

# “The Road to Awesomeness”: The Environment, Language and Rhetoric in Chetan Bhagat’s Postcolonial India

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**Abstract** This paper aims to discuss how environment, language and rhetoric interplay in the postcolonial context, in particular by focusing on *Making India Awesome* (2015), a recent collection of essays in which journalist and novelist Chetan Bhagat offers suggestions to handle many of the challenges of India, ideally positioning the country ‘on the road to awesomeness’. Although ecology is not specifically treated, it obviously constitutes the backdrop of the themes of the book as it intertwines with broad social and cultural domains. I will look at the postcolonial environmental intertext, and its ideological implications, which the author builds up via specific frames, metaphors and devices from an interdisciplinary perspective informed by postcolonial critique, environmental humanities and ecolinguistics. The purpose of the analysis thus is to provide a critical reflection on how language shapes, creates and hides values at the interface between the postcolonial and the environmental.

**Keywords** Chetan Bhagat. Postcolonial Environment. India. Ideology. Rhetoric.

**Summary** 1 Introduction: The Environment in the Postcolony . – 2 Theoretical Background: Environmental Studies, Postcolonial Critique and Rhetoric . – 3 The Author, the Text and the Context. – 4 Bhagat’s Writing: Changing India and Persuading People. – 5 Behind Ecocriticism: Ideology and the Nation?. – 6 Conclusion.



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## 1 Introduction: The Environment in the Postcolony

Over the last years, general attention to the environment and environmental awareness has experienced a remarkable growth in the attempt to spotlight crucial questions of ecology, power imbalance and society. It is now almost a truism to affirm that the environment is part and parcel of human life, but much recent scholarship has underlined how its very conceptualisation needs to be revised to extend to and include a vast system of forces, elements and notions, in which human beings constitute only one of the actors of a wide and dynamic scenario (Heise 2008). The emergence of a new environmental philosophy, or ecosophy, emphasises the living aspect of human experience and reflects on holistic dimensions such as wellbeing, the continuum between present and future, and the importance of resilience.

Such considerations inform and influence the field of environmental humanities, whose tools, frames and theories are used to address a number of issues, from cultural suppression of autochthonous communities, destructive processes of development and the rethinking of social practices. All these themes frequently appear in the post-colonial agenda too, thus endorsing the connection between the two fields, as abundantly demonstrated by both creative and academic works. Hence stems an interdisciplinary critical work that, according to DeLoughrey, Didur, Carrigan (2015, 5), “advocates for the power of the imagination as expressed collectively across the full range of cultural practices”. Since language constitutes the building blocks of discourse, it is imperative to focus on the key role it performs in the construction, circulation and naturalisation of ideas, or ideologies, for instance by investigating those texts that deal with environmental preoccupations and postcolonial contingencies. Thanks to specific linguistic strategies, in fact, values and meanings can be foregrounded in order to gain attention, or on contrary can be relegated to peripheral positions, or even totally silenced.

In this paper, I set out to discuss how the environment, language and rhetoric interplay in the postcolonial context, in particular by focusing on *Making India Awesome* (Bhagat 2015), a recent collection of essays in which journalist and novelist Chetan Bhagat offers suggestions to handle many of the challenges of contemporary India, ideally positioning the country “on the road to awesomeness” (175). Although ecology is not specifically treated, it constitutes the backdrop of many themes of the book as it intertwines with broad social and cultural areas to form “the entire network of human and non-human material existence” (Mukherjee 2010, 15). In fact, questions of exploitation, poverty and marginalisation are inextricably linked to the contexts depicted by Bhagat, and as such may be rendered as powerful, provoking or ideological narratives. My research purpose here is twofold. Firstly, I propose to scrutinise this text from an

interdisciplinary perspective that combines the methods and tools of postcolonial critique, environmental humanities and ecolinguistics (e.g. DeLoughrey, Didur, Carrigan 2015; Stibbe 2015). Secondly, since no text is ideology-free, I argue that even Bhagat's writing does not seem to entirely detach itself from a form of unconscious pride and nationalistic rhetoric in spite of the author's progressive views and ecological hopes, hence the need for a critical reflection on how language shapes, intensifies and hides values (Cockcroft, Cockcroft 2005; Jeffries 2010).

