
**Reading the Natural World: An Ecological Perspective on Purnachandra
Tejaswi's *Carvalho***

Dr Sangita Patil

LBS Govt First Grade College

RT Nagar

Bengaluru North University

Bengaluru 560032

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Abstract:

Climate change and globalization have necessitated a paradigm shift in our relationship with nature, prompting a critical reevaluation of the dominant Anthropocene worldview. Situated within this contemporary environmental context, this article undertakes a reading of Purnachandra Tejaswi's *Carvalho* (2023) to explore the intricacies of the natural world and human relationship with it. While exploring this novel, it will examine the natural world, the lifestyle of the people, and their occupations related to nature, such as beekeeping, honey production, agriculture, and other environmentally rooted practices that shape the lives of the characters.

Furthermore, this inquiry will also delve into the philosophical questions rooted in Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, juxtaposing the intuitive wisdom of an illiterate natural scientist, who possesses a deep understanding of the natural world gained through experience and tradition, with the systematic explorations of a highly educated research scholar, who approaches nature through the lens of scientific inquiry. This juxtaposition will highlight the tensions and complementarities between traditional and scientific knowledge, raising important questions about the nature of knowledge, the human place within the natural world, and the implications of Darwin's theory of evolution for our understanding of the world and our place within it.

Keywords: natural world; theory of evolution; occupations; natural scientist

Introduction

Purnachandra Tejaswi's *Carvalho* masterfully weaves together the intricate narratives of nature and human existence. The Western Ghats, with their breathtaking landscapes and rich biodiversity, provide a dramatic backdrop for the quest of Carvalho and Mandanna to uncover the truth about an endangered species. As they navigate the complex web of relationships between humans, animals, and the environment, profound

philosophical themes emerge, inviting readers to contemplate the delicate balance between nature and humanity, and the consequences of human actions on the natural world.

Purnachandra Tejaswi's literary oeuvre, encompassing short stories, novels, and ecological tales, embodies his profound understanding of the natural and social worlds as inextricably linked. As a naturalist and environmentalist, Tejaswi wove a synthetic vision that underscored the interdependence of all living beings, transcending the boundaries between humans, animals, and the environment. Through his characters, such as the modern scientist Carvalho and the intuitive naturalist Mandanna, Tejaswi seamlessly integrated traditional knowledge with modern scientific inquiry, demonstrating the value of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the natural world.

The flying lizard, a potent symbol of evolutionary transitions, serves as a poignant reminder of the "great chain of being," (Chenni) a fundamental ecological principle that underscores the interconnectedness of all things. This concept, which recognizes the intricate web of relationships between species, habitats, and ecosystems, reinforces the delicate balance and harmony that exist within the natural world. By exploring these themes, Tejaswi's work encourages readers to adopt a holistic perspective, acknowledging the intricate relationships between human and non-human entities, and the imperative of preserving the natural world for future generations.

Human-Nature Interactions: Agrarian Traditions, Beekeeping, and Survival

The novel is deeply rooted in the author's nostalgic reminiscences and intimate connection with the natural world. Throughout the narrative, the interactions between human beings and nature are intricately woven, featuring a diverse array of elements such as bees, trees, animals, and more. This delicate balance between humans and the environment serves as the foundation for the story, which unfolds with the narrator's visit to the Bee-Keepers' Co-Operative Society to purchase honey for his father.

The core of the novel revolves around bee rearing and honey production, highlighting the intricate relationships between humans, animals, and the environment. However, the narrator struggles to maintain his crops due to pest infestations, making it challenging to reap a harvest for survival. This struggle serves as a poignant reminder of the fragility of human existence and the importance of preserving the natural balance.

As the narrator navigates the complexities of agriculture and beekeeping, he seeks the expertise of Carvalho, a knowledgeable naturalist. Carvalho's insight proves invaluable, as evidenced by his prediction regarding the pests that have been devastating the narrator's crops, "Carvalho's prediction was right. The pests had indeed taken shelter near the stem under the water. When we drained away the water, they dropped off and began to crawl on the wet earth and then the birds and the frogs and the ants made a feast of them" (Tejaswi, 2014: 16). This passage underscores the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of understanding the natural world.

