without paper. And paper, excuse me for stating the obvious, comes from trees. The raw material for every medium comes from nature. So the study of the impact of the printing press and other media on the natural environment is also a legitimate part of media ecology. In this paper, I would like to show that the study of media ecology in literature is in fact a necessary part of the oikopoetic method.

The human act, as described in the ancient Tamil text *Tolkappiyam,* has eight factors: doing, doer, object, place, time, instrument, recipient, and end. For example: in advertising, the advertiser creates an advertisement at a certain time and place using certain tools for a target audience to achieve a certain goal. Though media ecology is concerned with the instrument (medium), it can be argued that each of the factors is a medium.

The medium is not only a means to an end, but also the end. The potter's wheel is a medium for making a pot; the pot is a medium for carrying or storing water; water is a medium for slaking one's thirst. Every end is a means to another end. We therefore need to pay much attention to the means as though they were ends in themselves, which in fact they are. Media ecologist Neil Postman, who passed away in October last year (2002), lists five things we need to know about technology. First, technology is not an unmixed blessing. Second, the advantages and disadvantages of new technologies are never evenly distributed among the population. Third, embedded in every technology is a powerful idea. In Marshall McLuhan's words: "The Medium Is The Message". Fourth, technological change is not additive; it is ecological. Postman says: "In the year 1500, after the printing press was invented, you did not have old Europe plus the printing press. You had a different Europe. After television, America was not America plus television. Television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry, and so on." Fifth and last, but not the least, media tend to become mythic.

Nirmal Selvamony's 'Oikopoetic Method' applies the principles of oikopoetics to specific texts. It seeks to 1. identify the oikoses in a text (oikos is the Greek term for habitat); 2. establish the relation of one oikos and other oikos(es); and 3. compare the oikos of one text with oikos(es) of other comparable texts.

The poem is a storage medium; it stores ideas. The poem is an expressive medium; it serves as a vehicle for the expression of ideas. In D.H. Lawrence's Snake, the storage media —water-trough and pitcher — are just that and nothing more. We shall look at, with an oikopoetic perspective, those literary texts in which storage media are exploited as expressive media.

Take the example of the pitcher in Rabindranath Tagore's 'Wrong Man In Workers' Paradise':

Every day they met and every day he said to her. "Girl of the silent torrent, give me one of your clay pitchers. I shall draw pictures on it."

She yielded at last. She gave him one of her pitchers.

The man started painting. He drew line after line, he put colour after colour.

When he had completed his work the girl held up the pitcher and stared at its sides, her eyes puzzled. Brows drawn, she asked:

"What do they mean, all those lines and colours? What is their purpose?"

The man laughed.

"Nothing. A picture may have no meaning and may serve no purpose."

The pitcher, in the woman's *oikos*, is just storage medium but is expressive in the man's *oikos*. Since by mistake he was placed in workers' paradise, his *oikos* was sure to threaten the oikos of workers' paradise. That is a beautiful story, which I wouldn't like to spoil in the retelling.

Our next example is Wallace Stevens's 'Anecdote of the Jar'. In Tagore's short story, there is no conflict between the cultural and the natural environments. In Stevens' poem, there is.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,

And round it was, upon a hill.

It made the slovenly wilderness

Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,

And sprawled around, no longer wild.

The jar was round upon the ground

And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.

The jar was gray and bare.

It did not give of bird or bush,

Like nothing else in Tennessee.

We can see that the introduction of the jar, a storage medium, is not additive but ecological. It is not Tennessee plus jar, but a different Tennessee. Postman might say it is the surrender of culture to technology.

'Ode On A Grecian Urn' by John Keats is another example. The urn, meant for storing the ash of the dead, is exploited as an expressive medium. The poem may be seen as an interaction between the external and the internal contexts. In the stanza beginning 'Heard melodies are sweet …' we are taken from the real world into the virtual. Heard melodies belong to the real world. The melodies that we cannot hear but still can enjoy are on the urn. In the stanza beginning 'Who are these coming to the sacrifice?' we are taken from the world within the poem to a world without. Keats speculates about a little town that is not on the urn.

What little town by river or sea shore,

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul, to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

Our next example is the pond, a natural storage medium. Consider Richard Church's sonnet:

Some fool has hurled a stone into the pond

Where I liked looking at the clouds, the stars,

The underside of leaves, the little wars

Of midge and feather, or those between my fond

And harsher moods; for the mind will seek a mirror

In any surface that reflects the sky

And for a moment shows eternity

Shining through time, as courage shines through terror.

Now I see nothing. The oracle is fled,

The little waters where all meaning sits

In miniature, lie shattered. I watch, instead,

The mirror in my mind, where faith re-knits

The images that I have always known

Survive the fool and his disturbing stone.

