

Mystique and society in Gagan Gill's Avāk: Kailāśa-Mānsarovar ek antaryātrā*

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Abstract

This paper addresses Indian Hindi poet Gagan Gill's account of her journey to Kailāśa-Mānsarovar. This is a text expressing the writer's desire to visit Kailāśa-Mānsarovar, but it actually becomes a reflection on myth, faith, identity, geopolitical issues of the Himalayan areas, and her own sense of finally letting go her husband after his death, happened more than one year before the journey. The journey to the mountains presents a cultural encounter with a different culture, but it is also a profound and spiritual journey.

Keywords: Mansarovar, Pilgrimage, Tibet

The *trimurti* of Hinduism – Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva – live in Brahmāloka, Vaikunṭha and Kailāśa. While it is not possible to visit Brahmāloka and Vaikunṭha as live beings, Hindus can indeed visit the abode of lord Śiva with their body and soul. Kailāśa lies in a remote part of the earth, being a peak in the Gangdisê Mountains, located in Ngari region in Western Tibet, China. Mount Kailāśa is known as Kangrinboqê /Gang Rinpoche (*gangs rin po che*) to Tibetans and Gang ren bo qi feng in Chinese, and it is revered and worshipped not only by Hindus, but also by Jains, Buddhists, and Bönpos, being thus held sacred for one fifth of the world population.¹

For the Tibetans who follow the Bön religion, which predates Buddhism in Tibet, Kailāśa is Yungdrung Gutseg (*gyung drung dgu brtsegs*), the 'pyramid of nine *svāstika-s*' on which Tönpa Shenrab (*ston pa gshen rab*), the founder of Bön religious tradition, descended from heaven on the earth. The entire area is a mystical region, and the hills

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¹ For general reference: John Snelling, *The sacred mountain. The complete Guide to Tibet's Mount Kailas*, London 1990; Katia Buffetrille, *Pèlerins, lamas et visionnaires. Sources orales et écrites sur les pèlerinages tibétains*, Wien 2000, pp. 15-105; Amilcare Barbero, and Stefano Piano, eds., *Religioni e sacri monti. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Torino, Moncalvo, Casale Monferrato 12-16 ottobre 2004*, Centro di Documentazione dei Sacri Monti Calvari e Complessi devozionali europei 2006.

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are the seat of all spiritual power.² According to the Jains, Ṛṣabhadeva or Ādināth, the first of the 24 *ūrthankara*, attained liberation from rebirth (*samādhi*) on Mount Aṣṭapāda, identified with one of the hills close to Mount Kailāśa. Mahāyāna Buddhism gained its foothold in Tibet through the Indian Buddhist saint of Nālandā, Padmasambhava (*padma 'byung gnas*: The Lotus Born, also known as Guru Rinpoche), who established the Nyingmapa (*nying ma pa*) school in the 8th century CE. The sage-guru born in a kingdom³, who is said to have transmitted Vajrayana Buddhism to Bhutan and Tibet and neighboring countries, is associated to numerous sites in the region, like Ciū *gompā*, a building covering a cave once occupied by Padmasambhava when he meditated on Yāma (Lord of Death). The most sacred part of the *gompā*, situated on a steep cliff overlooking Mānsarovar lake and having commanding views over the plain to Mount Kailāśa, is a small cave that is said to have been later used by Milarepa. Milarepa (*rje btsun mi la ras pa*, 11th-12th century)⁴ challenged and defeated Naro Bön-chung (*na ro bon chung*), champion of the Bön religion of Tibet, reaching the summit of Kailāśa. He did, however, fling a handful of snow on to the top of a nearby mountain, since known as Bönri, bequeathing it to the Bönpo and thereby ensuring continued Bönpo connections with the region. Even Guru Nānak – the founder of Sikhism and the first of the ten Sikh Gurus – made his way to the holy places in the Himalayan mountain-range. He set out to the north, up to Tibet and China on his third long preaching journey (*udāsī*) as a renouncer (1513-1518).⁵ During his travels in the Himalayan belt of Northern India Guru Nānak left a deep impact also on local people of Tibetan origin: amongst them was the then head of the Nyingmapa school, who became Guru Nānak's follower and invited him to Lhasa. At Mount Kailash, Guru Nānak had debates with the learned saints and fakirs. The most famous discussions are recorded in the *Siddh goṣṭhī* in the form of a dialogue in verse, reporting on his meeting with *siddha-s*, the descendants of the great Tantric Gorakhnātha who lived and

² Per Kvaerne, *Tibet Bon religion: a death ritual of the Tibetan Bonpos*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1985; Susanne Knodel, and Ulla Johansen, *Symbolik der tibetischen Religionen und des Schamanismus mit einem Beitrag zur Bon-Religion von Per Kvaerne*, Hiersemann, Stuttgart 2000.

