



Where the River Flows: Nature, Identity, and Power in Mahalinga Bhat K's *Unheard Sounds Flow On*

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Abstract

This paper explores the deeply intertwined relationship between nature, identity, and power in *Unheard Sounds Flow On*, Mahalinga Bhat K's Tulu novel translated by T. K. Ravindran. Set in the culturally rich and ecologically vibrant village of Kudramoole, the story follows Nanappayya's determined efforts to control the course of a river and contrasts it with the quiet wisdom of his tenant, Pony, who lives in tune with the land. Drawing on ideas from ecocriticism, deep ecology, and cultural ecology, the paper examines how Tulu traditions reflect a way of life that honours nature rather than dominates it. Here, the river becomes more than just a setting—it takes on a voice, resisting human attempts to reshape it. Nanappayya's eventual failure becomes a quiet but powerful reminder of nature's resilience. In the end, the novel gently suggests that true connection to the world around us comes not from control, but from care, humility, and respect.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Cultural Ecology, Tulu Literature, Mahalinga Bhat, River, Ecocentrism, Nature and Identity, Ecology in Folk Traditions, Environmental Resistance in Literature

Introduction

The way we perceive and construct our identities is often more intertwined with our surroundings than we might initially think. In literature, the external environment—the hills, forests, rivers, and changing landscapes—serves a greater purpose than just being a backdrop. It has a presence that influences, challenges, and sometimes confronts the characters inhabiting those spaces. Nature then becomes an equal or yet a greater partner in the character's journey towards self-discovery. Understanding ourselves is not about fixing our identity in place, but about noticing how we change; how our thoughts, feelings, and sense of who we are shift with the places we live in, move through, or resist. This exploration begins with a key question: how does the world around us shape, reflect, or resist our need to impose meaning and control on our lives? In narratives like Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and McCarthy's *The Road*, where nature is central—whether viewed as wilderness, sacred land, or a place of existential uncertainty—we see this tension played out. What emerges from these narratives is a picture of a world in constant flux, as well as a self that experiences its fluctuations.

In such stories, we see the profound connection between people and places, how they shape each other. It has the power to influence fates, disrupt certainties, and urge a deeper understanding of oneself. Through this perspective, we will see that defining who we are is always, in some sense, a response to the world around us—whether that world embraces us, opposes us, or remains hauntingly silent.

Unheard Sounds Flow On, translated into English by T. K. Ravindran, is based on Mahalinga Bhat K's original Tulu novel *Nanajjer Sude Tirgayer*. In many ways, just as Nanajja dares to change the course of the river, this novel, too, changes the direction of Tulu literature, carving a new path, leaving a lasting mark. At its core, the novel is about one man and his uneasy connection with the river that flows across his fields. This is not just any river, and Nana Grandpa is not just any farmer. He lives in a time when people rely on the wisdom passed down through generations — stories, instincts, beliefs — all spoken, never written. However, Nana grandpa chooses not to follow that path. Instead, he takes on something no one else would even think of — he tries to bend a river to his will. He is driven by dreams so big they almost seem to touch the sky, and in him, we see the figure of a man reaching beyond his limits, trying to impose his will on the natural world around him. This paper attempts to explore the complex, layered, and shifting relationship between people of Kudaramoole, especially Nanappayya (Nana Grandpa) and Pony, and the river that runs through their fields. The novel depicts how the river is not just part of the setting but a force that shapes identity, revealing how the human self is constantly formed and re-formed through its relationship with nature.

Conceptual Foundations

The man vs nature dichotomy has deep roots in Western philosophical thought, originating from Cartesian dualism, which distinguished between *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance), laying the groundwork for viewing humans as fundamentally separate from and superior to the natural world (Descartes 1641). Over time, people began to see nature not as a living presence but as a resource to control and use. Enlightenment ideas linked progress with mastering the natural world, creating a deep divide between humans and nature. This way of thinking supported systems like colonialism and capitalism, leading to widespread harm to the environment.

