



Ecologies of Care and Non-Human Agency: A Posthuman Ecofeminist Reading of Kalidasa's Meghadutam

Aishwarya Singh

Research Scholar, Department of English, Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Garhwal university, Pauri- Garhwal, Uttarakhand.

Email Id: aishwaryasingh2101@gmail.com

Orcid Id: 0009-0000-2221-9714

Abstract

Widely regarded as one of Kalidasa's most celebrated works, Meghadutam is noted for its emotional depth, poetic refinement, and vivid engagement with the natural environment. While scholars have extensively examined the poem's aesthetic appeal and emotional themes, its ecological imagination has received far less critical attention.

This article re-examines the poem through the intersecting lenses of ecofeminism, posthumanism, emotional ecology, environmental communication, sacred geography, climate humanities, and care ethics.

The analysis suggests that in Meghadutam, nature functions not merely as a backdrop to human experience, but as an active ecological network in which landscapes, climatic processes, and more-than-human entities shape the poem's emotional and ethical world. Employing qualitative textual analysis and close reading, the paper explores the ecological significance of the cloud, the relational role of sacred landscapes, and the dynamic interplay between affect, environment, and communication. The cloud is reimagined as a more-than-human agent of care and ecological connectivity.

Bringing ecofeminist ethics of care into dialogue with posthuman understandings of distributed agency, the study reinterprets the cloud not simply as a poetic messenger but as an ecological participant that mediates connections across geographical, emotional, and cultural spaces. The analysis reveals a vision of coexistence shaped by care, interconnectedness, and a shared responsibility toward the living world. In doing so, it challenges human-centred models of agency and highlights the active involvement of non-human forces in shaping lived experience.

The study expands ecofeminist literary criticism by demonstrating how classical Sanskrit literature offers alternative ways of conceptualizing ecological agency, relationality, and

environmental ethics. Beyond its literary significance, Meghadutam offers ecological insights that remain relevant to present environmental and climate-related concerns.

Keywords: Ecofeminism; Meghadutam; Emotional Ecology; Non-Human Agency; Sacred Geography; Posthumanism

1. Introduction

Kalidasa's Meghadutam occupies a unique position within classical Sanskrit literature because of its remarkable fusion of emotion, landscape, and movement. The poem narrates the experience of an exiled Yaksha who persuades a passing cloud to carry a message to his distant beloved in Alaka. Although the work has traditionally been appreciated for its lyrical beauty and imaginative geography, its ecological dimensions deserve renewed scholarly attention.

Recent developments in ecofeminist and environmental humanities scholarship have shifted focus from human-centered interpretations toward relational models of existence that emphasize interdependence, care, and ecological interconnectedness (Braidotti, 2020; Foster, 2021). Similarly, posthumanist perspectives challenge anthropocentric assumptions by recognizing the agency of non-human actors in shaping cultural and ecological realities (Fox & Alldred, 2020).

Within this context, Meghadutam emerges as a remarkably relevant text. The cloud is not merely a messenger but an active participant in the creation of meaning. Rivers, forests, mountains, and monsoon systems function as significant ecological presences that influence movement, memory, and communication. Through these interactions, Kalidasa presents a world structured by reciprocity rather than domination.

This paper argues that Meghadutam articulates an ecological imagination grounded in care, environmental communication, sacred geography, and non-human agency. By combining ecofeminism, posthumanism, emotional ecology, climate humanities, and care ethics, the study demonstrates how the poem anticipates many concerns central to contemporary environmental thought.

2. Literature Review

Ecofeminist scholarship has undergone substantial transformation in recent years. Foster (2021) argues that contemporary ecofeminism extends beyond essentialist associations between women and nature and instead focuses on environmental justice, governance, and relational ethics. Similarly, MacGregor (2021) demonstrates how ecofeminism and new materialism together reveal the interconnected nature of human and non-human worlds.

Braidotti (2020) further develops this discussion through posthuman theory, emphasizing the need to move beyond narrow definitions of the human. Her work highlights the importance of understanding ecological existence as a network of interconnected relationships.

Fox and Alldred (2020) contribute to feminist posthumanism by arguing that agency is distributed across human and non-human assemblages. Their perspective challenges traditional assumptions that limit action and meaning to human subjects alone.