³ Traditionally identified with the Swat Valley in present-day Pakistan, but possibly embracing a larger region, spreading on parts of present-day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Western Tibet (Zhang-zhung/Xangxung).

⁴ Jacques Bacot, ed., *Vita di Milarepa*, Italian transl. by Anna Devoto, Tascabili Bompiani, Milano 1989.

⁵ Grewal Dalvinder Singh, *Guru Nanak's travel to Himalayan and East Asian region: a new light*, National Book Shop, Delhi 1995.



meditated in mountain caves.⁶ Over the centuries the Kailāśa region has always evoked deep emotions in human beings, igniting the imagination of sages, poets and writers. The strong experience of this non-human muteness has equally attracted a large number of religious and secular people. Just recently the renowned British writer Colin Thubron published the travelogue *To a mountain in Tibet* (Chatto & Windus, London 2011), that incidentally has interesting parallels with the text I'm briefly analyzing in this paper, being a reflection on loss and grief, and about whether a journey can ever be a cure.

Gagan Gill's *Avāk: Kailāśa-Mānsarovar ek antaryātrā* is the literary account of a journey to Kailāśa, a pilgrimage which is immediately connoted as 'non-standard'. The person who sets out for the pilgrimage is, in fact, not trained in any formal religion, even if she desires to follow prescribed rites [13-14]. She is a Hindu woman who has come very close to Buddhism; she lives a secular life as a well off middle class woman, being a poet and widow of renowned Hindi writer late Nirmal Varmā (1929-2005). The wish to reach Kailāśa stems from a promise she made to her now deceased husband, but actually had been planned even before that, as a journey to be taken with a Greek friend of hers, but which had to be postponed because of Nirmal Varmā's illness. There is a constant intertwining of the sacred and the profane aspect of the journey, and the whole text can be used as an exercise in analyzing what happens to sacredness, and religious and sacred space in modernity. I will try to do it focusing on some aspects of the representation of what can be defined as the politics and poetics of sacred places in *Avāk*.

The politics of a sacred route

According to Niebuhr's definition 'Pilgrims are persons in motion—passing through territories not their own—seeking something we might call completion, or perhaps the word clarity will do as well, a goal to which only the spirit's compass points the way'.⁷ Pilgrimage can be described as a religious phenomenon in which an individual — or a group — sets forth on a journey to a particular cult location to seek the intercession of the divinity and/or the saints of that place in a wide range of concerns. But pilgrimage is also a social construction and a cultural product. The sacred, in fact, is imagined, defined and articulated within specific social, political and historical contexts. As

⁶ Kamala Elizabeth Nayar and Jaswinder Singh Sandhu, *The socially involved renunciate: Guru Nānak's discourse to the Nāth yogis*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 2007.

⁷ Richard R. Niebuhr, "Pioneers and Pilgrims," in *Parabola*, (IX:3; Fall, 1984) p. 7.



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John Eade and Michael Sallnow argue, a recurrent theme in pilgrimage is the reinforcement of social boundaries and distinctions, rather than their attenuation or dissolution.⁸ According to Van der Leeuw⁹ we can identify four kinds of politics in the construction of sacred space. Every establishment of a sacred place is a conquest of space, implying a politics of position; a politics of property whereby a sacred place is 'appropriated, possessed and owned', its sacredness maintained through claims and counterclaims on its ownership; a politics of exclusion, whereby the sanctity of sacred place is preserved by maintaining boundaries, separating the inside from the outside; and a politics of exile, which may take the form of a modern loss of or nostalgia for the sacred.

Avāk addresses these points referring to the changes that modernity introduced in the traditional pilgrimage route. Before political boundaries between India and China were fixed, there were about a dozen traditional routes to Kailāśa and a free flux of people between India and Tibet had been possible for many centuries. At the end of the 18th century, the Manchu supremacy completely excluded foreigners, ending any religious and/or diplomatic visit from the neighboring countries, and making Tibet a closed and forbidden land. Notwithstanding this, pilgrimage to sacred places as Kailāśa continued, and only after the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1959 the mountain became inaccessible: four years before the Cultural Revolution, in 1962, the Chinese banned all pilgrimage in the area, and for two decades devotees went on circling the mountain secretly and illegally. Only in 1981 were the first Tibetans and Indians permitted to return, and 12 years later a few hikers were allowed to cross the mountain borders between Nepal and Tibet. Today only two routes remain: one through Lipu Pass located in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, and the other through Nepal. Every year the Chinese Government issues 5,000 visas for travellers coming from India, but no individual can enter the area from India or Nepal without being part of an organized tour. The Ministry of External Affairs in India organizes the *yātrā* (journey: in the official documents it is not defined as *īrthayātrā*, pilgrimage) every year between June and September, with the assistance of States and providing financial support to agencies like the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam to offset the expenditure incurred by it for *yātrī*-s. There is a computerized draw for selection of *yātrī*-s and

⁸ John Eade, and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the sacred: The anthropology of Christian pilgrimage*, Routledge, London and New York 1991.