The narrator's struggles with agriculture and beekeeping ultimately lead him to contemplate selling his land due to the unprofitability of his endeavors. His frustration is palpable as he reflects on the economic realities of his situation, "I didn't make enough money to pay the interest on the loans I had raised. When sometimes the crop was good and the returns not bad, inflation etc. would swallow it all up" (18). This poignant commentary on the challenges faced by farmers and agricultural workers serves as a powerful indictment of the economic systems that often prioritize profit over sustainability. Despite his desire to escape the city's chaos and cultivate his own land for a living, the narrator finds himself trapped by poverty and monotony. Even beekeeping, his passion, becomes a struggle. Although he attempts to sell his land and relocate to the city, he remains bound to the natural world, illustrating the profound connection between humans and nature. This connection is rooted in a deep sense of interdependence, recognizing that human existence is inextricably linked to the health and well-being of the natural world.

On the other hand, Mandanna, a naturalist and botanist, spent most of his time immersed in the forest ecosystem, cultivating an intimate understanding of the natural world. However, the villagers viewed him with skepticism, perceiving his passion for nature as a frivolous pursuit. This sentiment is evident in the following conversation, which highlights the villagers' pragmatic concerns and their dismissal of Mandanna's expertise:

Sir, he is a vagabond. Maybe you like him much. But he spends all his time looking for beetles and insects and lizards and supplies specimens to the Sahib, and what use is it to us? My daughter will have to put a wet-cloth on her stomach when she gets hungry. That's all. And they will all surely say that I put a handful of earth into her mouth by marrying her off to a man like Mandanna. (32)

Mandanna possessed an extraordinary understanding of the natural world, one that belied his unconventional upbringing and lack of formal education and employment, and was instead on par with the expertise of Carvalho. His expertise encompassed the minute details of various species, including bees, insects, beetles, birds, and particularly the flying lizard. Mandanna's extensive knowledge, acquired through meticulous observation and hands-on experience, underscores the importance of traditional knowledge and the value of experiential learning. His character serves as a powerful reminder that intellectual curiosity and expertise can manifest in diverse forms, often transcending conventional boundaries of education and profession. As Carvalho espouses, "Madanna is a born naturalist. I am yet to come across anyone who it better than him in the art of observation. Nothing he has observed and reported so far has ever gone wrong... he is an extraordinary natural scientist" (58). Another character was Biriyani Kariappa, a man of diverse talents. He was a skilled swimmer, adept at catching birds, and agile at climbing trees. Additionally, Kariappa was skilled at crafting *machans*, elevated platforms used for shikar, or hunting.

The characters in the narrative share a common thread—a deep and abiding connection with the forest. Their lifestyles are intricately intertwined with the natural world, reflecting a profound understanding and respect for the land and its rhythms. Each

character's unique skills and abilities are honed in harmony with the forest, illustrating the interconnection of human beings and nature.

This synergy underscores the delicate balance and reciprocal relationship between human beings and the natural world. The characters' lives are not separate from the forest, but an integral part of it. They rely on the forest for their livelihood, and in return, they contribute to its well-being. This harmonious coexistence highlights the importance of living in sync with nature, rather than exploiting it for human gain.

The narrative portrays a way of life that is deeply rooted in the natural world. The characters' connection to the forest is not just about survival, but also about a sense of belonging and identity. Their lives are enriched by the forest, and they, in turn, enrich the forest with their presence. This mutual enrichment underscores the interconnectedness of all living beings and the natural world.

Evolutionary Insights: Mandanna's Empirical Wisdom and Carvalho's Scientific Exploration

The narrative offers evolutionary insights through the contrasting yet complementary perspectives of Mandanna and Carvalho. Mandanna's empirical wisdom, garnered from years of immersive experience in the forest, provides a unique window into the natural world. His intimate understanding of the forest's rhythms and patterns is rooted in traditional knowledge passed down through generations. In contrast, Carvalho's scientific exploration brings a more systematic and analytical approach to understanding the natural world. Through their parallel pursuits, the narrative highlights the value of both empirical wisdom and scientific inquiry in gaining a deeper understanding of the evolutionary processes that shape our world. The remarkable expertise in bee-keeping that Mandanna possessed was a testament to his dedication and passion for the field. His extensive knowledge and innovative approaches earned him the admiration of scientist Carvalho, who acknowledged Mandanna's contributions to the field. As Carvalho noted, "All these years we were under the impression that bee-keeping in a scientific way was our intention. But the pot-breeding says that it really is ancient. We should try and see whether it is possible to improve and popularise this method" (26).

