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Streams of Resistance: Water as a Metaphor for Women's Voices in Folktales

C. Arulmugil

Assistant Professor of English

Sacred Heart Degree College for Women, Bengaluru

Folktales are primarily traditional oral narratives that include legends, proverbs, music, jokes, and stories belonging to a particular culture or social group. These narratives reflect how a society perceives itself and convey its ideas of justice, rights, and social responsibilities. Nature, too, has its own folktales, often heard in villages and small towns.

This paper examines folktales associated with water bodies. Water is one of the most vital substances on Earth, as all living organisms depend on it for survival. Without water, life on Earth would not exist. It is an essential nutrient that plays a crucial role in the human body; while humans can survive without food for several weeks, they cannot live without water for more than a few days.

Symbolically, water represents cleansing, life, and independence, and its significance is richly portrayed in literature. Rivers often symbolize the flow of life or fertility, oceans represent relationships and interconnectedness, and lakes signify profound decisions. Overall, water commonly serves as a symbol of power, purity, clarity, and renewal.

Most civilizations on Earth originated near water bodies. Water has long served as a powerful source of human imagination. As Leonardo da Vinci observed, "Water is the driving force of nature." Many writers have given water a central role in their creative works, such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

In Tamil literature, the significance of water resources is evident in works such as Mukudarpallu, Kutrala Kuravanji, Agananuru, and Purananuru. Similarly, in Indian English literature, water emerges as an important theme in texts like Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Alice Albinia's *Empires of the Indus*.

Beyond written literature, water also serves as a vital source of inspiration in folktales. This paper focuses on the role of water-centered narratives in folk traditions. It examines stories that describe how water bodies were constructed by women in earlier times and how these structures continue to alleviate water scarcity even today.

The discussion centers on six case studies: three ponds from Karnataka and three water bodies from Puducherry.

The stories of the three ponds in Karnataka are drawn from Sudha Murthy's short story collection *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk*. The first narrative, "Ammani's Pond," describes how a common woman from a rural background constructed a pond with the assistance of colonial authorities.

Set near Kolar in Karnataka, the story revolves around Ammani, an illiterate milk vendor who agreed to supply milk and dairy products to British soldiers on the condition that payment would be made in a lump sum at the end of the arrangement. Ramappa, a middleman fluent in both English and Kannada, conveyed this unusual proposal to George, the British camp officer, who expressed a desire to meet Ammani.

During this period, Indians were generally afraid to interact with the British, as colonial officers often punished natives arbitrarily. Differences in race, language, and behavior further deepened this fear. Despite these circumstances, Ammani meets George and confidently communicates her decision.

As time passed, Ammani became a trusted milk supplier and earned the respect of the British soldiers, who valued the superior quality of her dairy products. In contrast, the villagers mocked her, believing that she lacked the knowledge to profit from selling milk products to the British. However, Ammani paid no attention to such gossip and remained firm and resolute in her decision.

One day, George informed Ammani that a considerable amount of money had accumulated in her account. He asked whether she was concerned that the money might be stolen or taken by her relatives, since she lived alone. He also mentioned that the camp would be relocated within a year and questioned her reason for entrusting the money to him. Ammani thanked George for reminding her that the camp would soon be moving.

Ammani then revealed the reason she had kept hidden from both the villagers and the officers. She requested George to use her savings to construct a pond with the assistance of the soldiers. Shocked by her request, George explained that the amount of money was insufficient and that building a pond would be a challenging task.

Ammani pleaded with him, explaining that the villagers had to walk long distances each day to fetch water for their basic needs. Moved by the villagers' distress, George assured her that he would consult the higher authorities and promised to help fulfill her wish. Subsequently, the officials approved the proposal, and a pond was constructed, which came to be known as "Ammani Pond."

The next narrative centers on "Navalgund Pond," which tells the story of a wealthy village girl who requested her father to build a pond in the heart of the village as part of her marriage dowry. Navalgund is a town located in northern Karnataka. Rame Gowda, the village chief, had two daughters, Channamma and Neelamma.

Although Navalgund was blessed with fertile land, it depended entirely on rainfall for its water needs. Repeated attempts to dig wells proved unsuccessful, forcing villagers to travel long distances to fetch water. In contrast, Rame Gowda employed numerous servants to carry out labor and collect water for his household. As a result, the family members remained largely unaware of the true value of water and the physical hardship endured by the servants.