⁹ Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in essence and manifestation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1986 [1933].



some State Governments also provide financial assistance to the pilgrims, thus rendering the process somehow 'democratic'. Pilgrimage, thus, has become a highly institutionalized organisation, involving governments, travel agencies, and reception facilities, in a way very similar to what happens in the tourist system.

The 26-day round trip from Delhi implies a weeklong trekking in the Indian territory, that has the advantage that one get acclimatized to the high mountain and does not get high mountain sickness, which invariably tend to happen in the Nepal route; moreover, the so called Chotā Kailāśa, with the Om face on the mountain described in *Skandapurāna*, is seen only from the Indian border site Pithoragarh (Uttarakhand), at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China. Return trek is across Uttarakhand. The Nepal route – the one covered by Gagan Gill and described in *Avāk* – is not controlled by the Indian Government and the tours are organized by Nepali travel agents recognized by the Chinese Government, but this is no guarantee of quality: the route is generally accomplished in 25 days time, but some tour operators complete the entire *yātrā* in just 12-14 days and, in the process, people generally fall sick. In fact, this route is considered less arduous because of the Landcruisers' drive from Kathmandu to the base of Kailāśa, but it can be dangerous for health as it leaves very little time to acclimatisation, and sometimes tourists and/or pilgrims have died of high mountain sickness. Moreover, the decisions of the Chinese Government are unpredictable: as Gagan Gill puts it, "Weather can change all of a sudden on Mt. Kailāśa, as well as in Tibetan politics" [218].

The fact that that control of the area is in the hands of the Chinese government raises the issue of ownership of the territory, of the necessity of fixing and controlling boundaries and access to the routes, and of the repression of the local population, as well as the containment of the claims of the community in exile.¹⁰ The point of view of the writer is clearly anti-Chinese. This is principally due to the fact that Gagan Gill is a supporter of the Free Tibet movement, but it reflects also a more general attitude common to many Indians, who tend to mistrust their intrusive neighbor. China's invasion of Tibet is not only responsible for the Dalai Lama's exile, but it is disrespectful of the very identity of Tibetan people. As in any occupied country, soldiers and military camps bring about social disruption, with the spreading of prostitution and corruption [81]. Chinese policy in Tibet is trying to cancel the local culture through a process of colonisation by Han

¹⁰ Robert Barnett, ed., *Resistance and reform in Tibet*, Hurst, London 1994.



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people and through the media and educational policy based on Chinese only [53]. Last but not least, Chinese government try to hinder any possibility of contact between Tibetans and foreigners, not letting Tibetans learn English [97-102]. This socio-political reasons combine with a sort of basic anti-Chinese bias shared by many Indians: for example, Chinese are described as disgusting people, who eat any impure thing (dogs, rats, snakes) [52-54], and are greedy cheaters, selling fake copies of things that pilgrims and/or tourists require [154]. In Gagan Gill's opinion, Chinese arrogance and greed are reflected also in the control they exercise on the pilgrimage tours, as if to deliberately make travelling conditions worse for Indian pilgrims: Indians citizens travelling on the Nepali route, in fact, are allowed to cross the border only through Nepal on both ways, and this forces them to a long detour which runs parallel to the Indian border. Moreover, the Chinese government announced the intention to apply a 200 Yuan fee (about 25 USD) for the Kailāśa pilgrimage tour, with the risk of making an already difficult journey to an inaccessible area an unachievable goal, definitely unattainable for poor religious people [218]. Some Tibetans, too, do cheat and take advantage from the tourists, but this is somehow excused as a necessary reaction to poverty and to the dire conditions of the country [46-50; 68; 167]. The present situation of Tibet is clearly stated as disgraceful: in a meeting with a Tibetan child who claims that his name is Viṣṇu, the writer explains to him that this means that he is god. But the reaction is strong: "Me god! My foot! If I were god would I live here?" – that is, in such a poor and desperate country. This is a strong statement, in contrast to the traditional claim that this actually is the abode of gods!

