



A Hydro-Medical Humanities Reading of A. K. Ramanujan's *A River*

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Abstract

Hydro humanities is a subfield of environmental humanities that focuses on water, rivers, floods, etc, as a cultural, political, ethical, and material force shaping human and nonhuman life. Medical humanities is an interdisciplinary field that studies health, illness, death, care, and vulnerability. Through the lenses of literature, ethics, and cultural studies and it is not limited to the cure or hospitals. When brought together, hydro-medical humanities studies how water produces bodily vulnerability, trauma, and mortality and how these are represented ethically in culture and literature. This paper studies A.K. Ramanujan's poem "A River" through the lens of hydro-medical humanities; the text operates as a literary case report of hydro-induced medical trauma rather than a conventional ecological or lyrical meditation on nature. The poet exposes how seasonal flooding in Madurai produces predictable trauma that is normalized through poetic tradition and civic neglect. The river acts as a determinant of health, injury, and mortality. Flooding emerges as a public health event shaped by infrastructural absence and governance failure rather than as a natural disaster. By framing 'A River' as a text of hydro-induced medical trauma, this study reveals that the medical humanities are not restricted to narratives of disease or healing. Instead, it advocates for a broader perspective of medicine that incorporates preventive, public accountability, and the environmental factors that influence life and death. The poem ultimately challenges both literary aesthetics and medical ethics to confront the normalization of avoidable mortality.

Keywords: hydro-medical humanities, ethical witnessing, medical trauma, biopolitics

Introduction

A. K. Ramanujan is a key figure of modern Indian English poetry. He has "a unique poetic style and through this voice and perspective, he has secured a significant and honored place in Indian English poetry. 'A River' is one of his best poems and it was published in *Striders* in 1966" (2). Ramanujan starts the poem by saying that Madurai is a home to poets for its temples and the river. During the summer dry months, the Vaigai river recedes and exposes stones, trash and skeletons. During the monsoon, it floods

the city bringing havoc, homes and lives. Ramanujan criticizes these earlier poets who all extoll the floods season, after season as if nothing ever happened. These poets embellish abundance and beauty but fail to acknowledge devastation. Conversely, Ramanujan notes bodies by precise enumeration of skeletons, a pregnant woman and a couple of cows swept away by the floods. This final points shows how aesthetic repetition reveals neglect as moral decay and how death becomes a part of cultural construction



A journal by Amar Mahato's "Mythology and Symbolism in A.K. Ramanujan's Poem "A River" (2023) delves into the intricate web of mythological allusions and symbolic imagery used by Ramanujan in A River City of Temples: The mention of Madurai as:

a city of temples sets a mythological backdrop. Madurai is known for its rich mythological heritage and the presence of ancient temples dedicated to various deities. The city's association with temples suggests a connection to Hindu mythology. Poets Songs: The poem highlights the poets' songs that primarily revolve around floods In Indian mythology rivers hold immense significance and are often personified as goddesses. The poets focus on floods may allude to the mythological narratives surrounding rivers and their transformative power. (3) Arnab Das's journal "Streams Of Consciousness: A Comparative Analysis of River Symbolism in Environmental Poetry of A. K. Ramanujan and Keki N. Daruwalla" (2024) explores as:

Assmann's concept of "communicative memory" - the lived memory and experiences shared by individuals within a group or society. It captures people talking about the tangible effects of a rising tide in their daily lives. It highlights how shared traumatic events become etched into a society's "cultural memory" through common narratives, images, and measures. The exact inches and cobbled steps mark this event as memorable. Tracking the rise of water levels implies how communities develop a sense of identity through remembering and quantifying disasters. Remembering the details shows how the event affects the group and shapes its self-understanding. Assmann argues that cultural memory is constructed through texts, images, rituals, and repetitive practices that provide a coherent narrative about the past. (7)

Although these approaches highlight collective memory and textual symbolism of the text, the paper explores Hydro-medical humanities and provides an accurate one to one correspondence by focusing on water as a determinant of bodily injury, death, and systemic neglect. The paper investigates water as shaping health, trauma, and mortality. Although the

poem lacks doctors, disease, and cure, it is nonetheless medical in its approach to obvious death with knowledge that such environmental destruction occurs too frequently. By acknowledging drowned bodies in the river over divine metaphors, the poet makes the river a medical mood. The poem demonstrates that medical humanities must attend not only to treatment and recovery but also to environments and infrastructures that produce injury before clinical intervention becomes possible.

The Hydro-Medical Gaze

The term hydro-medical gaze is proposed in this paper to describe a mode of observation that interprets water not as a symbolic or aesthetic element but as a determinant of bodily vulnerability, injury, and death. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the clinical gaze and extending it through environmental health and hydro-humanities, this framework displaces medical attention from hospitals and individual pathology to rivers, floods, and water infrastructures as sites where medical harm is produced. Unlike the clinical gaze, which locates illness within the individual body, the hydro-medical gaze situates vulnerability within ecological and infrastructural conditions of exposure. From this perspective, seasonal flooding is not merely a natural or cultural phenomenon but a recurring public health event shaped by governance, neglect, and environmental risk.

