

## Dying trees in globalizing Hindi literature: environment, middle classes, and posthuman awareness

Alessandra Consolaro

This article presents themes and arguments concerning the relationships between India's middle classes and the complex meanings and materialities of the environment with reference to literary treatments in the Hindi field, drawing also on environmental, social-cultural and political literature. It focuses on examples from Hindi short stories (*The neem tree* by Chandan Pandey and *Death of a tree* by Alka Saraogi) and poetry (*The killing of a tree* by Kunvar Narayan), dealing with civic indifference and the public sphere; environmental activism and ecological thinking; and environmental metaphors of creative writing.

### 1. Nature, Hindi literature, and the “Indian middle class”

For a long time the Hindi literary field has been dominated by middle class<sup>1</sup> writers, who have dealt with Nature from different points of view. Talking about ‘poetry of Nature’ in the precolonial Indian context would simply be anachronistic, as the notion simply did not exist: poetry was full of descriptions of nature and of the objects that constitute nature, but these were not theorized as a literary goal. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *kharī bolī* poetry was virtually inexistent, while prose was still in its developing phase. In a multilingual literary environment, a rich and complex heritage was available: the classical Sanskrit poetry, the refined Urdu/Persian lyrical tradition, the popular Braj, Gujarātī, Pañjābī archive, the experimental Baṅglā vanguard, and the “modern” English.

As Valerie Ritter (2011) has shown, it was at the beginning of the 20th century, in connection to the nationalistic movement, that natural scenes and objects of the Sanskrit metaphor began to be separated from their subjects, becoming ‘independent’ subjects of poetry: previously they were only used allegorically and metaphorically as *uddīpana vibhāva* (kindling instruments) in order to heighten the *rasa*. Other available models of nature were the Paradise Garden from the Indo-persian *sūfi* tradition and the English Romantic model of Wordsworth, but also the realistic, scientific

---

<sup>1</sup> Of course, the umbrella term ‘middle class/es’ is a simplification for a multifaceted class showing many differences when analyzed through income, education, or occupational criteria. For example, even within the same income categories, there are actually major differences on the rural-urban axis; middle class sense of belonging increases with educational attainment; social and political behaviors at the upper ends of the spectrum may differ greatly from the middle or lower section.

representations of *muḡal* miniatures, as well as the botanical drawings realized by the British. In connection to the development of a nationalistic ideology, writing in *khari bolī* became equivalent to adhering to an implicit socio-political agenda, not only according to the rhetoric of ‘natural language’, but also referred to notions of progress, modernity, and democracy.

In postcolonial India, the nationalistic orientation became less evident. Modernist writers such as Ajñeya developed a notion of Nature – equated to one’s own roots and origins – contraposed to Civilization, meant as annihilating and dehumanizing, especially when identified with urban society. Nirmal Varma’s style too – another iconic fiction writer of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – is marked by a symbolic undercurrent that reflects the inner life of the characters in images of nature and landscape. In his fictional works, where memory plays a pivotal role, Nature is motionless and directionless time, operating at an autonomous level and assuming a character of its own. Fog, streams, clouds, etcetera, are operative symbols of human fragmentation and confusion, functioning as nature’s prescriptions for human inadequacy.

Even today, the relationships between India’s middle classes and the complex meanings and materialities of the environment can be traced not only in environmental, social-cultural and political literatures, but also in literary works, with particular reference to civic indifference and the public sphere; environmental activism and ecological thinking; and environmental metaphors of creative writing. Of course, individual writers have developed many and diversified ways of interpreting Nature in their literary works and it is difficult – maybe even not desirable – to aim to a comprehensive treatment of the topic. Nevertheless, it is possible to give an idea of some aspects of the relation between literary works and natural elements as they appear in contemporary Hindi literature by middle class writers. This is also an opportunity to introduce to the international audience Hindi literary works that are mostly unknown, insofar discussions about Indian literatures, even in the academic field, are often confined to Anglophone authors and texts.

In this article, I focus on the theme of dying trees as shown in three texts composed by ‘middle class’ Hindi authors belonging to different generations. Kunwar Narain (Kuṃvar Nārāyaṇ, b. 1927) is one of the most celebrated Hindi poets of the postcolonial period linked to the New Poetry movement; Alka Saraogi (Alkā Sarāvgī, b. 1960) is one of the most distinguished Hindi fiction-writers, whose novel *Kalikathā via Bypass*, on the life of Kolkata’s Marwaris, is a milestone in contemporary Hindi literature; Chandan Pandey (Candan Pāṇḍey, b. 1982) belongs to the group of upper-caste and upwardly mobile young Hindi writers from engineering or management backgrounds that has risen to challenge the monopoly of English-language publishing over the readership for Indian commercial fiction. In the selected texts, the theme of the dying tree has been used both as a metaphor referring

to the work of a creative writer, and as a literary device introducing ecological and environmental consciousness in a more and more urbanized contemporary landscape.