Environmental humanities scholars have also emphasized ecological interconnectedness. Åsberg (2020) calls for broader engagement with environmental change through interdisciplinary approaches, while Dovchin et al. (2024) explore posthumanism in relation to local ecological knowledge and community experiences.

Another significant development is the rise of affective ecocriticism. Mossner (2020) argues that emotions play a crucial role in shaping ecological awareness and environmental relationships. Emotional experiences are therefore not separate from ecological realities but deeply embedded within them.

Although these theoretical approaches have generated productive discussions, their application to Meghadutam remains limited. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by bringing contemporary environmental theory into dialogue with classical Sanskrit literature.

3. Research Gap

Scholarly discussions of Meghadutam have predominantly focused on rasa theory, aesthetics, romantic separation, and descriptive nature imagery. Even when nature is discussed, it is often treated as a decorative setting that reflects human emotions.

Existing ecofeminist readings tend to emphasize symbolic parallels between women and nature. Such approaches provide valuable insights but frequently overlook the role of non-human entities as active participants in ecological processes. Likewise, concepts such as emotional ecology, environmental communication, sacred geography, climate humanities, and posthuman agency have rarely been brought together in the study of Meghadutam.

Recent scholarship in ecofeminism and environmental humanities has increasingly emphasized relational ethics, non-human participation, and distributed agency (MacGregor, 2021; Braidotti, 2020). However, these theoretical developments have seldom been applied to classical Sanskrit literature. Consequently, a significant gap remains in understanding how Meghadutam imagines ecological relationships beyond anthropocentric frameworks.

This study addresses that gap by examining the poem through an integrated posthuman ecofeminist framework that foregrounds care, communication, emotional interconnectedness, and ecological agency.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study employs an ecofeminist framework informed by the works of Vandana Shiva, Val Plumwood, Karen Warren, and Greta Gaard. These scholars collectively challenge anthropocentric and hierarchical models of thought while emphasizing ecological interconnectedness, relational ethics, and environmental responsibility. Their perspectives provide a useful lens for examining the relationships among human and non-human entities in Kalidasa's Meghadutam.

Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist thought highlights the interconnectedness of ecological systems and critiques forms of development that separate human life from nature. Shiva argues that sustainability emerges through relationships of reciprocity, diversity, and ecological balance

rather than through domination and control (Shiva, 2010). Her emphasis on interconnected living systems is particularly relevant to Meghadutam, where rivers, mountains, forests, and clouds form an integrated ecological network. Shiva further maintains that ecological knowledge is often rooted in local environments and place-based relationships (Shiva, 2010). This perspective helps illuminate the poem's representation of sacred landscapes as sites of environmental belonging and ecological continuity.

Val Plumwood's contribution lies in her critique of the dualistic structures that separate humans from nature. According to Plumwood (1993), Western philosophical traditions have frequently constructed hierarchical oppositions such as culture/nature, reason/emotion, and human/non-human, thereby legitimizing ecological exploitation. In Meghadutam, however, such boundaries become fluid as emotional experiences are mediated through ecological relationships. Plumwood's framework therefore enables an examination of how the poem challenges anthropocentric assumptions and recognizes the significance of more-than-human participation in the production of meaning. Her later work further emphasizes the need to acknowledge human dependence on ecological systems rather than imagining humanity as separate from them (Plumwood, 2002). Similarly, Zapf (2022) shows how literary landscapes connect ecological realities with cultural imagination. Together, these perspectives frame sacred landscapes as spaces where ecology, culture, and environmental ethics converge.

Karen Warren's ecofeminist ethics provides another important foundation for this study. Warren (2000) identifies the "logic of domination" as a conceptual structure that justifies the subordination of both women and nature. On the other hand, she supports ethical relationships based on care, mutual respect, and interdependence. This perspective is especially useful for understanding the ecological relationships represented in Meghadutam. The cloud's willingness to carry the Yaksha's message and the interconnected functioning of natural elements suggest an environmental ethic grounded in reciprocity rather than control. Warren's emphasis on care ethics thus helps explain the poem's ecological vision as one based on cooperation and relational responsibility.

