

THE ABANDONMENT OF DEEP ECOLOGY AND THE RISE OF
ANTHROPOCENTRISM: VIAPOLITICS IN S. K. POTTEKKATT'S
VISHAKANYAKA

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Abstract

S. K. Pottekkatt's Vishakanyaka portrays the dislocation of individuals and communities through migration, simultaneously foregrounding the ecological displacement that arises from such movements. This paper examines how the novel demonstrates the abandonment of deep ecology—a worldview that emphasizes the intrinsic value of all forms of life—as articulated by Arne Naess, in favor of anthropocentric perspectives that privilege human survival, progress, and settlement over ecological balance. Migration in Vishakanyaka is not merely a social or economic phenomenon but also an environmental rupture, leading to the silencing of nature and the relegation of ecosystems to the margins of human ambition. Drawing from ecocritical frameworks, including Chief Seattle's reflections on the sacred interconnectedness of all beings, and Carl Sagan's warnings about human irresponsibility toward planetary ecosystems, this study argues that the novel exposes the paradoxical tension between human progress and ecological destruction. By tracing the transformation of landscapes into utilitarian spaces, the narrative critiques how human-centered thinking undermines the deep ecological principle of biocentric equality. Ultimately, Vishakanyaka offers a profound commentary on the environmental consequences of migration and the human tendency to instrumentalize nature, thereby revealing the pressing need to reimagine ecological ethics in an age of displacement.

Keywords: S. K. Pottekkatt; Vishakanyaka; Deep Ecology; Anthropocentrism; Migration; Ecocriticism; Deforestation; Shallow Ecology; Routes of Migration; Environmental Ethics; Viapolitics; Kerala Literature; Displacement

Introduction:

S. K. Pottekkatt's *Vishakanyaka* is one of the most remarkable Malayalam novels that bring together the themes of migration, survival, and ecological transformation within the socio-political context of mid-twentieth-century Kerala. The work chronicles the mass migration of peasant families from Travancore (southern Kerala- Mundakkayam, Meenachil, Kanthirappally etc.) to the virgin hills of Malabar, a phenomenon that mirrors a significant historical movement known as the "Malabar Migration." These farmers, impoverished and oppressed by feudal structures, ventured into the dense forests of northern Kerala in search of livelihood and land ownership.

Rather than focusing on a single protagonist, Pottekkatt presents a collective narrative—a portrait of human determination, suffering, and ecological confrontation. The migrants' journey represents both a geographical and a moral crossing: from a familiar but oppressive social system to a new but hostile ecological terrain. Their struggles against malaria, wild animals, and an unyielding environment reveal not only the human desire to dominate nature but also the price exacted by ecological imbalance.

The title *Vishakanyaka*—literally meaning "poisonous maiden"—is an apt metaphor for the paradoxical nature of the Malabar land. It seduces settlers with promises of prosperity but ultimately consumes them, just as a mythical maiden whose beauty conceals deadly venom. Pottekkatt's depiction of migration transcends the historical and social dimensions to become a study of ecological disruption and moral reckoning. The lament that they have "escaped one 'P' (poverty) only to face three—'Pashu' (animals), 'Pullu' (grass), and 'Pani' (fever)" captures both the irony and tragedy of their endeavor.

Seen through the lens of deep ecology, as defined by Arne Naess, *Vishakanyaka* dramatizes a moral shift from an ecocentric worldview—where all life forms possess intrinsic value—to an anthropocentric one, where human survival and economic prosperity dominate ethical considerations. This migration, therefore, is not just a movement of people; it is the symbolic manifestation of humanity's migration away from ecological balance and respect toward exploitation and domination.

Review of Literature:

Although *Vishakanyaka* has been discussed in Malayalam literary circles for its social and historical value, little critical attention has been given to its ecological dimensions. Most studies focus on migration as an economic or sociological process, overlooking the environmental cost that underlies the novel's tragic tone.

1. Earlier Studies on Pottekkatt and *Vishakanyaka*

Pottekkatt has been recognized as a pioneer of travel writing and social realism in Malayalam literature. Scholars such as M. Leelavathi and K. M. George have celebrated his narrative empathy and depiction of marginalized lives. However, *Vishakanyaka* has rarely been read through an environmental or ecocritical framework. Existing analyses primarily interpret the novel as a chronicle of the Malabar Migration—a historical event that reshaped Kerala's agrarian landscape in the early 20th century.

2. Ecocritical and Environmental Studies

Ecocriticism, as formulated by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Deep ecology, a subset of ecocriticism proposed by Arne Naess in the 1970s, emphasizes that all beings have intrinsic worth independent of human utility. Greg Garrard, in *Ecocriticism* (2012), explores how human cultural constructs—migration, settlement, development—often disguise the exploitation of natural ecosystems.