## 2. The killing of a tree

Kunwar Narain is one of the most celebrated Hindi poets of the postcolonial period, linked to the New Poetry movement (Rosenstein 2004). In Kunwar Narain's poetry, one can trace a poetics of trees culminating in a poetics of ecology. While humanism remains the paradigm for his thought, Kunwar Narain discusses also its unkept promises. He suggests that the natural world, that especially in his later works becomes more and more prominent, counts as the basic unit of reference for the human.

A widespread Indian cultural construction of nature is all-inclusive and all embracing: a number of Indian scriptures offer specific examples of inclusive attitudes toward plants. In many Indian cultures, there is a recognition of an ecological and karmic link between plants, humans, and animals. Plants are recognized as living, sentient beings with their own purposes and goals. Therefore, they are considered to be within the realm of moral responsibility, and are appropriate recipients of compassion and nonviolent conduct (*ahimsa*). In the Jain tradition, the ethical ideals of compassion and nonviolence are taken to their logical ends: killing plants is not the same as killing a human being, but it is still considered a violent deed, creating negative *karman*. According to a much shared Hindu belief, each and every being, human or nonhuman, animate or inanimate, is pervaded by *ātman* and *brahman* and is connected with the wholeness of life. This leads to the enunciation of an ecological world-view in which human beings are thought of as having a spiritual kinship with the nonhuman world.

In *Ek vr̥kṣ kī hatyā* (*The killing of a tree*, Nārāyaṇ 2002: 54) a non-specified "I" talks about a tree. The first stanza introduces the human protagonist going back home and noting the absence of the old tree that used to stand by the gate as a guard. He used to protect the house from thieves, and shared with the poetic "I" the anxiety to protect the civil community from external enemies. This extends from the domestic space to the municipality up to the nation, culminating in a global exhortation to protect the environment and the quality of human life:

In fact, there always lurked in our ways  
 The mortal fear of some common foe –  
 Such that            the house had to be saved from thieves  
                           the city from plunderers  
                           the nation from its enemies

had to be saved –  
river from becoming drain  
air from becoming smoke  
food from becoming poison  
  
jungles from becoming deserts  
people from becoming jungles (Narain 2008: 159)

Danuta Stasik asserted that Kunwar Narain’s humanism is “non-anthropocentric” (2014: 30). I claim instead that in this vision the focus is very much on humans, without denying the powerful spiritual bonds (or at least nostalgic longings) that still connect Indians to animals, water, woods, etcetera. In fact, the protagonist of the poem is a fully anthropomorphized tree. A shared notion in different Indian religious tradition is that in order to achieve freedom one must be born as human (sometimes explicitly as a man), and here lies the paradox of Indian ‘anthropocentrism.’ There is a deep and abiding preoccupation in Indian civilization with the distinction between the ‘human’ and the ‘natural.’ A much quoted passage of the *Bhagavadgītā* (2.18. GRETIL 2016) asserts that the basic distinction is between *puruṣā* and *prakṛti*, that is not between body on one side and mind or spirit on the other, but between the complex of changeable elements in the personality (including body, mind, and intellect) and the eternal, unchangeable soul. The challenge for human beings caught in the web of confusion spun by the strands of *prakṛti*, is to recognize their true identities as immortal souls and escape the bonds of nature. Technically speaking, the distinction between *puruṣā* and *prakṛti* belongs to only two of the classic Hindu philosophical traditions – Sāṃkhya and Yoga – that do not, by any means, serve as the dominant framework for the interpretation of reality in the Indian milieu. However, the distinction has wide influence even in nondualistic traditions, such as Advaita Vedānta, that express a strong conviction that eternal things have ultimate value and changeable things do not: ‘Nature’ encompasses the things that change and pass away.

Buddhism – another important cultural reference for Kunwar Narain – does not share the Hindu conviction about the permanence of the individual soul, but it is suspicious of the difficulties and dangers of the ‘natural’ world, even if this does not imply hostility to nature as such. The natural world is seen as a locus and an illustration of the impermanence and *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) of death and rebirth. In order to seek a human good one must not attempt to dominate or destroy nature, in the form of either animals or plants. Freedom can be attained only if a state of awareness is

cultivated, in which the wild and untamed aspect of nature – all that is impermanent and unsatisfactory – be relinquished in order to achieve the sense of peace and freedom that is represented by the state of *nirvaṇa*. At the same time, enlightenment is made present in this body and this earth; therefore the human beings have to take responsibility for the harmony, the health, and the wellbeing of the holy setting of the quest for enlightenment.

The concluding line in the poem seems to draw from this trend of thought, but adds to it a social nuance that allows me to shift the attention to a particular construction of society that is suggested. Kunwar Narain plays with the etymological meaning of the term ‘jungle’, that denotes both a dry, desert space, and a wild land overgrown with dense spontaneous vegetation. He thus emphasizes the need to prevent desertification, but also the urgency to have a control on wilderness: nature deprived of the control by humans is connoted as savage, ferine, and barbaric. Human beings too become savage, ferine, and barbaric when living outside the civilizing control of society. To this point, one should remember that Indian forests – nearly six hundred million square kilometers – are home to over 35 million Adivasi (once defined as Tribals) hunters, fishers, cultivators, and herders pursuing their livelihoods, and Rajasthan’s large desert is thoroughly peopled and routinely crisscrossed by herders and traders. Therefore, this definition of ‘society’ seems to follow the overarching tendency to equate society with an urban, middle class milieu.