Greta Gaard expands ecofeminism beyond symbolic associations between women and nature by emphasizing environmental justice, intersectionality, and ecological responsibility. Gaard (2011) argues that ecofeminism must address broader environmental concerns and recognize the interconnectedness of social and ecological systems. Her approach is particularly relevant to the present study because it encourages an understanding of ecological relationships as dynamic networks rather than isolated entities. Gaard's work also highlights the ethical dimensions of environmental action and responsibility, providing a useful framework for interpreting the poem's vision of coexistence and environmental interconnectedness (Gaard, 2011).

Taken together, these ecofeminist perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for examining Meghadutam. Shiva's emphasis on ecological interconnectedness, Plumwood's critique of dualism, Warren's ethics of care, and Gaard's relational ecofeminism collectively support an

interpretation of the poem as a text that foregrounds ecological reciprocity, environmental communication, sacred geography, and non-human participation.

5. Methodology

The study adopts a posthuman perspective that understands agency as relational rather than exclusively human (Braidotti, 2013).

Following Fox and Alldred (2020), the analysis investigates how agency emerges through ecological assemblages rather than individual actors.

The methodology also draws upon Plumwood's (1993) critique of anthropocentrism to examine non-human participation within the narrative.

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology based on close textual reading. The primary text is Kalidasa's Meghadutam (trans. Kale, 2017).

The analysis combines ecofeminism, posthumanism, emotional ecology, environmental communication, sacred geography, climate humanities, and care ethics. Selected verses are examined to understand how non-human entities participate in communication, shape emotional experiences, and contribute to ecological relationships.

Rather than treating nature as a symbolic background, the study investigates how ecological elements function as active participants within the narrative structure.

6. Emotional Ecology and Ecologies of Care

Ecofeminist scholarship has consistently emphasized care, relationality, and interdependence as essential principles for understanding human–nature relationships. Karen Warren (2000) argues that ecological ethics should move beyond hierarchical models of domination and instead foreground relationships grounded in care, mutual respect, and responsibility.

For Gaard (2011), ecological life is sustained through networks of connection and care. These relationships extend beyond the human sphere and involve ethical responsibilities toward the wider living world. Similarly, Vandana Shiva (2010) highlights reciprocity and ecological connectedness as fundamental conditions for sustainable coexistence, challenging exploitative approaches that treat nature as a resource for human use.

These perspectives provide a valuable framework for reading Meghadutam, where emotional experience unfolds through intimate engagements with landscapes, rivers, forests, and seasonal transformations. The poem's representation of longing is not confined to an individual emotional state; rather, it is embedded within a broader ecological network that sustains communication, care, and relational belonging. Through this lens, the cloud's journey can be understood as an expression of ecological care that connects distant lives, places, and environments.

The emotional landscape of Meghadutam extends beyond the separated lovers. The Yaksha's longing becomes inseparable from the natural world surrounding him (Kalidasa, trans. Kale, 2017, vv. 1–15).

His grief is repeatedly expressed through ecological imagery. Mountains, rivers, and clouds do not merely reflect emotional states; they participate in the circulation of feeling. The cloud absorbs

the Yaksha's longing and carries it across vast geographical spaces. Emotion therefore becomes ecological rather than exclusively individual.

This dynamic corresponds closely with affective ecocriticism, which understands emotions as relational experiences shaped by environmental contexts (Mossner, 2020). The poem's ecological world is sustained through networks of care, reciprocity, and mutual dependence. Such relationships resonate with contemporary ecofeminist ethics that prioritize responsibility and interconnectedness over domination (Foster, 2021).

7. Environmental Communication and the Cloud Messenger

Communication in Meghadutam exceeds the boundaries of human language. The cloud functions as an environmental communicator capable of carrying memory, affection, and meaning across landscapes (Kalidasa, trans. Kale, 2017, vv. 5–20).

The Yaksha's decision to entrust his message to a cloud reflects a worldview in which communication is distributed throughout ecological systems. Meaning emerges through movement, weather patterns, rivers, and sacred places rather than through speech alone.

From an ecofeminist perspective, this mode of communication challenges anthropocentric assumptions and foregrounds the role of non-human entities in sustaining relationships (MacGregor, 2021).