Carl Sagan's *Billions and Billions* (1997) and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) also form key scientific and philosophical texts that warn against anthropocentrism and environmental degradation. Similarly, Chief Seattle's famous 1854 speech underscores the interconnectedness of all beings and the sacredness of the earth, a sentiment that resonates deeply with the moral vision of *Vishakanyaka*.

3. Migration and Environmentalism

In recent scholarship, the ecological implications of migration have been examined through the lens of Viapolitics—a concept introduced by William Walters, Charles Heller, and Lorenzo Pezzani to study the politics of mobility, borders, and routes. Viapolitics explores not just human migration but also the "routes, infrastructures, and ecological ruptures" caused by the movement of people and resources. However, no study has yet applied viapolitical theory to the context of the Malabar Migration, which transformed Kerala's landscapes from forests into farmlands, leading to soil erosion, deforestation, and ecological imbalance.

Thus, this paper fills a critical research gap by integrating deep ecology and viapolitics to analyze *Vishakanyaka*, revealing how Pottekkatt anticipates ecological concerns that are globally relevant today.

Theoretical Framework:

1. Deep Ecology

Arne Naess's concept of deep ecology argues that all life forms—human and non-human—possess intrinsic value. He contrasts this with "shallow ecology," which focuses merely on pollution control and resource conservation for human benefit. Deep ecology calls for "biospherical egalitarianism," wherein humans are not masters but participants in the

web of life (Naess 36). In *Vishakanyaka*, the migrants' anthropocentric attitude—clearing forests, burning vegetation, and domesticating nature—illustrates the collapse of this biospherical equality.

Naess also warns against what he terms “ecological self-deception,” where humans rationalize environmental exploitation under the guise of survival or progress. This is precisely what Pottekkatt's settlers do: they justify ecological destruction as the price of civilization. Their inability to coexist with the land leads to their downfall—a narrative embodiment of Naess's warning that “the arrogance of mastery will turn into the humility of suffering.”

2. Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism is the philosophical stance that humans occupy the central or most significant position in the universe. According to Val Plumwood in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), anthropocentrism manifests through the dualism of culture versus nature, where the former seeks to dominate the latter. In *Vishakanyaka*, this hierarchy becomes clear as human ambition overrides ecological awareness. The migrants' act of converting forests into plantations symbolizes the transformation of living ecosystems into economic commodities.

Carl Sagan's cosmic perspective challenges such human arrogance. He reminds us that “the earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena” (Sagan 7). The suffering of Pottekkatt's characters thus becomes emblematic of humanity's failure to recognize its planetary insignificance and ecological dependence.

3. Viapolitics and Migration

Viapolitics, as proposed by William Walters, Charles Heller, and Lorenzo Pezzani, shifts the focus of migration studies from borders and destinations to “routes, infrastructures, and vehicles.” It studies how pathways of movement themselves become sites of control, violence, and ecological change. Applied to *Vishakanyaka*, viapolitics allows us to interpret the migrants' journey as both a social and ecological transformation. The very act of moving from Travancore to Malabar involves clearing paths through forests, altering watersheds, and disturbing local biodiversity.

This framework also underscores the moral paradox of migration: while it is often driven by economic necessity and survival, it simultaneously generates environmental degradation and social displacement. In the case of *Vishakanyaka*, migration is thus not only a human tragedy but an ecological one, turning fertile ecosystems into disease-ridden wastelands.

4. Eco-spiritual Perspectives

Chief Seattle's address of 1854 and indigenous environmental ethics provide a complementary dimension to deep ecology. His belief that “the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth” (Seattle 124) foregrounds an ancient eco-spiritual awareness that Pottekkatt seems to echo. *Vishakanyaka*'s title itself evokes a spiritual personification of the land—a living, feminine force that punishes those who violate her sanctity. This aligns with ecofeminist interpretations of nature as a nurturing yet vengeful mother figure, an idea advanced by Vandana Shiva in *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1988).

Thus, combining Naess's deep ecology, Plumwood's anti-anthropocentrism, and Seattle's eco-spirituality with viapolitics yields a comprehensive lens for interpreting Pottekkatt's novel as both a social and environmental text.

Research Gap:

Despite the global relevance of ecocriticism and environmental studies, Malayalam literature has rarely been examined through this perspective. The Malabar migration, one of the most significant social phenomena in Kerala's history, has been discussed mainly in terms of economic opportunity or cultural displacement. However, its ecological dimensions—the deforestation, soil erosion, and the spread of diseases such as malaria—have not been sufficiently explored.