According to a widespread notion, Indian environmentalism arose in opposition to an anti-environmental government. Yet, as Shiv Visvanathan has showed (2002), the State of India has seen environmentalism as one of its sources of legitimacy, developing an “ecocratic discourse” that has provided justification to anti-democratic actions such as the clearing of slums in the name of disease prevention and the relocation of villages for dam building. Violence and exclusion have often accompanied conservation agendas and urban beautification schemes. Also in industrial settings, poor working conditions make factory workers more vulnerable to the toxic burden of urban pollution, and when factories are closed in the name of environment protection, the plight of the displaced workers deprived of their living wage, is considered by the middle-class elite as the unavoidable cost that must be borne for the sake of lessening the city’s pollution (Baviskar, Philip and Sinha 2006: 193-218).

Building on Spivak’s statement that the legitimation of the colonial project was based on some pronouncements regarding indigenous populations, postulating that they were “not graduated into humanhood” (1991: 229), I claim that in postcolonial India the only people fully entitled to the status of humanity/citizenship have come to be the middle classes (Consolaro 2009), whose environmental consciousness finds expression in this verse. The urban, educated middle and elite classes took on the

mantle of leadership in the nationalist struggle, forging some element of unity with the masses, but this mostly remained a superficial championing of the poor. The middle classes in India have been growing in size over the last century, more particularly after Independence, and the wealthier and more powerful sections of the population quickly turned to secure their own narrow class interests. During the early 1990s, with the introduction of economic reforms and an increasing integration of the Indian economy into the global markets, a qualitative shift affected the Indian middle classes, while the notion of two Indias became increasingly more visible and found entry into the debates on expanding social and economic inequalities. The public space has been transformed into a commercial zone or consumer space, excluding those who cannot participate in its consumerism: the beautification of cities, the clean city/smart city/mall culture, deny the visibility of poor people, who have been rendered as illegal and excluded them from public space.

In the analyzed verses, genuine aspiration to protect the environment is connected to an anxiety to defend a clean and safe place from intruders, who are perceived as a menace to order and stability, as well as a polluting menace to the world. Let us not forget that the hygienically environmental metaphor had already been used in India between 1975 and 1977 during the so-called Emergency in order to legitimate the war to poverty, that was, in Indira Gandhi's words "the greatest polluter" (Gandhi 1972), and it is still in use in order to justify urban beautification policies (Ghertner 2010). In the next section, I will turn to another literary example dealing with the Indian middle class 'elite environmentalism.'

### 3. The neem seedling

Chandan Pandey's short story *Nīm kā paudhā* (Pāṇḍey 2012) brings the focus on the increasing concern with pollution and urban squalor in the Indian middle class 'elite environmentalism'.

The protagonist of the short story is Roli, a middle class young woman working in an office. She migrated from a village to the city, and is a typical member of the emerging Indian young middle class. She lives in a women's hostel, has a rich social life and a boyfriend. She is perfectly at ease in the urban milieu, but is aware and proud of her rural roots. In fact, she has a derisive reaction when some environmentalist activists enter the cafeteria where she is used to have lunch, campaigning in favour of planting trees. Not only she sarcastically looks down to people who cannot recognize and name different trees, but she can rely on memories of the greenery she sees when she visits home as a relieving balm for eye pain after a hard day's work.

The story focuses on the relationship Roli develops to a tiny neem seedling that is entrusted to her by an activist. When she tells friends and acquaintances that she got a neem tree, she gets

different reactions. Some just suggest that she throw it away, others are enthusiastic tree protectors, but nobody has a solution for the main problem: where is it possible to find enough soil in order to plant a seedling of *Azadirachta indica*, that will grow to a height of 15–20 meters? Trying to identify a “natural” place, Roli thinks of a park close to her residence, but soon her hopes shatter away:

The park was full of foreign plants, mostly small ones, remarkable for their fragranceless flowers. Everything was systematically kept in order, as if they were no plants and flowers, but a painted scene, a beautiful painting, so likely that it seemed natural. The park had a lot of space. She went to a gardener, who introduced himself not as a ‘mali’ but as an ‘in charge.’ Without any preamble, Roli pointed to the eastern corner of the park. “I must plant this neem tree in that place. You got a hoe?” She would have never imagined what followed.

The gardener said, “One cannot plant trees like that in this park: there are rules!” “What do you mean?” “Regulations, norms, a rule, a law. Every year many plants are bought for this park. There is a board who knows which plants are to be planted for the health of the population of this city, and which nursery they must be bought from.”

Roli got blue in the face: “Oh, come on! This is a neem tree!”

The in-charge for the park replied, “Come back in July, after the starting of the rain season. I’ll submit a request for permission to the board.”

Grinding her teeth in anger Roli hissed: “What the hell are you talking about, you old moron?” She grabbed the plant by the leaves and left the park [...]. She pondered a couple of minutes whether she should be angry to the old man for his wickedness or should rather feel sorry for his stupidity and negligence.