Ecological thinkers, however, began to question this line of thought. They challenged this division and stressed the interconnectedness of the human and natural world. The first wave of British eco-critics was concerned with the restoration of forms of writing that foregrounded the non-human world and fostered environmental sensibility (Marland, 2017). Ecocriticism has grown around two main ideas: deep ecology and social ecology. Deep ecology encourages us to move away from an anthropocentric mindset to an ecocentric one. Arne Naess introduced this idea in the 1970s, believing that the real problem lies in how modern society puts humans above everything else. Social ecologists such as Murray Bookchin believed that “natural worlds and social are interlinked by evolution into one nature that consists of two differentiations” (Bookchin, as cited in Marland, 2017, p.1512). They felt that the root of environmental damage lies in how people dominate each other. Unless we first tackle this social inequality, we cannot truly fix the harm done to nature, an idea that still shapes ecocritical thought today.

The anti-anthropocentric stance has been further explored in posthumanist and new materialist theories, which challenge the idea that humans are exceptional. Thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett suggest that everything around us — including rivers, animals, and machines — has the capacity to act or exert power and should not be viewed as passive (Latour, 2004; Bennett, 2010). This aligns with Indigenous philosophies and ecofeminist critiques that have long resisted the fragmentation of nature and culture, as well as the separation of body and mind, and the distinction between human and earth. Such frameworks destabilize the binary thinking that perpetuates environmental harm.

In India, the terminology of ecocriticism and literary ecology may have gained popularity in recent times, but the theme is ancient. The paradigm of ecocriticism has emerged from a unique confluence of ancient traditions and later postcolonial consciousness, as well as community-based environmental movements. Classical Indian texts such as the Rigveda and Upanishads, as well as epics like the Ramayana and

Mahabharata, reflect a symbiotic relationship between human beings and the natural world (Vavaiya, 2021). This cultural relevance has influenced both the traditional ways of life and contemporary writings on the environment. Writers such as G. N. Devy, Vandana Shiva, and Amitav Ghosh foreground the intersections of ecology, culture, and power, urging readers to reevaluate modernity's exploitative relationship with the environment. Parallel to this, development-driven policies, the marginalisation of communities, and the quest for environmental justice have added momentum to Indian ecocriticism. The Chipko Movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and struggles in regions like Bastar and Niyamgiri illustrate how environmental resistance is often led by women, Adivasis, and Dalits, who defend both land and livelihood. As a result, ecocriticism in India is not just a literary tool but a broader cultural and political lens for envisioning sustainable and equitable futures.

Ecology in Tulunadu Traditions

Cultural ecology looks at how people live with and respond to their environment, not just for survival, but through rituals, beliefs, and everyday life. Julian Steward introduced this idea, showing how cultures change as they adapt to their surroundings. Instead of seeing nature as just a background, cultural ecology highlights how traditions like music, stories, and ceremonies carry and pass on ecological knowledge. Over time, this approach has found resonance in areas far beyond anthropology, including literature, geography, and environmental studies. The focus now is on how people honour, sustain, and coexist with the living and non-living world around them, rather than measuring how people extract resources. In many traditional societies, sustainable practices and ecological strategies are passed down, disguised, or culturally reframed as folklore, legends, rituals, and traditions that are more effective than external conservation policies. To study cultural ecology is to explore how cultures not only survive in their environments but also become part of them.

This layered relationship between culture and ecology is profoundly evident in the traditions of Tulunadu, a coastal region in Karnataka, India. The people of Tulu Nadu hold deep reverence for nature-based deities, including Mother Earth, the Bhootas (local spirits), and Naga Daiva (the serpent god). Their connection to the environment is woven into their cultural practices and beliefs. Through annual rituals such as Keddasa, Bhoota Kola, Nema, and Nagapanchami, they honour both their ancestors and the land. These traditions reflect an enduring and sacred bond between human life and the natural world—one where the divine is seen not apart from nature, but within it. (Shetty and Pakeerappa, 2023). The belief systems tied to *Nagabanas* demonstrate how spiritual thought and ecological preservation can coexist.

Predominantly an agrarian society, rituals such as Nagaradhane, Nagamandala, and Keddasa offer further insight into how Tulunadu's cultural life expresses ecological awareness. During Keddasa, for instance, farming halts and the earth is symbolically allowed to rest, just as a menstruating woman would. This pause in agricultural activity reflects an understanding of the land as a living, feminine presence that needs renewal. Likewise, rituals devoted to serpent spirits honour animals not as threats or pests but as allies in maintaining the balance of nature. These ceremonies, along with oral traditions, folk songs, and seasonal wisdom, form a living archive of environmental knowledge. In Tulunadu, nature is not something to be managed—it is something to be listened to, respected, and lived with. This is cultural ecology in its truest form: a way of being that blurs the boundary between the sacred and the ecological, reminding us that sustainability can be as much about memory, ritual, and story as it is about policy or science.