Here we have the clash of two oikoses — the poet's and the fool's. The fool just loves to create a splash in the waters. But faith helps to re-knit the poet's oikos. Oikopoetics actually tries to comprehend the meaning of a poem at three integrated levels – human, nature and sacred. This sonnet easily lends itself to the oikopoetic method.

In John Milton's Paradise Lost (Book IV), a lake is exploited as an expressive medium. Eve looks into a smooth lake that seemed to her as another sky. Eve is on the verge of becoming another Narcissus.

As I bent down to look, just opposite,

A Shape within the wat'ry gleam appeared

Bending to look on me, I started back,

It started back, but pleas'd I soon returned,

Pleas'd it returned as soon with answering looks

Of sympathy and love, there I had fixt

Mine eyes till now, and pin'd with vain desire,

Had not a voice thus warn'd me …

Let us move on to another example. Postman tells us that technology becomes mythic. We no longer look at the alphabet and number system as a product of our culture. They appear to us as old as the hills and therefore an indispensable part of nature. The making of a pot requires some clay. Nature seems to gladly provide it. The digging of a well involves violence against nature. But nobody seems to look at it that way. The well over the ages has become mythic and therefore a part of the landscape. My poem *The Ballade of The Frog* attempts to portray the conflict between the sacred and human need. A temple is razed and a well is dug. Here's the poem:

For many years, counting from one to nine,

No single drop of rain from the skies fell.

So townsfolk raised to the Rain-God a shrine

And bade the priest cast out the evil spell.

The river that used to run through the town

Had been dammed by a king beyond the dell.

No chants could make the smiling skies to frown;

The priest was reborn a frog in the well.

Along came a man, water to divine,

With divining-rod that can secrets tell.

He walks along a curve, along a line,

But cannot figure where the waters dwell

Till he steps into the shrine in the town;

For there the rod begins to spin like hell.

All smile for joy but only one did frown;

The priest was reborn a frog in the well.

To dig a well they needs must raze the shrine:

Already they can hear the waters swell.

The priest loses his cool and calls them swine

And for the last time rings the temple bell.

He then begs upon his knees like a clown

But they raze the shrine and dig a deep well.

He goes mad and runs up and down the town.

The priest was reborn a frog in the well.

He looks up at the skies that would not frown

And clasps the idol of the Rain-God well;

He jumps into the well, himself to drown.

The priest was reborn a frog in the well.

Our final example is the dam. The pot can only store a little water. The dam, thanks to our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, is still being considered as the temple of the future. Why are environmentalists against it? Allow me to state my position in verse (River Narmada).

Part I

No more a child to mother glad

Runs the river into the main;

But dancing flows like serpent sad,

Serpent caught in a piper's strain.

The snake dances not for ever

But coils up in a basket soon,

So within a dam the river

Curls up in a serpentine swoon.

The wind sighs o'er the river tame,

Gathering clouds darken the skies;

But is a serpent ever tame? –

A snake hisses but never sighs.

If the earth quakes, then the dam breaks:

The waters foam like killer brew.

And ere the peaceful hamlet wakes,

Each drop will prove a venom true.

The skies cry out in thunderstorms

And clouds fire a volley of rain.

Once more a child to mother's arms

The river runs into the main.

Part II

Citizens of a rural clime

On the banks of the Narmada –

Awake tonight with thoughts sublime –

Hold the river-goddess in awe.

All earthen lamps they brought now sail

Like fire-laden boats upon the stream;

All eyes follow the blazing trail,

Eyes rapt in visionary gleam.

In silent prayer they shut their eyes

And with them hymns the wind tonight.

Earth, water, air, fire and the skies –

In peace the elements unite.

River-goddess, we seek your peace;

Our lowly lives you must sustain.

The fire-laden boats float on with ease

And sail into the longing main.

A poet can do no more than create an aesthetic awareness about the consequences of technology, not only on the media environment but also on the natural environment. We have seen that the pot has become mythic. The well has also received the same status. The dam is yet to. There is much talk about linking rivers. The very idea, let alone the impact on the

environment, will annihilate the idea of diversity. Do you remember the rhyme 'If all the seas were one sea'?

If all the seas were one sea,

What a great sea that would be!

If all the trees were one tree,

What a great tree that would be!

And if all the axes were one axe,

What a great axe that would be!

And if all the men were one man,

What a great man he would be!

And if the great man took the great axe,

And cut down the great tree

And let it fall into the great sea,

What a splish-splash that would be!

This rhyme seems to share the fool's oikos in Richard Church's sonnet that we have discussed. A momentary splish-splash gives us such a great delight that we care not for anything else. If all the rivers become one river, the dam will surely become mythic.

Sources

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