Roli’s growing concern with the neem plant contrasts with her reaction to the gardener. She talks to him with a tone of command, even if she is young and he is “old”, which would generally imply deference and respect on her side. Roli’s behavior to the gardener shows a rude and patronizing attitude: she does not need any preamble or polite introduction, as she sees him as a hierarchically inferior “Mali,”<sup>2</sup> just a servant. She does not try to understand that the man works in an organized and complex system, but she just disregards him as “wicked”, “stupid”, and “negligent.” That embodies a typical middle class annoyance to an organized collectivity system requiring norms, rules, and bureaucracy. In fact, Indian middle classes steadily resort to private services, and tend to withdraw from engagement with local government (Harriss 2012).

---

<sup>2</sup> The Mali caste is technically classified as Backward Class (OBC), spread across 89 districts in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Andhra Pradesh. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Marathi activist and reformer for the uplifting of low caste people Mahatma Jotirao Phule was born in a Mali family (O’Hanlon 1985).

Upper middle-class civil society in India is often glorified as ‘vibrant’, but it is neither markedly ‘civil’ nor notably ‘social.’ The urban rich, upper middle classes have consolidated the hold on power they already had in colonial times. In postcolonial India, dispossessed poor remained excluded by lucrative work, social networks, and education. In the development discourse created by the State and the rich, the poor could bargain for a share of state resources through the production of categories such as "Other Backward Classes" or "Below Poverty Line," but remained outside civil society, occupying a fuzzy 'political sphere' where they organized into groups on an ad hoc basis in order to request government resources and help (Chatterjee 1998, 2004). Nowadays, business and industrial elites in metropolitan areas have often used funds from international organizations (e.g. World Bank) to establish NGOs that present themselves as agents of social development while effectively are elite civil society organizations that “crowd out” opportunities for other sections of urban society to become more involved in participatory governance, thus neutralizing political threats from the poor (Harriss 2006).

Another crucial theme in the short story is the shortage of soil and open space in the urban context. In her relation to the seedling Roli personifies “him” as a king, a boyfriend, a baby. She realizes that even if she plants the neem seedling, the shrub might be eaten by animals, or uprooted for fun by children or other people. Someone might tear him off in order to get a stick to clean their teeth. She feels the responsibility to protect him, feeling that she is his whole family. She cannot just plant him on a pile of garbage or in a vacant lot and abandon him. Neither is she willing to install the plant in the garden, as it would grow too large and it would have to be cut within a couple of years. She finally thinks of her village and calls home, in the hope to find a sympathetic response from her own family, who live in a place where soil is not so overused as in an urban area. Yet, as it turns out, her father and brother have discarded slow-growing trees in favor of eucalyptus and poplars, that are more water-consuming but profitable in five years: they refuse to consider adopting the neem seedling.

As ethnographic and religious literature shows, neem trees are traditionally considered as the village pharmacy, and they are objects of worship, insofar they are an embodied form of a goddess, whose presence is enhanced with colorful ornamentation and a facemask appended to their trunk. That India has an uninterrupted tradition of tree worship is widely attested by archaeological and textual evidence drawn from scriptures and ancient literatures such as the *Veda-s*, *Upaniṣad-s*, *Purāṇa-s*, and vernacular traditions. In contradistinction to anthropologists like Stewart Guthrie, who see anthropomorphism as an “unconscious perceptual strategy” (1995: 149), David Haberman believes that such adornments are added in a conscious attempt “to help make connections with [the divine]



stronger and more intimate” (2013: 133). Roli’s village family’s callousness is particularly striking, as it witnesses that the profound significance of the neem tree is somehow fading out in the present consumer oriented world.

Eventually, Roli gives in. On the next Sunday she takes a bus to the Yamuna, convinced that she must abandon the plant to his destiny. The journey is disastrous: at the bus stop a wild crowd is fighting to get on buses, therefore Roli has to wait for a long time in the scorching sun. Covered with sweat and dust, when she manages to put one foot on an overcrowded bus, she has to travel with a foot floating in the air, holding on to something with one hand while the other holds the plant. The worst happens while they are getting off: her bag strap gets caught in the crowd and while she bends down to pull it back the plant falls to the ground and gets trampled by the feet of people who are getting off. A dejected and shocked Roli plants what remains of the neem “in the midst of that water infested with sand and garbage, adverse and alien to the plant.”

I would like to read this story within the frame of rising consumerism and business oriented attitude in present-day India. Under the name of environmentalism there is often a regressive nature: the ‘green’ concerns and activities of many ‘armchair environmentalists’ have little or no impact on their consumer lifestyles. The standard environmental narrative regarding India, though accurate in many aspects, is often faulty in large matters: it focuses on the negative aspects of colonialism and on a wise peasantry endowed with an instinctive respect for natural processes. In a nostalgic mode it tells a story of pervasive precolonial social harmony and self-sufficiency for which there is little evidence; it is hostile to the market system as if it were an alien factor, thus ignoring that Europe’s attention to India was drawn in the first place by the latter’s trade goods and merchant capital, and that foreign investment had a strong impact in rural India well before the colonial era.