One day, during a village panchayat meeting, the poor villagers approached Rame Gowda and requested him to construct a pond for the community. They even offered to contribute their labor without expecting any wages. Rame Gowda responded that he would support the project if another wealthy villager took the initiative. However, no one was willing to come forward, as everyone expected the village chief himself to take the lead.

Days passed with no wealthy villager willing to help, and the poor continued to suffer from the scarcity of water. The youngest daughter of Rame Gowda, Neelamma, observed this situation and felt disheartened by her father's attitude. One day, she accompanied a servant to fetch water from the pond and realized for the first time what a truly "Herculean task" it was to obtain water.

Days turned into months, and months into years. Eventually, Rame Gowda's two daughters got married. On the day they were to leave their parental home, Rame asked them what they wanted as dowry. The eldest daughter requested a bullock cart filled with jewelry, while the youngest daughter, Neelamma, asked for a promise that her father would fulfill her one wish. Rame readily agreed. Neelamma then requested that a pond be constructed in the center of the village to provide water for the poor. Honoring his daughter's wish, Rame Gowda accepted and had the pond built.

Today, it stands as a symbol of Karnataka and is deeply respected by the locals. Although those who built it are no longer alive, their memory endures through the pond they created.

The next story is about "Bhagirathi's Pond," constructed by a woman who sacrificed herself for the welfare of her village. Some years earlier, Mallana Gowda, the village headman, had attempted to build a pond. However, it remained dry. "He was really worried" (79). He spent additional money digging the pond and performed numerous rituals and poojas, yet the water never came.

Mallana Gowda had seven sons, all of whom were married. Bhagirathi, the youngest daughter-in-law, was married to a son who served in the army. She was a kind-hearted and beautiful woman, deeply cared for by her in-laws. One day, the village elders suggested to Gowda that if any married woman was willing to pray to God for water, she should be ready to sacrifice herself in the pond if her prayers were answered. When this proposal was discussed in the village panchayat, none of the fathers or fathers-in-law were willing to offer their daughters or daughters-in-law for the task.

Suddenly, someone in the crowd shouted Bhagirathi's name. Upon hearing this, Gowda angrily questioned the villagers why they were singling out his daughter-in-law. The villagers explained that her name was another name for Ganga and recounted the legend of King Bhagiratha, who prayed for the river Ganga, which flowed only in the heavens, to descend to Earth. Through his intense penance, his wish was granted, and thus Ganga came to be known by the name Bhagirathi.

After hearing the discussion, Bhagirathi rushed home, determined to act selflessly, just like her husband. The next day, she requested her father-in-law to perform another pooja at the bottom of the pond. Gowda agreed and scheduled the ritual for the following week. That same day, she visited her best friend and her parents' home. As she departed from both houses, she wept, knowing she might never see them again. However, her friend and parents assumed that she was simply feeling lonely in her husband's absence and comforted her, assuring her that he would soon return.

The day of the pond pooja arrived, and all the villagers gathered for the ceremony. Bhagirathi, dressed like a bride, participated in the rituals. After the pooja, the villagers gradually left, but Bhagirathi stayed behind. She told her father-in-law that she had forgotten her bangle at the pond and asked him to return home, assuring him that she would join him shortly. Once everyone had left, Bhagirathi prayed to Goddess Ganga, asking her to descend to the village, fill the pond with water, and bring prosperity to the people. Soon, water began gushing from the sides of the pond, and Bhagirathi prepared herself to sacrifice her life.

When Mallana Gowda returned in search of his daughter-in-law, he was initially overjoyed to see the pond brimming with water. But his happiness quickly turned to despair when he realized Bhagirathi was nowhere to be found. He cried out loudly, drawing the villagers back, and the people were unable to celebrate the arrival of water due to their grief over her disappearance.

A month after the war ended, Bhagirathi's husband returned home, his heart filled with dreams of reuniting with his beloved wife and sharing his wartime experiences. When he arrived, his father was astonished to see him alive but couldn't summon the courage to reveal the truth about Bhagirathi's death. Instead, he told his son that she had gone to visit a friend.

Eager to see her, the husband rushed to Bhagirathi's friend's house, but she too hesitated and said Bhagirathi had gone to her parents' home. He then hurried to his in-laws' house, where they told him that Bhagirathi had just left for her husband's home.