Notwithstanding this desolating picture, hope is not lost. The argument proposed in order to show the resistance of Tibetan people recalls a typical trope of Indian nationalists of yore: even if Chinese rule in a political, economic, and social sense, Tibetans maintain a moral and spiritual supremacy [81; 102] that will allow them to overcome [138]. In brief, Tibetan culture is essentialized as religious and it is contraposed to the materialistic communist culture of China. In fact, Chinese people are depicted as totally uninterested in understanding the intellectual, spiritual, or artistic value of the Tibetan heritage, but they are willing to restore the monasteries they had destroyed at Mao's orders because they meet the pressure of the global public opinion and of the tourism industry [94]. Tibetans, on their side, resist violence because of their inner strength, due to their traditional culture and belief. Gagan Gill claims, therefore, that the real rulers of the country are not the oppressors, who enjoy no popular consensus, but those who, even while in exile, have conquered the people's hearts



and minds [102]. With the passing of time a sort of historical revenge, or divine justice, has taken place: the Chinese government has introduced the Yuen as only accepted currency in Tibet and nowadays in *gompā*-s thousands of Mao – the image that is printed on the one Yuen note having become the common name for the note itself – are found at the very feet of sacred images of Buddha or other saints, as if in a perennial gesture of piety [115].

For Tibetans in exile the prohibition to go back to their ancestral home is sorrowful, but even more painful if the awareness that nobody will perform the *korā* for them: this is the most important pilgrimage route for Tibetans, who leave an item of clothing (or hair, teeth or blood) to entrust the loved one/s who owned such objects to the goddess's grace. Yet, Tibetan in exile find it very hard to have somebody perform this rite for them. Gagan Gill acts as a broker between exiled and resident Tibetans: even if she does not speak the language, she succeeds in communicating in broken English and through bodily gestures. She is performing the *korā* for her friend Sāmdong Rinpoche, prime minister of the exiled leadership: she will leave a nail fragment of his at *olmā-lā*, the mountain pass with altitude of 5,630 m. termed after goddess *Tārā* (Tibetan: *Dolma/sgrol ma*), the 'mother of liberation' [30]. Moreover, she once had a close encounter with the Dalai Lama, who even gave her a *khatā*, the votive scarf used by Tibetans. These facts make her reliable to Tibetans who talk overtly to her about the difficult relations with Chinese oppressors, and about their dream of independence. They envy Tibetans who migrated to India, as they feel as prisoners at home, especially since the Nepali government has started a policy of collaboration with the Chinese [97-102].

While there is a tendency to think of sacred spaces in terms of sites and locations, it is important to focus also on religious routes. For the pilgrim the experiences obtained along the way are at least as important as the destinations themselves. In *Avāk* only a very limited number of pilgrims – one third of the original group – succeeds in completing the circumambulation of Kailāśa and, indeed, the route can be experienced without necessarily ever arriving at its objective. For some people this is due to a specific religious affiliation, prescribing only a partial and incomplete circuit: for example, *vaiṣṇava*-s go back after getting the *darśan* of one face of Kailāśa and of Mānsarovar, without performing the full journey [106]. Other people succumb to physical stress or must take care of others who get sick, like the *Svami Maharaj* from Cennaī who has too much faith in his spiritual strength and neglects to take medicines for his diabetes, thus forcing the whole



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group accompanying him to go back without completing the *parikramā* [103-106]. There is also the case of people who suddenly realize they cannot make it to the end, and decide to go back after completing 60 percent of the route. This happens to the cinema people from Bangalore: Mr. Rājendra Singh Bābū, a movie director who is supposedly interested in shooting a family movie about the journey to Kailāśa-Mānsarovar; Mohan, a film producer, and Komal, an actor. They had spent more than 30,000 Rs. for the technical equipment, and had trained along the way wearing thick trousers, waterproof jackets, oxygen masks, dark glasses, etcetera: “they looked like being bound for a space flight, rather than for a journey to Kailāśa”, comments ironically the writer [84]. They are supposedly the best equipped and trained in the whole group; nevertheless, they leave unexpectedly, claiming that this is due to a prior work commitment, which had in any case never been mentioned, not even to their female travel mate, the actress Rūpā [84]. This emphasizes that mere physical training is not enough in order to successfully complete the journey to Kailāśa. In Gagan Gill's own words: “This journey is not only a challenge to come out alive at an altitude ranging from 15,000 to 18,500 feet, but it also forces to survive the encounter with the dreadful inner world that is within human beings. The psychological effort required by this journey is not less than the extreme physical exertion. Before overcoming this journey one has to be fully ready to bear pressure from any side” [217].