India’s ongoing and projected economic growth poses many the environmental risks, connected mainly to rising personal consumption levels; growing urbanization; expanding infrastructure; and a greatly increased demand for all types of resources. The management of these factors will determine the nature of the outcomes that are realized. The higher-consuming middle classes have a massive environmental impacts, but they have also a pivotal role in shaping the legal, political, cultural, educational and media structures and norms in relation to the environment. The deployment of natural resources is a political issue: ‘the environment’ is a field of fluid political alliances, deriving from collisions of opposing values and interests: “the survival needs of the landless and the urban poor, the hopes of small farmers, fishers, and micro-entrepreneurs, the rational calculations of foreign development agencies and the ecological dreams of NGOs and conservation biologists, the relentless ambition of global capital, and the vacillations of judicial and regulatory agencies”

(Greenough 2006: 186). There is a growing realization of the fact that environmental degradation poses a serious long-term threat to the future growth and well-being of the country, and it would be in its own interest to pursue a more environmentally sustainable developmental pathway. Yet, the violence and exclusion that have often accompanied conservation agendas and urban beautification schemes (Adams and Mulligan 2002; Baviskar 2002; Saberwal et al. 2001) explain why poor and marginal groups can suffer from, and resist 'elite environmentalism' (Gardner 1995 and 2012; Rangarajan 2001).

In the next section the focus will shift on the environmental discourse as a literary metaphor.

#### 4. Death of a tree

Alka Saraogi's short story *Ek ped kī maut* ("Death of a Tree", Sarāvgī 2003) is included in the author's second anthology of short stories, a collection that seems to be guided by the will to shatter the dogma of realism, that has been dominating the Hindi literary field since its origins. The stories don't depend on a heavy exhibition of plot and events, and move away from the so-called realistic narrative that has haunted Hindi literature for more than one century, often producing a half-hearted discourse about the nature and human behavior. Alka Saraogi's stories, with their new forms of narration mixing genres and styles, indicate that perhaps the only meaning of the stories (as well as the only significance and perfection of life) can be found in incompleteness and imperfection.

*Death of a tree* tells the story of a storyteller: it is a tale of reality and imagination, focusing on the subtle interplay between factuality and interpretation of facts that develops in the narrative play. The story focuses completely on the personal—relationships, choices, dilemmas, and inabilities—with a sympathetic understanding of the characters and their motivation. The technique works to capture the layers of emotion with sensitivity, without dissolving into an excess of emotion. Free from sentimentality, this 'tale'—in the etymological sense, as things told, divulged—sports humor mixed to a sort of melancholia or touching depression, hinting to the fact that the non-ordinary or extraordinary is hidden in the heart of the ordinary.

The story opens with a warning to the reader: the narrator is just re-telling something heard from the original storyteller, faithfully maintaining his style and manner, though this might sound confusing, even irritating to a realism-oriented audience, for whom the title might prompt a reaction such as: "Oh come on, trees keep on dying, even more in a megalopolis like Kolkata! How can we mourn for the death of a tree in a city where people live and die on the streets while trying to put together some sort of household amassing ramshackle kitchen utensil under trees!" (Sarāvgī 2003: 38).

The protagonist Jagannath Babu is a passionate storyteller, for whom the art of narrating runs in the family. His invalid father too is a superb entertainer, who can fascinate the audience no matter what their age or taste is, and knows the art of making diversions without losing the thread of the story. Yet, the general atmosphere of his family life is gloomy: Jagannath Babu is unmarried and lives with his father, a stern and unhappy mother, and his two sisters, who are constantly busy giving dance and music tuition, doing needlework, or relating with the spirits of the dead using Hindi alphabet letters as a communication tool. The family endures tragic events: the elder sister dies on the stage during a performance, and after his father's death, the widowed mother turns to *sātī* worship. This notwithstanding, Jagannath Babu is a happy-go-lucky fellow: he has no family responsibilities and changes jobs with unflinching regularity, as if this were a strategy for his stories, that often begin with "This happened when I was working in such and such place..."

The short story focuses on a particular moment in Jagannath Babu's life when he happens to have been working in the same office for six years. The general opinion attributes the reason for such a stability to love: in fact, Jagannath Babu suddenly started talking about birds, that are interpreted as a metaphor for "girls." In particular, he seems very fond of a "black and yellow red peaked bird" who repeated "What did I say? What did I say?" People think that a girlfriend has finally entered his life, and he will eventually enjoy a happy wedded life. But soon Jagannath Babu's chatting turns to various different colored birds, to the point that many listeners get upset by his careless infidelity to the yellow and black *sārī* wearing girl. Finally, his interest turns from birds to trees, and the botanical accuracy with which he discusses *gulmohar*, *palās*, *semal*, etcetera, convinces everybody that Jagannath Babu's birds and trees were indeed birds and trees.

At this point of the story Jagannath Babu finds a colorful and odd "bird tree" close to his office, and gets hooked to "the tree where blue-yellow-green-red birds come," for which even the botanical expert in the park has no name. He stops telling stories, turning to ornithology and botany books, and he even gets a disciple in the figure of the lawyer Nimai Sadhan Ghosh, a former radical non-believer to Jagannath Babu's stories, whose conversion happens when he unexpectedly succeeds to spot a very rare bird on that tree. Most people, on the contrary, are disappointed when they come to admire this wonder with a lot of anticipations and expectations, and find instead what for them is just an ordinary tree with plain birds such as crows, sparrows, and starlings.