Mandanna had a profound understanding of bee behavior and ecology, which allowed him to make accurate predictions about honey production. For instance, when a large number of gurgugi trees blossomed in Maland, Mandanna predicted a bumper honey harvest. This rare event, occurring only once every eight years, demonstrated the depth of his knowledge about the complex relationships between bees, plants, and the environment. Mandanna demonstrated exceptional observational skills and a meticulous nature, making him an astute researcher. His keen senses and ability to notice minute details allowed him to gather valuable insights from even the most fleeting encounters. His chance encounter with a flying lizard, for instance, prompted a detailed explanation to Carvalho. This encounter not only showcased Mandanna's vast knowledge of the natural world but also his ability to think critically and make connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena.

As Chennai, a well-known critic, very aptly said about the flying lizard, "the eponymous scientist and his ragtag team of explorers confront the flying lizard, a symbol of the missing link and transitions in evolution" (Chennai, 2024). This observation highlights the significance of Mandanna's discovery and its implications for our understanding of the natural world.

The exceptional observational skills and ability to interpret complex phenomena demonstrated by Mandanna made him an invaluable resource for scientists like Carvalho. His unique blend of traditional knowledge and intuitive understanding of the natural world enabled him to approach problems from a distinct perspective, often yielding innovative solutions and new insights. As Jacques Derrida aptly noted, "As a centre, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible" (Derrida 352). This concept resonates with the idea that the flying lizard represents a pivotal stage in evolution.

The origin of human beings is traced back to monkeys, and the flying lizard is a subsequent stage in this evolutionary journey. This elusive creature embodies the enigmatic and complex nature of evolution, reflecting the intricate and dynamic processes that shape the natural world. The empirical knowledge of Mandanna complemented the scientific inquiry of Carvalho, and their combined expertise converged in the study of the flying lizard. This convergence of knowledge embodied the principles of evolution, specifically the concept of 'descent with modification' as proposed by Charles Darwin. The significance of the flying lizard in this context was underscored by Carvalho's eagerness to collaborate with Mandanna, even going so far as to seek his release from jail to aid in the search and capture of the elusive creature, as evident from his statement:

This flying lizard, and the others like it, are capsules of time, holding within them the secrets of the universe. If we catch them, we might come to know a great deal. Maybe they tried to fly even before the ancestors of the early birds did...Some organs, some of bone must have changed the evolutionary direction of these creatures. When we meet it, we may get to know answers for some of our questions. (Tejaswi, 84)

The team led by Carvalho ultimately succeeded in capturing the flying lizard. However, in a mesmerizing and enigmatic turn of events, the creature suddenly propelled itself into space and vanished. The fleeting glimpse of this ancient being was akin to a flashback from the past, a momentary revelation that seemed almost apocalyptic. And then, it was gone. The disappearance of the flying lizard left behind a profound and haunting question: where does the evolution of life ultimately lead, and what lies at its terminus?

Conclusion

The natural world of Malanad offers a rich tapestry of life, woven from diverse threads of experience and exploration. On one hand, we can embark on a journey through the dense forest, teeming with an array of bees, insects, beetles, and animals, alongside a vast variety of trees that play a crucial role in honey production. On the other hand, the intuitive understanding of the natural world that Mandanna possessed, combined with the scientific

expertise of Carvalho, provides a profound and enigmatic perspective on the intricate web of life.

The research of Carvalho delved deep into the complexities of paddy fields, birds, and animals, further expanding our understanding and offering a broad spectrum of knowledge. One fascinating example he shares is the story of the hornbill. When the female hornbill lays eggs and sits on them to incubate, the male carefully weaves a strong nest around her, leaving only a small opening through which he can provide food. This remarkable display of partnership and care is poignant, as Carvalho notes that if the male bird is killed by Kariappa, the female and their young will also perish. Through the eyes of Mandanna and Carvalho, and particularly through the enigmatic figure of the flying lizard, the reader is invited to explore the natural world, accompanied by a deeper quest to understand the mysteries of evolution.

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