Official and nonofficial appropriations of the pilgrimage route (not merely the site) is an important aspect of the socio-political setting of the region.¹¹ The route to Kailāśa has been appropriated by governments of the regions through which it passes: they image, market, and, hence, commodify it. Nowadays the dominant religious meaning as a pilgrimage destination is modified, so that a place of prayer becomes a heritage attraction, a ritual becomes a special event of tourism, harsh pilgrim routes for penance and self-renewal become off-road adventure trails, and so forth. In modern age, consumerist attitudes have affected not only travellers who come from richer countries, but also the residents of the regions. This, of course, can hinder the poetics of the sacred place, emphasizing a sense of a modern loss of or nostalgia for the sacred. In *Avāk* this is exemplified by the relation between pilgrims and markets. The writer herself seems almost unaware of her own consumerist attitude, and she buys a lot of things on the route, even if eventually she finds out that most of them are

¹¹ B. Graham and M. Murray, “The spiritual and the profane: the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela”, in *Ecumene* 4, pp. 389–409.



useless; on her way to Kailāśa she purchases what she thinks is a good equipment, often following a cunning shopper's advice, only to find out later that what she bought is absolutely unusable, regretting her incapacity to focus on the inner aspect of the experience rather than on trivial external needs [41-42; 68; 141-142]. Yet, also devotion implies consumerism, as pilgrims are shown as stressed by the eagerness to put together all the necessary items to perform their rites: Buddhists collect sacred items like prayer flags, while Hindus buy wood and other things required for celebrating *pūjā* on Kailāśa. Goods are available both legally and illegally: for example, there is a black market for pills against high mountain sickness [43], and other items requested by foreigners, like energy drinks, are counterfeited and sold off to unaware tourists and pilgrims [154].

Another aspect that is often emphasized in the text is the gap between the purity of the region in spiritual terms, and the filthiness of the environment [79; 82; 115-116]. This is, once again, partly due to the Chinese dominion fostering not only social, but also environmental degradation [115]. The water of Mānsarovar is filthy and this leads Gagan Gill to muse about the meaning of purity in our present time: "Frustration – shall I state that this is the frustration of my civilisation?*" What is not worth drinking is worth worshipping" [115]. She also records the process of desertification of the area, hinting at the possibility that the lake disappear soon, due to climate change and human misuse of hydric resources. The challenge to environment in the Himalayan area are serious, as the Himalayas are a fragile geo-ecologic system:¹² in Shalini Singh's words, "the Himalayas represent an oxymora of sorts, viz; massive and fragile, beautiful and unsightly, dangerous and endangered, scarred and sacrilegged, challenging yet inspiring, threatening and threatened".¹³ In *Avāk* we get a glimpse of what could be considered a theological manifestations of contemporary tourism through the notion of geopiety.¹⁴ In fact, even if most pilgrims are motivated by a religious belief, nowadays it is not uncommon to

*The editors spoke to two academicians who went in Aug 2012 as a part of the Indian yatra group. They found the Mansarovar water present of the put and wonders why this Mansarovar boshing is done by certain writers.

¹² Vikas Giri, *Sumeru parvat: Kailāśa Mānsarovar yatra*, Kailāśa Aśram, Jilā Pithaura garh, Uttar Pradesh 1999; Bikash Giri (illustration & author), forwarded by H.H. Vishnu Kant Shashtri, translated by Anshuman Singh Gularia, *Sumeru parvat: 12 years of Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage and transformation*, Kailash Ashram, Distt. Pithorgarh, Uttar Pradesh 2000; Shalini Singh, 'Secular pilgrimages and sacred tourism in the Indian Himalayas' in *GeoJournal* (2005) 64, pp. 215–223.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 221.

¹⁴ Shalini Singh, "Tourism in the sacred Indian Himalayas: An incipient theology of tourism?", in *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research*, 11: 4 (2006), pp. 375 — 389.



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have people visiting sacred places without being part of any institutionalized religion. Gagan Gill, for example, describes herself as such, and both her travel partners – Nirmal Varmā's niece and her husband – are introduced as secular young people only interested in trekking and in feeling the power of the earth. In places like Kailāśa Mānsarovar anything has a divine or a spiritual power for a religious person, but even a secular gaze can perceive the life of the earth. As Erik Cohen has shown,¹⁵ nowadays there is a sort of spirituality also in tourism, that relates to broader religious goals and aspirations: the objective of spirituality is fulfilled, for example, through the affirmation of the “environmental pilgrim”'s conviction in the science and sensibility of indigenous mores, religious practices and beliefs.