No major study so far has connected Pottekkatt's *Vishakanyaka* with the theoretical frameworks of Deep Ecology or Viapolitics. The existing scholarship has ignored how migration, as represented in the novel, reflects a moral and ecological fall from harmony to domination. Therefore, this study fills the lacuna by reading *Vishakanyaka* as an allegory of environmental exploitation and as a critique of anthropocentric modernity.

Research Objectives:

1. To analyze *Vishakanyaka* through the theoretical framework of deep ecology and anthropocentrism.
2. To examine the ecological implications of migration and human settlement in Malabar as portrayed in the novel.
3. To investigate how the novel anticipates contemporary environmental concerns such as deforestation, disease, and ecological imbalance.
4. To apply the concept of viapolitics to understand the routes, vehicles, and geophysical impact of migration within the text.
5. To explore how Pottekkatt's narrative transforms the Malabar landscape into a moral and ecological metaphor for human-nature relationships.

Research Hypothesis:

S. K. Pottekkatt's *Vishakanyaka* is more than a social chronicle of migration; it is an ecological allegory of the human-nature relationship. The novel suggests that the massive migration into the untouched forests of Malabar—specifically regions such as Kozhikode, Wayanad, Kannur, and Kasaragod—resulted in the transformation of grasslands and forests into plantations and estates. Through this process, human beings violated the deep ecological balance, leading to diseases, natural disasters, and existential suffering.

From the perspective of deep ecology, these adversities can be interpreted as nature's retribution for human arrogance. The "poisonous maiden" of the title symbolizes the anger of Mother Earth—beautiful, fertile, but deadly when desecrated. Thus, the novel allegorically argues that ecological neglect and anthropocentrism lead to both moral and physical destruction, confirming the hypothesis that the abandonment of deep ecology precipitates human tragedy.

Research Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, drawing from primary and secondary literary and theoretical sources.

1. Primary Source:

S. K. Pottekkatt's *Vishakanyaka* (original Malayalam text and English translation).

2. Secondary Sources:

- [i] Critical and theoretical texts on ecocriticism, deep ecology, and viapolitics.
- [ii] Historical records and sociological analyses of the Malabar Migration.
- [iii] Philosophical works by Arne Naess, Val Plumwood, Vandana Shiva, William Walters, and others.

3. Analytical Framework:

- [i] Application of Deep Ecology to understand the ethical and ecological dimensions of the narrative.
- [ii] Use of Viapolitics to trace the routes, infrastructures, and environmental consequences of migration.
- [iii] Examination of symbolism, metaphors, and narrative strategies that link human suffering to ecological imbalance.

4. Method of Analysis:

- [i] Close textual reading, supported by ecocritical theory.
- [ii] Comparative insights from global environmental literature.
- [iii] Contextualization of Pottekkatt's work within Kerala's environmental and historical background.

The methodology thus blends literary criticism, environmental philosophy, and cultural history, offering an interdisciplinary reading of *Vishakanyaka* that situates it within global ecological discourse.

6. Analysis

6.1 Migration as Ecological Rupture

Migration in *Vishakanyaka* is not simply an economic or social act—it represents a rupture in the ecological order. The migrants from Travancore, in their search for cultivable land, encroach upon the pristine ecosystems of Malabar. The forests, teeming with biodiversity, are portrayed as both beautiful and deadly. Pottekkatt's landscape is thus more than setting—it is a living character that responds to human intrusion with vengeance.

The settlers, in their attempt to civilize the wilderness, embody what Arne Naess terms "the arrogance of mastery" (Naess 41). They clear trees, burn vegetation, and divert streams in the name of progress. Yet, each act of human advancement is met with nature's retaliation: floods, fevers, and famine. The settlers' encounter with malaria—"the fever that gnaws from within"—is not a random affliction but a manifestation of the ecological imbalance they themselves create.

From the perspective of Deep Ecology, *Vishakanyaka* dramatizes the breakdown of biocentric equality. Naess's ecosophy emphasizes that all species have an equal right to live and flourish (Naess 38). However, the human community in the novel prioritizes survival and ownership over coexistence. The land, personified as *Vishakanyaka*—the poisonous maiden—punishes this ecological sin. The title itself, both alluring and fatal, functions as a metaphor for the paradox of progress: the seductive promise of wealth concealing the venom of destruction.

The imagery of "grass, boar, and fever"—the three 'P's that the migrants encounter—illustrates the triple challenge posed by ecology: vegetation (as resistance to cultivation), wildlife (as competition for space), and disease (as biological retribution). Pottekkatt's narrative transforms migration into a moral allegory of human overreach.