Confused and exhausted, he returned home. Feeling thirsty, he noticed a new pond nearby and drank from it—the water was sweet and soothing. Sitting by the pond, he felt a deep sense of warmth and affection, wondering how such a beautiful pond had appeared so suddenly. Curious, he asked a young boy grazing cattle nearby about it. The boy then told him the story of Bhagirathi's sacrifice.

Overwhelmed with grief and pride in his wife's noble act, Bhagirathi's husband could no longer bear the sorrow. Longing to be with her again, he leapt into the pond and ended his life, joining her in death.

Today, we see a pond filled with lotuses and leaves. No one is allowed to pick the flowers from the pond, and anyone who tries may risk their life. The pond symbolizes Bhagirathi, and the lotus represents Bhagirathi's husband. This pond has become an iconic symbol of the village.

Next, let us explore the water bodies of Puducherry, beginning with Aayi Pond. Several centuries ago, King Krishnadeva Raya, accompanied by his wife, Tenali Rama, Appaji, and their soldiers, were traveling to Chidambaram to worship Lord Nadaraja. On their journey, they wished to meet a wealthy agriculturist named Uiyyakunda Viswaraya Mudaliar, who was said to have hair on the soles of his feet and wore gold sandals. Such a phenomenon is considered impossible for ordinary humans, as only gods are believed to possess such traits.

Curious about Mudaliar's uniqueness, the king went to meet him and then hurried to Villivanalur (present-day Villianur) before nightfall. On the way, they came across a house illuminated with music and lamps. Believing it to be a temple, everyone, including the king, bowed their heads in reverence. A passerby, astonished by the gesture, revealed that it was actually the house of a harlot named Aayi. The king felt deeply ashamed for having unknowingly worshipped her house.

In anger, he ordered the house to be destroyed and Aayi to be brought out. Upon seeing her, however, the king was struck by her extraordinary beauty and requested that she join his palace as one of his wives. Aayi accepted the king's proposal wholeheartedly, but with one condition: she wished to build a water pond on the site where her house had been destroyed. The king granted her wish, and thus Aayi Pond was created.

Years later, during French rule in Pondicherry, the town was divided into the Indian and French Quarters along the boulevard. In the 1850s, the French Quarter began facing a serious problem of water scarcity. In response, the French Governor of Pondicherry, Bontemp, requested Napoleon III to send a skilled engineer who could help resolve the issue.

Soon, Engineer Lamair arrived in Pondicherry at the governor's request. Lamair began his investigations in search of a reliable water source. He visited many houses in the Indian Quarter and tasted water from their wells. During his research, a common man told him the story of Aayi and the gift of her pond to the villagers.

Intrigued, Lamair rushed to Muthrapalayam, where Aayi's pond was located. He found the water there far superior in taste to any he had encountered in the Indian Quarter. Impressed by both the quality of the water and Aayi's dedication to her people, he reported his findings to the French authorities.

Soon, a tunnel was constructed to bring water from Aayi's pond to the French Quarter. The French residents were grateful to the government for providing a reliable water supply. Lamair then requested Governor Bontemp to erect a monument in honor of Aayi, the harlot whose generosity had benefited the town. The request was granted, and a monument to Aayi was built opposite the Governor's residence, near what was then the parade ground—later renamed Bharati Park after independence.

This story inspired literary works in Puducherry: the Tamil writer Prabajan wrote the novel *Inbakani*, and bilingual writer Dr. P. Raja wrote the play *Water Please*.

The next notable water body in Puducherry is Oestri Lake, built by Oesi, the younger sister of Aayi. Inspired by her sister's generosity, Oesi wished to create a water source for the people and thus constructed this lake. Today, Oestri Lake is the longest lake in Puducherry, spanning areas of both Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

Similarly, in the southern part of Puducherry, two women named Vangari and Singari, who were also harlots, undertook the construction of a river, which has become one of the region's important assets. This river flows through the village of Bahour, known as the "rich bowl" of Puducherry due to its fertile land. Even today, the villagers recount the folktale of Vangari and Singari and honor their efforts in creating the river. Statues of these two women can be seen on the riverbank, and the locals worship them as deities. The river passes through nearly ten villages, providing water for irrigation and supporting prosperous cultivation in the region.