In the end, Jagannath Babu's constant distraction costs him his job. Unexpectedly, instead of using his free time to visit the tree and tell stories, he falls into dejection. Nimai Sadhan Ghosh shakes him reminding him of the profound relationships with trees that result in an intimate connection with the very source of life itself, engendering a more inclusive world view, a deep reverence for life,

and strong connectedness with all forms of life. He emphasizes that trees have feelings and that trees and humans share a unifying bond, the universal sap that is inside every living being. Both men rush to the building in order to meet their friend and cultivate their ever-expanding love for him. But, alas, the tree has been cut down, disappeared, as if it had never been there.

Jagannath Babu is left with many unanswered questions, regarding the sentience of trees, plant perception, communication and movement ability. He even wonders whether the tree may experience emotions such as love, and accepted to let himself be cut down, in a sort of suicidal choice due to of the pain of separation from its lover. He mourns the tree and celebrates the last rites as is generally done for humans. Then he carries on: he gets a new job, and he is sure that the birds that used to collect on the unnamed tree are now gathering on the huge *semal* tree close to his new office.

What should we make of the dominant image of birds and tree in this story? What is their function? To what extent can we legitimately assign ‘meanings’ to them? How do those ‘meanings,’ interacting among themselves, and the images from which they are drawn, help creating the story?

The self-conscious metaphor of the tree with the colorful birds has a clear literary precedent in W. B. Yeats’ “painted birds.” In *The wanderings of Oisín* the “coloured Asian birds” dance with the Immortals and contrast the mortality of youth, love, humans (Yeats 1994). Tree is also the tree of knowledge, the tree of life. In Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain texts, as well as in ancestral knowledge, the recognition of personhood is based upon that the personal experience that plants, animals, and humans share the capacity to flourish. In Indian cosmology we find the cosmic tree, the undying ancient figtree (*aśvattha*) with its roots above and branches below (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* VI.1 [GRETIL 2016], later borrowed by *Bhagavadgītā* XV. 1-3 [GRETIL 2016]). Ramana Maharshi uses the metaphor of a *pīpal* tree for the world, in order to address the problem of evil: “birds come to eat its fruit, or take shelter under its branches, men cool themselves in its shade, but some may hang themselves on it yet the tree continues to lead its quiet life, unconcerned with and unaware of all the uses it is put to.” (Sharma 1995: 29-30).

Birds have an ambiguous symbolic significance across cultures throughout human history and there are almost universal associations between birds and both life and death. Birds can be seen as creatures that symbolize interplay between the physical and spiritual. More specifically, in the Indian milieu, the bird imagery is related to the parable of two birds on the same tree (RV I.164.20 [GRETIL 2016], later borrowed by *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, 3.1-2 [GRETIL 2016]), symbolizing the –empirical and the eternal and transcendental– self. The tree is the imagery/symbolism that represents the human body, introducing the analogical equivalence of physical features of a man and those of a tree, with the root of a man being his soul (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* III.9.28 [GRETIL 2016]). Images are used both

as private signs and universal symbols, and each image does not adequately explain its function. Whatever the metaphor of birds and trees mean, it is clear that tree is the so called inanimate nature, and birds are the animate nonhuman nature.

In the short story, this is linked to other scattered observations on creativity. The explicit theme is reinforced and expanded by other themes implicit in the images themselves, and all together, this gives the reader the feeling that she is experiencing something more. Each image contains the meaning the narrator has put into it and has found into it, but it contains also the meaning that each reader must – in her very nature as reader – add to it. And the story we read, because of its creative act of our own, is never precisely the story the author read when she put down her manuscript for the last time. It is the role of the dominant image to force the reader into this creative act. As we find an imagery of numerous but ‘imprecise’ meanings, we fit into the given image both private meanings of our own, and feelings too.

### 5. Posthuman, all too human?<sup>3</sup>

In the Anthropocene, the natural world is threatened by human activity (Chakrabarty 2009). It is critical to explore ways of behaving more appropriately towards plants, as it is plant biomass that enables our continuing existence. The short stories and the poem that I have introduced in this article show that it is possible to avoid a strict divide between human and nonhuman agents. From an ecological perspective, just as animals, especially mammals, have increasingly been seen to possess sentience and personhood, so plants too may be accorded a ‘voice’ to promote their right to moral consideration. Global health and well-being are enhanced by increased connectivity and allowing other species and ecosystems to grow and continue their existence. The challenge is to consider expanding the borders of personhood to embrace some of the other/more-than-human inhabitants of this planet, listening and learning also from the botanical ‘voices’ that surround us.

This leads to the very fundamental question: ‘Who is a tree?’ The entire Indic world-view, in fact, suggests a notion of personhood in the cultural construction of Nature, which requires revisiting and re-evaluating such concepts as ‘primitive’, ‘animism’, ‘anthropomorphism’ and ‘personhood’ in connection with the modernist bias of much hegemonic academia that would see tree worship as the vestigial remains of an archaic religious worldview or irrational, premodern mentality (Haberman 2013). Today an absolute opposition between human and nonhuman beings has come in for sharp criticism (Haraway 1991, 2008; Braidotti 2006, 2013), and animal studies have flourished (Puar and

---

<sup>3</sup> I borrowed this title from Rosi Braidotti (2006).