The poetics of a sacred place

The subtle interplay between secular attitudes and religious experiences, between socio-political issues and inner research, is significantly a sign of the dedifferentiation between the secular-sacred boundary as the secular becomes “less obviously secular”¹⁶ and some social movements have religious undertones: ecological movements, for example, take certain moral positions about what is good or bad and just or unjust and, while being explicitly secular movements, also approximate an “implicit religion”.¹⁷ Following Paul Heelas, differentiation and dedifferentiation can be understood as processes taking place within both modernity and postmodernity.¹⁸ While modernity is characterized by a separation between religion and politics (the idea of secular state), between science and religious life, there is also an internal differentiation, as contrasts develop between traditional, authoritative religions and liberal teachings with a strong dose of humanism. Modernity, though, has also witnessed tendencies in favor of dedifferentiation, with a search for the unifying or the unitary, as well as for the transcendental. With modernity comes the acknowledgement that all people are the same and all cultural and other differences are somewhat unimportant, privileging the construction of ‘humanity’. Gagan Gill often refers to the Dalai Lama's

¹⁵ Erik Cohen, “A phenomenology of tourist experiences” in *Sociology* 13 (1979), pp. 179–201.

¹⁶ Paul Heelas, *Introduction: on differentiation and dedifferentiation*, in P. Heelas, editor, with the assistance of D. Martin, and P. Morris, *Religion, modernity and postmodernity*, Blackwell, Oxford and Malden, MA 1998, p. 3.

¹⁷ J.P. Bartkowski, and W.S. Swearingen, “God meets Gaia in Austin, Texas: a case study of environmentalism as implicit religion” in *Review of Religious Research* 38 (1997), pp. 308–24.

¹⁸ Paul Heelas, *Introduction*, p. 5.



‘loving kindness’ spirituality: his humanistic, highly egalitarian “*basic spirituality*” includes “the basic human qualities of goodness, kindness, compassion, caring”; his subjectivized rendering of the ethic of humanity is clear when he says that “as long as we are human beings, as long as we are members of the human family, *all* of us really need these basic human values. Without these, human existence remains very hard, very dry. As a result, none of us can be a happy person, our whole family will suffer, and society will be more troubled. So, it becomes clear that cultivating these kinds of basic spiritual values becomes crucial.”¹⁹ The ways in which people experience, understand and value themselves, people who live around them, and humanity in general, has huge significance for how they act in the world; to have new experiences, to acquire new understandings, to change values during the ritual process – exemplified by *rites de passage* – has profound significance for life.

The tendency to combine symbols from (previously) disparate codes or frameworks of meaning could be interpreted as postmodern. Gagan Gill’s attitude, though, both in differentiation and dedifferentiation, seems definitely modern rather than postmodern. In fact, while postmodern dedifferentiation is associated with the deregulation and disorganisation of traditions, where fragments merge with a plethora of other cultural phenomena and create a series of complex and often ephemeral hybrids, modern dedifferentiation is associated with the construction of the whole, the unitary. As for differentiation, postmodern differentiation encourages micro-discourses, that by default are of equal standing; modern differentiation, on the contrary, constructs essential differences and hierarchies of value and discrimination. Of course, categories as ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ are drawn by Western critique and some may frown at this, as the text is set in a South Asian context. But Gagan Gill’s culture is definitely cosmopolite, being composed by her South Asian ancestor’s tales and scripts, or by her husband’s writings –to which her prose style seems to be often inspired– as well as by French, American or Mexican literature: the *Mahābhārata*, the *purāṇas*, and Akkā Mahādevī’s *vacan-s* have gone to Kailāsa in the writer’s mind together with verses by Charles Baudelaire, W.H. Auden, Roberto Juarrez, Philippe Jaccottet [212]. Gagan Gill, therefore, does not hesitate to quote freely from sacred texts pertaining to the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian tradition, she refers to myths and rites belonging to different religious fields, and also cites literary references with no

¹⁹ Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler, *The Art of Happiness: A handbook for living*, Mobius Easton Press, Riverhead 1998, p. 258 (his emphasis).



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particular religious connection; but, instead of adhering to relativism and pragmatism, she claims that individualized, deregulated religion must bow before 'real experience', which is described as a universal experience, in a way that reminds me of the Turnerian paradigm, according to which pilgrimage had certain similarities with the notion of the rite of passage.²⁰ Victor and Edith Turner's hypothesis that pilgrimage is a discrete phenomenon, which stands beyond – indeed involves an abrogation of – secular social structures, has increasingly proved insufficient to describe the often troubled, competitive relations among visitors to sacred sites. Nevertheless, their work emphasizes how pilgrimage encourages people to move (literally and metaphorically) from their normal, everyday lives and to enter, however temporarily, different social and spiritual worlds. That the journey to Kailāśa Mānsarovar brings about a radical change in those who perform it is clearly stated in *Avāk*, as all the protagonists note that after returning home everything looks alien, as if they do not belong any longer to their common everyday world [206]: the individual who undergoes such a unique experience, as in a rite of passage, returns renewed, even transformed.