8. Sacred Geography and Ecological Relationality

The cloud's journey from Ramagiri to Alaka maps a network of rivers, mountains, forests, and sacred sites (Kalidasa, trans. Kale, 2017, vv. 16–63).

These locations function as more than geographical markers. They form an interconnected ecological landscape shaped by memory, spirituality, and environmental belonging. Sacred geography in the poem creates a sense of relational attachment between humans and place.

Such representations align with environmental humanities approaches that emphasize the significance of place-based ecological consciousness (Åsberg, 2020).

The sacred sites encountered during the cloud's journey do not function merely as geographical markers. They reveal a dynamic interaction between cultural memory and ecological processes. Such a representation resonates with Zapf's (2022) ecohumanist argument that literature often mediates between cultural imagination and environmental realities. The rivers, forests, and mountains of Meghadutam are simultaneously ecological entities and repositories of collective meaning.

9. Non- Human Agency and Posthuman Ecologies

A posthuman reading reveals that non-human actors consistently influence the narrative. The cloud determines the movement of communication, landscapes shape perception, and seasonal processes structure experience (Kalidasa, trans. Kale, 2017, vv. 1–10; 35–50).

The cloud cannot be understood merely as an object. It functions as an active collaborator whose actions shape the unfolding narrative. Agency is therefore distributed across ecological networks rather than concentrated within human subjects.

This interpretation reflects contemporary posthuman scholarship that recognizes the active participation of non-human entities in ecological and cultural processes (Fox & Alldred, 2020; Braidotti, 2020).

10. Climate Humanities and Monsoon Imagination

Monsoon imagery occupies a central place in Meghadutam. The cloud's journey depends upon seasonal cycles, atmospheric movement, and ecological continuity (Kalidasa, trans. Kale, 2017, vv. 1–25).

Climate functions as more than a physical condition. It shapes emotional experiences, social connections, and ecological relationships. The poem presents environmental processes as deeply integrated with human existence.

Work in the climate humanities increasingly shows that ecological and cultural life are deeply intertwined. Environmental challenges are therefore not only ecological concerns but also questions of relationships, values, and ways of living in the world (Braidotti, 2020; Gough & Whitehouse, 2020).

11. Discussion

A posthuman ecofeminist reading of Meghadutam reveals that Kalidasa's ecological imagination extends far beyond ornamental descriptions of nature or the emotional suffering of separated lovers. The poem presents a world in which human and non-human lives exist within a shared network of relationships sustained through care, communication, movement, and interdependence. Such a perspective resonates strongly with contemporary environmental humanities, which increasingly challenge anthropocentric frameworks and emphasize relational modes of existence (Braidotti, 2020; Åsberg, 2020). Rather than positioning nature as a passive backdrop against which human emotions unfold, Meghadutam portrays ecological entities as active participants in the creation and circulation of meaning.

One of the most significant insights emerging from this study is the centrality of emotional ecology within the poem. The Yaksha's separation from his beloved is not represented as a purely psychological condition. His emotional state is continually mediated through interactions with the surrounding environment. From the opening verses, the cloud becomes intertwined with longing, memory, and hope (Kalidasa, trans. Kale, 2017, vv. 1–15). The emotional energy generated by separation moves outward into the landscape and becomes embedded within ecological processes. Rivers, forests, mountains, and monsoon clouds participate in the expression of feeling. Consequently, emotion is not confined to an individual subject but circulates through an interconnected ecological network.

This interpretation aligns with Mossner's (2020) argument that ecological awareness is deeply connected to affective experience. Environmental relationships are not solely material or intellectual; they are also emotional. In Meghadutam, longing acquires ecological dimensions because the natural world becomes the medium through which emotional connections are maintained. The Yaksha does not withdraw from nature during his exile. Instead, he turns toward

it as a source of companionship, communication, and continuity. Such a representation challenges modern assumptions that separate emotional life from environmental experience.