Livingston 2011) even in the mainstream academic milieu; nevertheless, it is still common to consider as primitive or childish the notion that plants are living beings with their own, very different, perspective and with the ability to communicate in their own way (Hall 2011). Most people can conceive plant personhood just as a form of anthropomorphism, projecting human-like qualities where they do not belong and attributing human faculties to plants.

Personhood, then, is crucial to our estimation of what constitutes a life of value, and a major conceptual challenge for the contemporary world is the idea of a post- or non-anthropocentric worldview that posthumanism implies. The reading of the literary texts that I have proposed in this article raises the imperative issue of redefining the boundaries of the human and the sense of coexistence between the human and nonhuman living within the shared ecological niche we occupy, but also the question of a subaltern subject in a posthuman perspective.<sup>4</sup> Even within an ecological worldview that recognizes a kinship between human beings and the nonhuman world, there may be ambivalence and confusion on granting the status of person to some human beings. The 2011 Census in India showed the population of Indians belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes as being over 25 per cent of the population: one fourth of India means 300 million people. Of these 16.6% are Dalits (once called Untouchables) and 8.6% are Adivasis. If these people were a nation by themselves, they would be ranked the fourth largest in the world – after China, India, and the United States. However, in India's neoliberal economy they still have almost no presence, due to lack of access to quality education and historical lack of opportunity for employment. In this case, recognizing personhood to the nonhuman beings seems to be less challenging than doing the same for all Indian citizens.

Many middle class Indians are ready to point out the ecological sensitiveness of their ancient culture, as well as the tradition of sustainable, ecologically responsible forms of communitarian life. Together with Ayurveda, cricket, yoga, food, anti-colonial history, democratic institutions, pluralism, etcetera, this often becomes an argument in praise of India's soft power also in the mainstream nationalistic oriented discourse (Nye 2006; Tharoor 2008; Thussu 2013), as if this were a proof of an ethically minded culture and power. Acknowledging the 'personhood' in nonhuman life and establishing 'mutually beneficial relationships' with it should go side by side with taking notice of the monstrous and apartheid-like division that exists in Indian society, and conceding that the Indian middle classes' welfare has come to them on the back of denial to others. They claim the right to a healthy and non-polluted life, but they are not ready to grant the same to the still too numerous

---

<sup>4</sup> I am here referring to a post-identitarian and non-linear nomadic subjectivity (Braidotti 1994).

Indian population affected by material deprivation from the basic things needed for a decent life, such as food, water, energy, sanitation, housing, learning, and health.

The hardest challenge for a sustainable future – the yearning for which is the only thing that can construct a liveable present – is to investigate the complex meanings and materialities of the environment without underplaying the contradictions and discontinuities between the human and the nonhuman environment, but also refusing to romanticize the interaction between them.

## References

- Adams, William M., and Martin Mulligan, eds. 2003. *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era*. London and Sterling: Earthscan Publications.
- Baviskar, Amita, Kavita Philip, and Subir Sinha, eds. 2006. *Rethinking Indian Environmentalism. Industrial Pollution in Delhi and Fisheries in Kerala*. In *Forging Environmentalism, Justice, Livelihood and Contested Environments*, edited by Joanne Bauer, 189-256. New York: Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, M.E. Sharpe.
- Baviskar, Amita. 2002. "The politics of the city." *Seminar* 516 <http://www.india-seminar.com/2002/516/516%20amita%20baviskar.htm>
- Braidotti, Rosi. 1994. *Nomadic subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2006. "Posthuman, All Too Human. Towards a New Process Ontology." *Theory, Culture & Society* 23: 7–8.
- Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35.2: 197-222.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1998. "Beyond the Nation? Or within?" *Social Text* 56: 57-69.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Consolaro, Alessandra. 2009. "Corporate democracy: the Times of India 'Lead India' campaign." *Jura Gentium. Rivista di filosofia del diritto internazionale e della politica globale*, <http://www.juragentium.org/topics/rol/india/en/consolar.htm>
- Gadgil, Madhav and Ramchandra Guha. 1995. *Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gandhi, Indira. 1972. "Indira Gandhi's Speech at the Stockholm Conference in 1972." Plenary Session of United Nations Conference on Human Environment Stockholm 14th June. Accessed November 30, 2015. <http://lasulawsenvironmental.blogspot.it/2012/07/indira-gandhis-speech-at-stockholm.html>
- Gardner, Katy. 1995. *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh*. New York: Oxford University Press.