This poetics of a religious place may be shaped by political relations, and while there may exist a simultaneous politics and poetics of religious places and experience, only the latter is real and immanent for the individual religious adherent. The 'poetics', the 'substantial', the 'essential character' of religious place, assumed to be a sacred place, has long drawn attention from scholars of religion.²¹ If the divine is everywhere, this would allow an unbounded, unfixed notion of sacred space: yet, in *Avāk*, Kailāśa is described as a sacred place where the divinities dwell, demarcated within and limited to a particular physical and geographical area. It is also a place where the divine reveals him/herself to human beings. This is why, according to Gagan Gill, all non-believers should go there, so that they can receive their spiritual initiation [140-141]. On the other hand, a sacred place like Kailāśa-Mānsarovar is also a site where the divine tries to conceal from human beings: gods built their abodes in such a remote and inhospitable place

²⁰ Victor Turner, and Edith Turner, *Il pellegrinaggio*, Argo, Lecce 1997 (Italian translation of *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, published in 1978).

²¹ Suffice to mention Mircea Eliade's work, contending that the sacred irrupts in certain places as revelations (hierophanies), causing them to become 'powerful centers of meaningful worlds', set apart from ordinary, homogeneous space (*Il sacro e il profano*, Italian translation from French (*Le sacré et le profane*) by Edoardo Fadini, P. Boringhieri, 1967); B.C. Lane, on the contrary, characterizes the sacred as that which chooses, rather than that which is chosen (*Landscapes of the sacred: geography and narrative in American spirituality*, Paulist Press, New York 1988).



precisely to get a safe place and some privacy [175]. By maintaining boundaries the sanctity of sacred place is preserved and in this case the natural unfriendliness of the environment enforces a politics of exclusion, helping in selecting the chosen ones and excluding the unworthy ones. Devotion, in fact, urges many human beings to come all the way to these dangerous places in order to find the gods, but only a very limited number can reach their goal. These are the ones who actually renounce everything, get rid of all their rational or religious armors, and enter the absolute mystic silence in perfect solitude: they are the real devotees, even if they may not fit into any institutional religion [200].

Sacredness, therefore, is intimately linked to states of consciousness: it is possible to go now and again to a sacred place without recognizing it as sacred. In *Avāk* there are many instances of the writer not immediately getting aware of the sacredness of places or persons. This happens, for example, in the episode in which Gagan Gill, exhausted from the day trek, reaches a *gompā* where a monk silently invites her inside. She feels that she had already prayed a lot in the morning, and she does not get in: for a while she stands outside listening to the prayers, then she salutes and goes back. Later she finds out that that was the *gompā* where *guru* Padmasaṅbhava had spent his last seven years, and that it contains a godly man's *murti* identified either with Padmasaṅbhava or *guru* Nānak [131]. When one does recognize sacredness, however, one may experience it as the 'numinous'. According to Rudolf Otto's work,²² when the numinous grips or stirs the mind powerfully, it produces feeling and responses that are not ordinary ones intensified, but rather are unique or *sui generis*, like numinous dread or awe-fullness (the *mysterium tremendum*), a mental state of stupor, shudder, creature-consciousness and the simultaneous experiencing of the self as nothing, sense of unworthiness and need for 'covering'. All these states are present in the writer's experience of Kailāśa, that is described as an encounter with tremendousness (*tremendum*), mysteriousness (*mysterium*), and fascination (*fascinans*).

Another instance of the fact that the sacred is recognized through a particular state of consciousness is given by the character of Rūpā, a young glamorous actress from Bangalore who turns out to be a very devout and profound knower of the *śāstra*-s, a downright *purohit* [72]. She is portrayed as an earthly manifestation of the divine: the writer

²² Rudolf Otto, *Il sacro : l'irrazionale nella idea del divino e la sua relazione al razionale*, Italian translation by Ernesto Buonaiuti, N. Zanichelli, Bologna 1926.