6.2 Human Resilience and the Myth of Progress

At one level, *Vishakanyaka* celebrates human courage—the indomitable will to survive against nature's fury. But Pottekkatt complicates this heroism by showing that such resilience often masks ecological blindness. The settlers' triumphs are transient; each field they cultivate, each house they build, comes at the cost of the forest's death.

Carl Sagan's warning in *Billions and Billions*—that humanity's technological and economic growth may ensure its own extinction—finds narrative expression in Pottekkatt's story (Sagan 72). The novel's peasants may not wield modern machines, but their primitive axes and fires are equally destructive in scope. In chasing prosperity, they lose harmony with nature and, eventually, their own lives.

This paradox reflects the modern ecological crisis: progress built upon environmental devastation. Vandana Shiva, in *Staying Alive*, calls this "the development of death," where growth metrics conceal ecological loss (Shiva 54). The Malabar migrants embody this paradox—they measure success in acres cleared, not in balance sustained. Thus, Pottekkatt's novel becomes a prophetic critique of anthropocentrism decades before the global environmental movement emerged.

6.3 Nature as Feminine and the Anger of the Earth

The feminine imagery of *Vishakanyaka* is central to its ecological message. The land is depicted as a woman—fertile yet fatal, nurturing yet vengeful. This duality resonates with both ecofeminist and indigenous worldviews. The "poisonous maiden" personifies Mother Earth violated by human greed. Her vengeance is the revenge of the natural world against the exploiters.

Ecofeminist theorists such as Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant have shown how patriarchal domination over women parallels human domination over nature. In *Vishakanyaka*, this patriarchal impulse manifests as agricultural conquest. The male migrants “tame” the land as if subduing a resistant female body. But this conquest ends in suffering: the earth’s revenge takes the form of disease and death.

Chief Seattle’s message—“Man does not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it”—echoes hauntingly through the narrative (Seattle 125). The settlers forget this cosmic balance and treat the land as property. Their fate—malaria, exhaustion, and decay—becomes symbolic of humanity’s alienation from its ecological mother.

Thus, Pottekkatt reclaims the land as a moral agent, not a passive background. The environment in *Vishakanyaka* is neither benevolent nor neutral; it is reactive, intelligent, and sacred.

6.4 Viapolitics of the Malabar Migration

The theoretical lens of Viapolitics, developed by William Walters, Charles Heller, and Lorenzo Pezzani, expands the study of migration beyond human suffering to include the infrastructures, routes, and environmental consequences of mobility. In the context of *Vishakanyaka*, viapolitics exposes how the movement of people transforms landscapes into political and ecological sites.

The migrants’ journey from Travancore to Malabar traverses rivers, hills, and forests—each route marked by the footprints of destruction. Pathways are cleared, animals displaced, water sources polluted. Migration here is not a neutral act of movement; it is a violent inscription upon geography. As Heller and Pezzani argue, “the route itself becomes an archive of violence” (Heller and Pezzani 118).

In Pottekkatt’s text, the “roads” carved through the wilderness symbolize both hope and harm. They connect human settlements but simultaneously fracture ecological continuity. Viapolitically, these routes embody the infrastructural violence of development—where roads, railways, and bridges open the earth’s body to capitalist extraction.

The migrants’ vehicles—ox carts, boats, and footpaths—become ecological instruments of transformation. The land they settle ceases to be wilderness and becomes a commodity. This analysis situates *Vishakanyaka* within a global discourse where migration is both a social phenomenon and an ecological catastrophe.

6.5 Disease and Disaster as Nature’s Retribution

The recurring epidemics of malaria and fever in *Vishakanyaka* function not only as narrative devices but as ecological symbols. In clearing forests, the migrants disturb the natural habitats of mosquitoes and other vectors, inadvertently creating new breeding grounds. The disease, therefore, is an ecological feedback loop—nature’s revenge for human intrusion.

Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) discusses similar consequences of human interference: when ecosystems are disrupted, diseases proliferate and species decline. Pottekkatt anticipates this insight decades earlier. The fever that decimates the settlers is not divine punishment but ecological consequence.

Greg Garrard observes that “environmental retribution is not moral in intention but material in effect” (Garrard 102). Pottekkatt’s narrative echoes this realism—the suffering of the settlers is not mystical but ecological. Their deaths signify the collapse of environmental equilibrium. Thus, disease becomes both a biological and moral metaphor for anthropocentric excess.