- Gardner, Katy. 2012. *Discordant Development: Global Capitalism and the Struggle for Connection in Bangladesh*. London: Pluto Press.
- Ghertner, D. Asher. 2011. *Green evictions: environmental discourses of a "slum-free" Delhi*. In *Global Political Ecology*. Edited by Richard Peet, Paul Robbins, and Michael Watts. 145-165. London: Routledge.
- GRETIL - Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages. 2016. <http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de>
- Guthrie, Stewart E. 1995. *Faces in the clouds: a new theory of religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haberman, David L. 2013. *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, Matthew. 2011. *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*. Albany; State University of New York Press.
- Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Simians, cyborgs, and women: the reinvention of nature*. London: Free Association Books.
- Haraway, Donna J. 2008. *When species meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press.
- Harriss, John. 2006. "Middle Class Activism and the Politics of the Informal Working Class." *Critical Asian Studies* 38.4: 445-465.
- Harriss, John. 2012. "Civil Society and Politics in India: An Anthropological Perspective". In *The Blackwell Companion to the Anthropology of India*, edited by Isabelle Clark-Deces. 389-406. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Mawdsley, Emma. 2004. "India's Middle Classes and the Environment." *Development and Change* 35.1: 79-103.
- Narain, Kunwar. 2008. *No other Worlds. Selected poems*, translated by Apurva Narain. New Delhi: Rupa & Co.
- Nārāyaṇ, Kuṃvar. 2002. *In dinom*. Dillī: Rājkamal Prakāśan.
- Nye, Joseph. 2006. "Think Again: Soft Power." *Yale Global Online*, [foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power](http://foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power).
- O'Hanlon, Rosalind. 1985. *Caste, conflict and ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and the low caste protest in nineteenth-century Western India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pāṇḍey, Chandan. 2012. "Nīm kā paudhā", *Pratilipi* 13 (December) *Āzādī viśeṣāṅk/Freedom Special*, <http://pratilipi.in/2013/01/chandan-pandey-short-fiction/>
- Paul Greenoug. 2006. *India: A Foreword*, in *Forging Environmentalism: Justice, Livelihood, and Contested Environments*, edited by Joanne R. Bauer Armonk. New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Puar, Jasbir K., and Julie Livingston. Eds. 2011. "Interspecies." *Social Text* 29 (1 106): 3-14.
- Rangarajan, Mahesh (2001) *India's Wildlife History*. Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Ritter, Valerie. 2011. *Kama's Flowers: Nature in Hindi Poetry and Criticism, 1885-1925*. Albany: State university of New York Press.



- Rosenstein, Lucy, ed. and trans. 2004. *New Poetry in Hindi. Nayi Kavita: An Anthology*. Delhi: Anthem Press.
- Saberwal, Vasant, Mahesh Rangarajan and Ashish Kothari. 2001. *People, parks and wildlife: towards coexistence*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Saraogi, Alka. 2009. *The tale retold: selected stories*. translated by Vandana R. Singh. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.
- Sarāvgī, Alkā. 2003. *Ek peḍ kī maut*. In *Dūsri kahānī* by Alkā Sarāvgī, 38-49. Naī Dillī: Rājkamal Prakaśan.
- Sharma, Arvind. 1995. *The philosophy of religion and Advaita Vedanta : a comparative study in religion and reason*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Spivak Chakravorty, Gayatri. 1991. "Remembering the Limits: Difference, Identity and Practice." [A Transcript] In *Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism*, edited by Peter Osborne, 227-239. London: Verso.
- Stasik, Danuta. 2014. "My intimate neighbour: Kunwar Narain's poetics of trees". *Pandanus* 14.2: 21-36.
- Tharoor, Shashi. 2008. "India as a Soft Power," *India International Centre Quarterly* 35.1: 32-45.
- Thussu, Daya Kishan. 2013. *Communicating India's soft power: Buddha to Bollywood*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Visvanathan, Shiv. 2002. "Environmental Values, Policy, and Conflict in India" [http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles\\_papers\\_reports/709.html](http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/709.html)
- Yeats, William Butler. 1994. *The wanderings of Oisín*. In *The poems*, edited by Daniel Albright, 1-32. London: Dent.

Alessandra Consolaro is Associate Professor of Hindi Language and Literature at the University of Turin. Her field of interest and research is interdisciplinary, focusing on South Asian history (*Ri-orientarsi nella Storiografia dell'Asia Meridionale. Rappresentazioni e Intersezioni*. Torino 2008; *Madre India e la Parola. La Lingua Hindi nelle Università "Nazionali" di Varanasi (1900-1940)*. Alessandria 2003); contemporary Hindi fiction: critical study and translation (*La Prosa nella Cultura Letteraria Hindi dell'India Coloniale e Postcoloniale*. Torino 2011; Premchand, शतरंज के खिलाड़ी, *I giocatori di scacchi* / شطرنج کی بازی, *La partita a scacchi*. Parallel text edition, transl. from Hindi and ed. by A. Consolaro, transl. from Urdu by D. Bredi, Milano 2015); colonial and postcolonial theory, feminist critique and gender studies ("Respectably Queer? Queer Visibility and Homophobia in Hindi Literature". *DEP Deportate, Esuli e Profughe* 25 (2014): 1-16; *Induismo queer: dalla mitologia all'attivismo per il riconoscimento dei diritti umani e civili diritti* in *Daimon: Omosessualità e matrimonio nei diritti delle religioni e degli Stati*, numero speciale 2015: 165-185).