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has been guessing this all along the way, but she recognizes it, in a flash, only during a “wonderful, supernatural *pūjā*” performed by Rūpā at Mānsarovar. Gagan Gill reaches the rite place after a tormented night, when she suffered from a sudden and violent abdominal pain that forced her outdoors in order to reach the toilet. If the sacred place is a ritual place, a location for “formalized, repeatable symbolic performances”,²³ also the human body plays a crucial role in the ritual production of sacred place: not only ritual action “manipulates basic spatial distinctions between up and down, right and left, inside and outside, and so on, that necessarily revolve around the axis of the living body”,²⁴ but the body itself is a micro-cosmos, an instrument for attaining awareness, as in the practice of yoga. In the narration it is a bodily need that allows the writer to get a *darśana* of stars dipping into the lake, an epiphany of gods and goddess taking an ablution in Mānsarovar. Swaying in physical pain, astonishment and awe, she invokes Śiva Mahādeva and surrenders to him, thus undergoing a sort of rebirth, which is symbolized by the reiterated feeling of death and by the numerous analogies to labour pains and the process of giving birth. When in the morning she finally gets to the place where Rūpā is celebrating a *pūjā*, she is confused by the night experience, but it is indeed thanks to this very particular state of consciousness that she is finally able to recognize Rūpā’s divine nature, as a manifestation of the goddess, Gāyatrī [126].

The fact that the pilgrimage is performed in a land torn by political troubles, and in a landscape that, at least in part, has been transformed from originally bucolic mountain villages into unplanned inhabited centers, somehow hinders the poetics. The texts often emphasize the gap between the inner world where a spiritual quest is in progress and an outer reality of prosaic matter-of-factness. This is stylistically carried out, for example, through the use of speech figures like anticlimax, as in the passage when Gagan Gill reaches Zutul puk (‘the miracle cave’) on her way back from Kailāśa. While performing the circumambulation of Kailāśa pilgrims undergo a symbolic death, and the journey is an experience of bodily and psychic suffering, even implying a risk of actual death. In *Avāk* this is experience by the writer who faces the pilgrimage without any prior physical training and with a psychic burden represented by the necessity to celebrate the final rite for her deceased husband. In the mentioned passage she has just performed

²³ David Chidester, and Edward Tabor Linenthal, eds., *American sacred space*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN 1995, quoted by Lily Kong, “Mapping ‘new’ geographies of religion: politics and poetics in modernity”, in *Progress in Human Geography* 25,2 (2001) p. 220.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.



the ultimate parting from Nirmal Varmā, leaving his shirt at \square olmā-lā so that Tārā, the goddess, can protect him [172]. As a result she feels at the same time elated (“Well, the *parikramā* is complete! the worst is over! How many people do succeed? I have seen god and I’m going back!” [182]) and devastated, totally emptied (“Hey, what’s going on? Am I chanting the name of death instead of the name of god? *I have come here to die! I have come here to die!* [!]) What comes out of my lips is beyond my control! *I have come here to die! I have come here to die!*” [182]; I don’t feel like anything! god is nowhere! justice is nowhere! [185]). There is a long passage dramatically constructing a metaphysic and philosophical world, where Gagan Gill is completely lost in her musings. This is suddenly broken by an unexpected hard landing into the trivial reality of bodily life:

Oh my Lord, I want to die! You did not accept me

I want to sleep now. I want to die.

Will I ever be able to forget what happened today?

Where shall I go? I’m escaping myself, where can I go?

- *Will you go to the toilet?* [185].

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to analyze Gagan Gill's literary account of her journey to Kailāśa – *Avāk: Kailāś-Mānsarovar ek antaryātrā* – as a text discussing what happens to sacredness, and religious and sacred space in modernity. There is a constant intertwining of the sacred and the profane aspect of the journey, which is a pilgrimage but also a reflection on identity and on some geopolitical issues of the Himalayan areas. It is also a personal account of an experience of loss and grief, and a reflection about whether a journey can ever be a cure, but this issue has not been investigated in the present reading, as I focused on the politics and poetics of the sacred route to Himalaya and of the sacred place of Kailāśa-Mānsarovar. *Avāk* addresses the issue of changes that modernity introduced in the traditional pilgrimage route, emphasizing the present geopolitical situation of Tibet from the point of view of an Indian supporter of the Free Tibet movement. I have used Van der Leeuw's paradigm, recognizing four politics of sacred space. In the text the politics of position and property of sacred space is dealt with discussing the international relationships between China, Nepal, India, and the issue of the Tibetan population both within Tibet and abroad. Politics of exclusion and of exile are dealt with through a reflection on the composite identity of the modern individual, for



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whom the secular-sacred boundary is constantly redefined by a process of differentiation and dedifferentiation. For Gagan Gill the poetics of a religious place may be shaped by political relations, but while there may exist a simultaneous politics and poetics of religious places and experience, only the latter is real and immanent for the individual. The experience of the sacred is intimately linked to states of consciousness and only in the inner world an authentic experience is possible.

