

Environmental Crisis and Urban Vulnerability in Ashokamitran's *Water***1. J Sheik Kother (Reg. No.: 20214544011031)**

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Abstract:

Ashokamitran's *Water* offers a quiet yet powerful portrayal of how environmental issues, particularly water scarcity, deeply affect the everyday lives of people in an urban setting. The novel depicts not only the physical hardship of going without water, but also the psychological and social toll it takes, particularly on women, through the experiences of characters like Jamuna and Chaya. The paper investigates how urban life's susceptibility to environmental degradation is reflected in water. It looks at how, when access is denied, necessities like water which are frequently taken for granted become essential to one's identity, routine, and dignity. The impact of the crisis is heightened by the story's portrayal of it as a normalized aspect of urban life rather than dramatizing it. Using ecocritical and sociological perspectives, this study argues that *Water* goes beyond being a story about drought, it becomes a reflection of the fragile balance in city life, where the failure of infrastructure leads to emotional strain and social inequality. Ashokamitran depicts the crisis, reminding us that environmental degradation is not an abstract issue but a deeply personal one, touching lives in intimate, often invisible ways.

Keywords: Water Scarcity, Urban Vulnerability, Environmental Crisis, Ecocriticism,

Gender and Survival

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Ashokamitran, one of the most respected voices in modern Tamil literature, is known for his understated style and deep sensitivity to the everyday struggles of people. In his novella *Water*, he brings to light the silent yet pressing crisis of water scarcity. The story unfolds through the eyes of two women, Jamuna and Chaya, as they try to manage their daily lives amidst the constant shortage of water. With a sharp eye for detail and an empathetic portrayal of urban life, Ashokamitran creates a narrative that speaks not only of physical deprivation but also of emotional and social strain caused by environmental neglect.

Water, in this story, is not just a necessity, it becomes a symbol of survival, dignity, and social inequality. From the very beginning, we see how even a simple act like taking a bath becomes a struggle. Jamuna, unable to bathe, resorts to eau de Cologne and considers using the office bathroom. Her friend Chaya doesn't have that option and must find other ways to cope. Such small, personal moments highlight the larger crisis of urban living, where even basic needs are out of reach for many, as told,

I haven't had a bath today either. I have to coverup with eau de Cologne. If there is no water here tomorrow as well, I shall have to manage somehow in the office bathrooms." "You can at least do that. Where can I go?

Chaya gazed at Jamuna with her wide eyes as she lifted up her hair with both hands and twisted it in place. You could go to Paati's house for a bath.(Ashokamitran 19)

The novel shows how the scarcity of water affects everyone, regardless of class, age, or profession. People line up with vessels when the lorry arrives, pushing aside social status in desperation. Even those who have servants or belong to wealthier households are forced to queue up and carry water themselves. There is no distinction, everyone is equally vulnerable when water becomes scarce. Yet, women bear the greater burden, as seen in the way they are constantly planning, collecting, conserving, and rationing water for the household.

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.08.176

Ashokamitran also draws attention to the corruption and inefficiency of urban governance.

The story includes scenes of bribery for illegal water connections, misuse of public resources, and the indifference of officials. Even after setting up tubewells and pumps, these are stolen or misused. Even after the installation, the water tube and the pump handle were robbed by people ,

Oh, he must have made a cool six hundred rupees out of that single well. So why didn't he dig another couple of them while he was at it? Anyway, after that day the pump handle disappeared. The next day the pump itself had gone. Two days ago they removed the entire tube that had been sunk, and took it away. And some woman in Delhi is giving away thousands of rupees to subsidize this daylight robbery.(61)

The public's trust in the system slowly erodes. People begin to lose interest, and their curiosity turns into quiet resignation. They stop asking questions and simply adapt to a new normal of shortage and decay. The people loss of interest over the curiosity to have new water connection,

Earlier, when the corporation men came to carry out some work, many of the local people were both anxious and eager to crowd around them and ask for details. Now there were only one or two. The rest, after the odd glance through their windows or front door, were intent upon their own business.(58)

One of the most disturbing parts of the story is the contamination of drinking water with drainage. The characters talk about water that smells of sewage or urine. They bathe in it, drink it, and cook with it because they have no other choice. This blending of the sacred (water) with the polluted (sewage) creates a strong metaphor for the collapse of public health and civic responsibility in urban India. It shows how environmental crisis is not just about scarcity but also about the failure to protect what little is left. Mixing of sewage water in tap

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.08.176

water, “It is flowing through the taps for the first time in many months. There’s bound to be a slight smell. No, no. This is like to Stench of sewage. Try it.”(139)

The emotional weight of the story lies in its quiet acceptance of reality. Jamuna and Chaya, like many others, stop expecting change. When they finally see water coming through the taps after months of drought, they are met with the bitter truth that it is actually drainage water. Even then, there is no outrage, just disappointment and silence. In the end, they step out into the same muddy street, carefully crossing the same ditch. Nothing has changed. This final image reflects the hopelessness and exhaustion that people feel when they are let down repeatedly by a failing system.

The closing scenes of Ashokamitran’s *Water* present the environmental and emotional toll of urban water scarcity. The issue is no longer just about the lack of water it has now turned into a crisis of contamination, humiliation, and helplessness. When water finally arrives after months of dry taps, it is not a moment of relief, but one of disgust. The tenants, including children, recoil at the water’s smell and taste. “Definitely smells of urine,” the girl says (140), and her mother, unknowingly using the same water for bathing, later cries out, “Ayyo, yes it’s true. There’s a terrible smell all right. I’ve gone and poured this filthy stuff on my head” (140). The delayed arrival of water does not restore dignity, it deepens the sense of betrayal.

This reaction echoes the core concerns of Cheryll Glotfelty’s ecocriticism, which argues that literary texts should not only reflect nature but also reveal the ways human systems misuse, degrade, and exploit natural resources. According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies and considers environmental problems as central, not peripheral, to literature. *Water* exemplifies this by focusing on the ecological injustice embedded in urban infrastructure and governance. The mixing of sewage and drinking water is not just a physical hazard, it’s symbolic of a deeper decay in societal values.

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.08.176

In Ashokamitran's story, nature as represented through water is not nurturing or life-giving. It is absent, polluted, or exploited. The city, with its failed pipes, broken wells, and corrupt systems, becomes a place where nature itself is twisted by human failure. The final reflection of Chaya, who turns her gaze away after identifying the new water as "Sewage water" (142), says more than outrage ever could. It is a moment of quiet acceptance, a tired acknowledgment that nothing is going to improve. This resignation, this refusal to even speak further, reflects a collective emotional numbness that develops when survival itself becomes uncertain.

Ashokamitran does not use grand language or dramatic events to talk about the water crisis. Instead, he allows the quiet frustrations of his characters to speak for themselves. His strength lies in showing how environmental problems are deeply connected to human experience. *Water* is not just about a drought it is about the everyday battle to live with dignity when the most basic necessity becomes rare as rightly pointed by Cheryll Glotfelty "Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature. As a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman."(xix).

Water does not offer easy answers or heroic resolutions. Instead, through its detailed and grounded portrayal of everyday life, it reveals how environmental degradation slowly seeps into people's lives through the tap, through the body, through silence. Ashokamitran's work, read through the lens of ecocriticism, stands as a quiet but forceful literary witness to the cost of ignoring both nature and those who suffer most when it fails.

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