Hubris and Harmony: Man's Two Faces in Kudramoole

Nana Grandpa, or Nanappayya as he came to be known, is not just a character who shapes the land—he is shaped by it in return. In the early pages of the novel, we meet a man who looks back on his youth with a fierce sense of pride, not for riches or accolades, but for what he made with his own two hands. He is a man who came down the hill, crossed the river, and planted his roots deep into the soil of Kudramoole. The forest that once stood thick and unnamed became something else under his care—or perhaps, under his conquest. He levelled hillocks, dug into the land, and watched as paddy fields and arecanut plantations rose where wild trees once stood. For Nanappayya, nature was never a thing of beauty to be preserved; it was a challenge, a

living force to be reshaped. “Sarasu, you may find it mad. People may find it to be a monkey trick. But for me it is a challenge. It is my obstinate passion to lock horns with the river!” (Bhat 2019, p. 37) The river, the hillock, the dense forest—all were obstacles he met with a determined mind.

His relationship with the river captures the essence of his worldview. He does not speak of it as something to be admired, but rather as something to be corrected. The river, in his eyes, is foolish—it should have taken a different path, one that would have allowed him to cultivate more fields, yield more crops. There is no poetry in the water for him, only lost potential. “If it had gone the other way, about a mile of distance could have been saved” (K Bhat, 2019, p. 3). He dreams not of what the river offers, but of what it denies. Thus, he sets out to change its course—literally. With embankments to hold it back and new channels to redirect its flow, Nanu begins a new kind of battle. He sends out word for workers, uncaring of caste or creed, looking only for people willing to sweat and toil to bring his vision to life. He wants the work done before the new moon—fast, efficient, determined. This is not just farming or engineering; it is a mission. And in that mission lies his deepest need—to make the land obey, and through it, to prove something to the world and himself.

However, for all his defiance of nature, Nanappayya is not simply a harsh or heartless man. He is someone who has lived on the margins—not geographically, but socially. Though born a Brahmin, he was never accepted within the orthodox folds of his caste. The son of a cook, known as a ghost priest for participating in funeral rituals and a man from whom people turned away, he arrived in Kudramoole as a stranger with nothing to his name. Nevertheless, through his labour and sheer will, he earned respect, transforming from Nanu, the unknown outsider, into Nanappayya, a name people now speak with a mix of awe and fear. The house he built, the fields he sowed, the festivals he hosted—they are not just signs of wealth, but symbols of his rising. He marries outside caste boundaries, hires a cook without concern for caste, and takes the plough in hand, though tradition forbids it for someone of his background. His sacred thread does not restrain him. He breaks rules, but never with arrogance. He respects the village Bhuta, and he bows to the Swami of the mutt. He does not discard faith; he simply refuses to be caged by it.

While Nana Grandpa charges ahead with grand plans to tame nature, the rest of Kudramoole watches with quiet scepticism and resignation. His tenant and helper, Pony, stands as a striking counterpoint to Nanappayya’s, restless ambition. Pony is grounded in the rhythms of the land and the water, a man without formal education but with a deep, intuitive understanding of his surroundings. When he asks, “Oh, master, does the river have a mind like our mind, does the tree have a mind like ours?” (Bhat, 2019, p.3), it is not just an innocent question—it is a gentle challenge to Nanappayya’s logic. To Pony, rivers, trees: each has its own life, its own path, and no man, no matter how strong-willed, can fully bend them to his will. His knowledge is quiet but observant: he notices the mist and predicts heavy rains, he knows when the river will swell or recede, and he remembers how even in the driest months, water can be found if one knows where to look. The river, for Pony, is not a challenge to conquer but a presence to live with.