The ecological significance of the cloud deserves particular attention. Traditional interpretations often regard the cloud primarily as a poetic device or symbolic messenger. However, a posthuman ecofeminist perspective reveals a more complex dynamic. The cloud functions as an active ecological agent capable of shaping relationships across geographical distances. The Yaksha's appeal to the cloud is meaningful precisely because the cloud possesses mobility, connectivity, and environmental presence (Kalidasa, trans. Kale, 2017, vv. 5–10). Communication becomes possible not through human intervention alone but through collaboration with a non-human actor.

This representation corresponds closely with contemporary posthuman theories that question the exclusive attribution of agency to humans. Braidotti (2020) contends that human existence is always entangled with broader ecological and material systems. Similarly, Fox and Alldred (2020) emphasize that agency emerges through networks of relationships rather than through isolated individuals. The cloud in Meghadutam exemplifies such distributed agency. It carries messages, shapes movement, influences landscapes, and creates connections among distant places. Its role exceeds simple symbolism because it actively contributes to the unfolding of the narrative.

The poem therefore encourages readers to reconsider conventional distinctions between subject and object. The cloud cannot be reduced to an inert element of nature. Instead, it participates in communicative and ecological processes that affect both human and environmental realities. The active presence of non-human forces in the poem reflects a view of agency that reaches beyond the human, a perspective that has become increasingly significant in contemporary posthumanist scholarship (Fox & Alldred, 2020).

The concept of environmental communication further strengthens this interpretation. Communication in Meghadutam operates through ecological pathways rather than exclusively through spoken language. The cloud's journey creates a communicative network linking the Yaksha, his beloved, and the landscapes through which it travels. Meaning is transmitted not merely through words but through movement, atmosphere, memory, and place.

This broader understanding of communication reflects ecofeminist critiques of anthropocentrism. MacGregor (2021) explores that ecological relationships develop through interactions that extend beyond human-centered frameworks. In Meghadutam, communication is inseparable from environmental processes. The cloud's passage over rivers, forests, mountains, and cities transforms these locations into participants within a larger communicative system. Each landscape contributes to the transmission of emotional and ecological meaning.

Such an interpretation also highlights the significance of sacred geography within the poem. Kalidasa's detailed descriptions of rivers, mountains, forests, and pilgrimage sites are often admired for their geographical richness. Yet these descriptions perform a deeper ecological

function. The cloud's journey creates a map of interconnected places that together form an environmental and cultural network (Kalidasa, trans. Kale, 2017, vv. 16–63).

Sacred geography in Meghadutam is not merely religious or symbolic. It expresses an ecological consciousness grounded in relationships among humans, landscapes, and non-human entities. Places acquire meaning through their connections with living communities and environmental processes. Rivers nourish ecosystems and settlements. Mountains provide stability and orientation. Forests sustain diverse forms of life. These ecological functions coexist with cultural and spiritual significance.

This understanding resonates with Åsberg's (2020) call for environmental humanities approaches that emphasize interconnected ecological systems. The poem does not separate environmental value from cultural value. Instead, it presents landscapes as sites where ecological, emotional, and spiritual dimensions intersect. In doing so, it unsettles conventional nature–culture binaries and draws attention to the interconnected character of ecological and cultural life.

The relevance of sacred geography becomes even more apparent when considered in relation to contemporary environmental crises. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and ecological degradation often result from viewing landscapes primarily as resources for human exploitation. By contrast, Meghadutam encourages a relational understanding of place. The cloud's journey demonstrates that environmental spaces are interconnected and mutually dependent. Damage to one part of the ecological network inevitably affects the whole.

Another important contribution of the poem lies in its articulation of care ethics. Throughout the narrative, relationships are sustained through acts of support, reciprocity, and responsibility. The cloud agrees to carry the Yaksha's message. Rivers nurture surrounding environments. Seasonal cycles facilitate renewal and continuity. These interactions collectively create what may be described as an ecology of care.

Ecofeminist scholars have long emphasized the importance of care as an alternative to hierarchical and exploitative models of human–nature relationships (MacGregor, 2021). In Meghadutam, care is not limited to interpersonal relationships. It extends across ecological boundaries and includes non-human participants. The cloud's willingness to assist the Yaksha illustrates this principle. The relationship is not based on domination or control but on mutual recognition and interdependence.