This hydro-medical focus is made clear in A. K. Ramanujan's poem 'A River', where the list of casualties - "a pregnant woman and a couple of cows" swept away by flood, resembles epidemiological reporting. Ramanujan exposes how poetic traditions and civic governance normalize flood-related deaths and it examines public space as a site of Injury. The river is thus reconfigured as a medical environment, where risk is recurrent, vulnerability is predictable and failure of prevention constitutes ethical and institutional neglect. Through this gaze, the poem serves as A literary record of environmental health failure, demonstrating how medical humanities can ethically document harm even in the absence of illness or cure.



Ethical Witnessing and the Poem as Case Report

The concept of ethical witnessing has been developed in trauma studies and medical humanities, notably by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in *Testimony* (1992). Ethical witnessing involves acknowledging suffering without aestheticizing or appropriating it.

Like a case report, 'A River' functions as a literary case report; the poem documents a specific event, records casualties, and implicitly highlights preventability. The poet places ethical responsibility on the reader, transforming the poem into a document of serenity rather than consolation.

In medical humanities, ethical witnessing involves acknowledging moral engagement where an observer acknowledges another person's experience of suffering, vulnerability, or harm with empathy, respect, and a commitment to moral responsibility. The poem exemplifies this mode by not narrating just grief, mourning, or rescue; instead, it records loss as an unadorned fact. The deaths occur not because floods are unpredictable but because the city fails to respond. Ethical witnessing here involves exposing negligence rather than offering consolation. 'A River' functions as an ethical document that challenges both poetic tradition and civic conscience.

Hydro-Biopolitics and the Governance of Life

The concept of biopolitics was introduced by Michel Foucault in *Society Must Be Defended* (1975-76). Hydro-biopolitics extends this framework to water infrastructures and aquatic environments. In "A River", seasonal flooding is a known phenomenon, yet no preventive measures are evident. This absence reflects that water is not merely natural, but administratively unmanaged, and such management determines whose lives are protected and whose are exposed. The river thus becomes a biopolitical instrument through which vulnerability is unevenly distributed. 'A River', the Vaigai's annual flooding is represented as a known, recurrent event. Its predictability is crucial; deaths occur not because the floods are exceptional but because they are anticipated and yet unaddressed. The poem's emphasis on repetition of poets' praising floods

'every year', the city experiencing the same destruction, signals a biopolitical decision to tolerate risk. The specific naming of casualties: the river floods "every summer, destroying crops, houses, people, and cows". Yet this recurring devastation indicates a hydro-political condition in which water-induced harm is normalised rather than addressed. This normalisation becomes biopolitical when the poem briefly records that the flood is:

carried off three village houses
one pregnant woman
and a couple of cows. (25-27)

The pregnant woman's body, her unborn twins, and cows reveal how hydro-biopolitical neglect distributes vulnerability across both human and nonhuman lives. Crucially, the poem contrasts this silence with the poets of Madurai who "sang of the floods", aestheticising the river while ignoring its consequences. Through these hydro-biopolitical views, the river is no longer an external force but a political medium. Planning, prevention, and ethical responsibility shortcomings are exemplified by floods.

The poem can also be viewed in hydro-induced medical trauma, meaning bodily injury and death caused by water. The floods led to drowned and swollen bodies and to the death of a pregnant woman along with her unborn twins. These events focus directly on the physical body and on loss of life, even though there are no hospitals, doctors, or treatment in the poem. The trauma here is not about recovery but about irreversible bodily damage. The poem also shows how such deaths are treated as routine and are remembered only through numbers and brief descriptions, rather than through care or prevention. By presenting flood deaths as something that happens again and again, the poem reveals how water-related suffering becomes normalised and socially accepted. From a hydro-medical humanities perspective, the poem highlights how water can cause serious bodily harm, while the absence of care leaves this suffering unnoticed.



Conclusion

Analysing the poem, 'The River', through the lens of hydro-medical humanities, shows a strong ethical account of environmental harm and public neglect. Instead of praising the river or focusing on poetic beauty, the poem highlights the physical damage floods cause to human bodies. The repeated flooding leads to deaths that could have been avoided, showing a failure of public responsibility. Ramanujan's calm listing of the dead acts like a record of loss and makes readers witness water-related bodily harm. From a hydro-biopolitical view, the river becomes a place where some lives are repeatedly lost because there is no proper care or protection. Most importantly, the poem shows that medical humanities is not only about illness or treatment, flood deaths, and medical concerns, because they are predictable and preventable.

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