Pony’s connection to the river is deeply personal. It has been part of every phase of his life: from childhood swims to adult labour. It is where women wash clothes, where his wife scrubs vessels, and where the village gathers and lives. Though he understands the value of the river and even questions the logic of diverting it, he does not protest loudly. He just wonders, asks, and accepts. This quietness reflects a larger truth about the people of not just Kudramoole but of India in general: they are used to yielding to the decisions of the powerful. Pony may worry about losing the river’s water during summer, but instead of resisting, he consoles himself with the hope that Nanappayya might dig a well for him. This docility—this lack of collective resistance—is perhaps the most poignant observation the novel offers. The powerful reshape the world, and the rest adapt, even when it means losing what sustains them. This dynamic mirrors real-world environmental struggles, where the vulnerable often bear the cost of progress without having a say in it.

In contrast to Nanappayya, who has an unrelenting need to prove himself by diverting rivers, flying planes, riding horses, pedalling cycles, or building dramatic pandals, Pony leads a content and unambitious life. He finds joy in simple things: the taste of a mango dropped by a squirrel, a visit to the toddy shop with the coconuts fished out of the river, the routines of tending cows and gathering workers. Nanappayya's restlessness is performative, a way to assert his place in the world, while Pony's stillness is rooted in lived knowledge and quiet observation. Even Nanappayya's wife, Sarasakka, senses the danger of her husband's ambitions. She bluntly questions the logic of turning a river, mocking the idea that a river is something pliable like a creeper or an infant. Her warnings ring with practical wisdom: "If water from three rivers is diverted, either Kudramoole will get drowned or Nellikunnu will cave in" (Bhat, 2019, p.23) But Nanappayya, ever resolute, dismisses her doubts with the conviction that nothing in his life is ever left half done.

Even the spiritual forces of the village, once seemingly distant from worldly affairs, join the subtle resistance. The Swamy of the Mutt warns that earth and water are elements beyond human control. The village Bhuta, speaking through a young Pambada, voices the unease of the people. In a community where rituals and offerings are meant to preserve balance, Nanappayya's boldness threatens the delicate harmony between man and nature, between the seen and the unseen. Though he tries to appease the gods with ceremonies and offerings, the anxiety remains. The Bhuta becomes a symbolic voice of dissent—a divine protest reflecting the unspoken fears of a silenced majority. In these moments, we understand that Nanapaya's war with the river is not just about water and land—it is a deeper struggle between power and humility, ambition and balance, control and coexistence. Through Pony, Sarasakka, and even the Bhuta, the novel reminds us that the river, like life itself, does not always yield to force—it flows on its own terms.

Nanappayya's downfall is marked not by the failure of his strength but by the collapse of his arrogance. At the height of the rains, when the skies open up just as Pony had predicted, his wife gently asks if he would like to go and see the river. His response, "Why should I? The river has to go along the new path I have made. What else will it do?" (Bhat, 2019, p.101) reveals the core of his hubris. He speaks not like a man who has worked with the earth, but like one who believes he owns it. For him, nature is no longer a living force but a thing that must obey. In contrast, Pony—humble, unassuming, and rooted—wakes early and rushes to see the miracle with excitement, relieved to find the river turning as planned. But this joy is short-lived. Within two days, the river returns to its original course. The rains have undone Nanapaya's work: the hill has sunk, the new channel has filled with silt, the embankment has broken, and the river, like a defiant child, runs where it always belonged.

Conclusion

In *Unheard Sounds Flow On*, Nanappayya's journey shows us how deeply a person's identity can be tied to the land they live on. His need to bend the river to his will was not just about crops or progress—it was his way of pushing back against a world that had long denied him status and belonging. When he says, "Don't think about where I was born... just think about the way in which I have lived my life" (Bhat, 2019, p. 82), he is not just defending his actions, he is trying to define himself through them. But in the end, it is the river, not people, that delivers the final judgment. When his plans fail, it is not loud or dramatic. He simply fades, leaving behind a silence heavier than defeat.

The novel's final image—Pony walking beside the empty, overgrown channel—speaks volumes. For a short time, the river flowed where Nanappayya wanted. But it did not last. Nature quietly reclaimed what was its own. That moment captures the heart of the story: we may try to shape the land, but it shapes us too. Through this simple walk, Mahalinga Bhat reminds us that identity is not built through force, but through listening to the land, to others, and to the flow of life itself.

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