6.6 Geophysical Processes as Catalysts for Displacement

Geophysical and climatic forces further shape the migration in *Vishakanyaka*. Floods, soil erosion, and shifting monsoon patterns create unbearable living conditions in Travancore, compelling peasants to seek refuge in Malabar. This ecological push factor parallels modern climate migration.

According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *The Climate of History*, human history must now be read as planetary history (Chakrabarty 216). Pottekkatt’s novel anticipates this Anthropocene perspective: human displacement is intertwined with environmental instability. The peasants’ migration reflects the cyclical relationship between climate stress and social vulnerability.

By portraying these forces as catalysts, Pottekkatt situates migration within a web of environmental causation, not merely economic necessity. His narrative thus becomes a proto-environmental study of how geophysical change and human ambition co-produce ecological crisis.

6.7 Climate Change and Environmental Stress as Migration Drivers

The novel also hints at broader climatic anxieties: erratic rainfall, loss of soil fertility, and declining biodiversity. These phenomena mirror early symptoms of what we now term climate change. While *Vishakanyaka* predates the Anthropocene discourse, it intuitively captures the feedback loop between environmental degradation and human movement.

As Elizabeth Kolbert notes in *The Sixth Extinction*, “each extinction begins with displacement—of species, of climate, of people” (Kolbert 88). Pottekkatt’s migrants thus foreshadow the ecological refugees of the twenty-first century. Their tragedy reflects the universal predicament of humanity caught between environmental exhaustion and the illusion of progress.

7. Results

The analysis yields several interconnected findings:

1. Ecological Displacement: Migration in *Vishakanyaka* results in the destruction of forest ecosystems, the loss of biodiversity, and the transformation of natural landscapes into agricultural estates.
2. Anthropocentric Morality: The settlers' ethics are governed by survival and ownership, not ecological balance. Their anthropocentric worldview blinds them to the intrinsic value of non-human life.
3. Environmental Retribution: Diseases like malaria and recurring natural disasters function as nature's mechanisms of correction, symbolizing the ecological costs of human intrusion.
4. Metaphoric Personification: The title *Vishakanyaka* encapsulates the dual nature of the earth—nurturing yet deadly—embodying the spiritual logic of ecological revenge.
5. Viapolitical Insight: Migration routes themselves serve as ecological scars, demonstrating how movement and settlement restructure environments.
6. Proto-Ecocritical Vision: Pottekkatt's narrative anticipates modern ecological ethics by exposing the human failure to coexist harmoniously with nature.

These findings confirm the research hypothesis that *Vishakanyaka* represents the abandonment of deep ecology in favor of anthropocentrism, and that the resulting human suffering reflects nature's moral and biological retribution.

8. Discussion

Pottekkatt's *Vishakanyaka* stands at the intersection of literature, ecology, and ethics. It transcends its immediate context—the Malabar migration—to engage with global environmental themes. The novel mirrors what ecocritic Lawrence Buell calls "toxic discourse," where landscapes bear witness to human exploitation (Buell 31).

By integrating the theories of Naess, Seattle, Sagan, and Walters, this study reveals that *Vishakanyaka* critiques not migration itself but the anthropocentric mindset underlying it. Migration becomes a metaphor for humanity's alienation from the natural world. The destruction of forests and the outbreak of disease signify the ecological cost of human ambition.

Moreover, the novel's ecological realism challenges the romantic notion of progress. It suggests that development—when pursued without ecological ethics—inevitably leads to destruction. In this sense, *Vishakanyaka* anticipates contemporary concerns about climate migration, resource depletion, and environmental justice.

Thus, the novel is both local and universal: it speaks to Kerala's history of land hunger and to humanity's larger history of ecological disregard.

9. Conclusion

All forms of migration, when motivated by anthropocentric desires, risk devastating consequences for nature and for humanity itself. *Vishakanyaka* dramatizes this truth through the suffering of its characters and the desolation of its landscapes. The migrants' tragedy symbolizes the larger ecological tragedy of human civilization—our persistent illusion of mastery over nature.

Through the lens of deep ecology and viapolitics, Pottekkatt's novel emerges as a prescient ecological parable. It warns that the violation of ecological balance leads to famine, disease, and moral decay. The "poisonous maiden" is not merely the land of Malabar but a universal emblem of Earth herself—seductive, generous, yet vengeful when abused.

The study thus concludes that *Vishakanyaka* is an early South Asian literary expression of environmental consciousness, anticipating global discourses on ecological ethics, sustainability, and posthumanist thought. Its moral vision urges humanity to return to a biocentric humility—to recognize that our survival depends on the well-being of the ecosystems we inhabit and exploit.

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