This emphasis on care challenges dualistic structures that separate humans from nature. Rather than portraying nature as a resource to be used, Kalidasa presents ecological entities as partners within a shared world. Such a vision aligns with contemporary ecofeminist efforts to develop ethical frameworks based on reciprocity and environmental responsibility (MacGregor, 2021).

The poem's engagement with climate and seasonal change further strengthens its ecological relevance. The monsoon cloud occupies a central position within the narrative, making climatic processes inseparable from emotional and social experience. Rainfall, atmospheric movement,

and seasonal transitions shape the conditions under which communication becomes possible (Kalidasa, trans. Kale, 2017, vv. 1–25).

From the perspective of climate humanities, this representation is particularly significant. Scholars increasingly recognize that climate is woven into everyday experiences, cultural practices, and collective memories, extending far beyond the boundaries of scientific inquiry (Gough & Whitehouse, 2020). Meghadutam anticipates this insight by depicting climate as a force that influences relationships, memories, and movements. The monsoon cloud embodies both ecological and emotional significance.

The cloud's journey reveals how human lives, emotions, and aspirations are shaped through ongoing relationships with the natural world. Without the seasonal arrival of the monsoon, communication between the Yaksha and his beloved would remain impossible. Climate therefore functions as a mediator of social and emotional life rather than as a distant environmental background.

This relational understanding of climate also supports broader posthuman interpretations of the poem. Dovchin, Dovchin, and Gower (2024) note that contemporary discussions of the Anthropocene increasingly emphasize the need to recognize interconnected ecological communities. Meghadutam similarly portrays existence as a web of relationships extending across human and non-human domains. The cloud, rivers, forests, mountains, and seasonal cycles all contribute to the production of meaning and experience.

The convergence of ecofeminism and posthumanism within the poem ultimately reveals a distinctive ecological worldview. Ecofeminism highlights the importance of care, reciprocity, and relational ethics, while posthumanism challenges assumptions regarding human exceptionalism. Together, these frameworks illuminate how Meghadutam imagines a world in which agency, communication, and emotional significance are distributed across ecological networks rather than concentrated solely within human subjects.

The poem therefore offers more than a literary representation of longing. It presents a model of ecological coexistence grounded in mutual dependence and shared participation. Nature is neither silent nor passive. Instead, it acts, responds, connects, and communicates. The cloud becomes a messenger not because it is controlled by humans but because it possesses the capacity to participate within a larger ecological system.

Viewed in this way, Meghadutam contributes meaningfully to contemporary environmental humanities by offering a vision of relational existence that remains relevant in the twenty-first century. Its emphasis on interconnectedness challenges exploitative attitudes toward nature and encourages more ethical forms of environmental engagement. Through emotional ecology, sacred geography, environmental communication, climate consciousness, and non-human agency, Kalidasa's poem articulates a sophisticated ecological imagination that continues to speak to present environmental concerns.

Ultimately, Meghadutam suggests that ecological flourishing depends not upon mastery but upon relationship. Human and non-human lives are woven together through networks of care, communication, and interdependence. By foregrounding these connections, the poem anticipates many of the central concerns of contemporary ecofeminist and posthuman scholarship and demonstrates the continuing relevance of classical Sanskrit literature within global environmental discourse.

12. Conclusion

A posthuman ecofeminist reading of Meghadutam reveals a sophisticated ecological imagination that extends far beyond conventional nature description. The poem envisions a world structured by care, communication, interdependence, and shared vulnerability. Non-human entities participate actively in the production of meaning, while sacred landscapes function as sites of ecological relationship and ethical engagement.

By bringing together ecofeminism, emotional ecology, environmental communication, sacred geography, posthumanism, climate humanities, and care ethics, this study demonstrates that Meghadutam offers a remarkably relevant model of ecological thought. Its vision of relational coexistence provides valuable insights for contemporary environmental humanities and encourages renewed engagement with classical Indian literary traditions in the age of ecological crisis.

Rather than privileging human experience over ecological existence, Kalidasa constructs a relational world in which cultural and environmental life remain mutually dependent.

A similar idea appears in Zapf's (2022) ecohumanist thinking. Literature, in this view, becomes a space where human and non-human lives intersect, influence one another, and generate new ways of understanding the world.

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