## **2 Theoretical Background: Environmental Studies, Postcolonial Critique and Rhetoric**

I start with the outline of a theoretical background whose critical scaffolding delineates the connections between environmental studies and postcolonial critique, two coterminous fields that share much work and commitment. Scholars working in both areas in fact have repeatedly highlighted how the ruthless exploitation of natural resources, the progressive destruction of biodiversity and the risks of industrialisation processes are common research objects. The rise of ecocriticism and environmental humanities, following a kind of environmental turn of the last two decades, has brought to light other shared pathways too, spanning topical issues as diverse as the annihilation of aboriginal populations in Australia, the contradictions of Canadian 'ecological' projects and the dystopian power of climate change in South Asian literatures. As Huggan, Tiffin (2015, 6) hold, “postcolonial studies has come to understand environmental issues not only as central to the projects of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically – and persistently – depend”. As a matter of fact, even with the achievement of political independence, some of these territories have perpetuated colonial policies, often under the rubrics of progress and development, and therefore ecological questions turn out to be crucial in the postcolonial world. Novelists and theorists like Ken Saro-Wiwa, Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh, in different times, contexts and genres, have given global visibility to many environmental concerns, interrogating the pernicious entanglements of environmental and societal questions, or reimagining the relation between human life and other forms of life in a holistic manner.

If we turn an ecocritical lens on the postcolonial world, thus, we can observe an extensive map showing different relations between local communities, committed writers, political fractions at play with centripetal and centrifugal forces, often negotiating, or fighting, neoliberal policies that are the by-product of formerly imperial conditions.

In this light, the material aspect of life goes hand in hand with the natural and the cultural ones because the production of commodities not only determines the size of the labour market but also obviously generates consequences in terms of exploitation, pollution and suitability. As Mukherjee (2010, 73) notes, "eco- and postcolonial criticism have been discovering how to cross-fertilize each other through an ongoing dialogue, and a stronger materialist re-articulation of their positions should make this exchange about culture and society even more fruitful". In other words, this type of interdisciplinary approach takes, adapts and elaborates tools and theories from cultural criticism to deconstruct the (in)visible representation and treatment of the environment in postcolonial texts, also considering the role of historical capital and the obfuscating borders of the globalised world.

The metaphors and discourses that celebrate development, progress and welfare can be analysed in this light too and Chetan Bhagat seems to begin his reflection on contemporary India from such a position because he uses factual cases not only to discuss, but also to provide suggestions about how to solve social and economic problems that are implicitly related to the environment. The articulation of Bhagat's text reflects his double role (as a novelist and a motivational speaker), takes a narrative form and is driven by the principles of rhetoric, such as the Aristotelian *ethos* (the character of the speaker), *pathos* (the arousing of emotions in the audience) and *logos* (the linguistic realisations of the speech), in the construction of discourse (see Burke 2014). Specifically, the author applies techniques and tropes "to structure and elaborate an argument, and to move the emotions" (Wales 1995, 406), activating forms of functional persuasion, which indicates "all kinds of persuasive discourse (spoken or written) concerned with everyday life, here real people are being persuaded to a real purpose" (Cockcroft, Cockcroft 2005, 5). Thus, the writer tries to convince readers to discard unwise social practices, which often have a very negative impact on nature, and adopt responsible behaviours, which are expected to contribute to national wellbeing and life in general. However, a closer look at the book in reality can reveal how, to a certain extent, it ambiguously situates itself close to some forms of populism, whose environmental awareness is not always transparent. In what follows, I concentrate on the linguistic strategies through which the author proposes his solutions to some of the challenges of contemporary India. From this angle, Bhagat's stylistic choices are viewed as signs of discourse and ideology that cumulatively galvanise current narratives of both denunciation and celebration, thus offering a sketched portrait of the attitudes, contradictions and sentiments that characterise India's social, cultural and natural arena.

### 3 The Author, the Text and the Context

This section briefly presents and contextualises the author, his work and style. In the Indian subcontinent, Chetan Bhagat is extremely famous, not only thanks to his literary career, but also because of his role as correspondent, Bollywood screenwriter and social media influencer, thus demonstrating how new media platforms now are parallel to, or replace, traditional medias in building, circulating and amplifying discourses and news stories (Chaudhuri 2010), including of course debates on the environment, sustainability and public perception (Nambiar 2014). Bhagat's production spans both fiction and non-fiction, with novels such as *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the Call Center* (2005), and *The Girl in Room 105* (2018). All these stories share a number of motifs and features that outline the new Indian scene as they speak about young generations, the rise of opulence in the main urban centres and the economic and post-industrial transformation undergoing in the country. The novels hybridise various genres, from the coming-of-age tradition to the realms of crime and romance, and in spite of their mass-market connotations they mirror social and cultural traits of present-day India, in particular the English-speaking metropolitan contexts. Thus, Bhagat's books have enriched the formation of a new canon for Indian English literature (Varughese 2013, 13-17) with questions of identity, globalisation and power, and have even inaugurated a sort of subgenre, namely the so-called “call centre fiction”.

However, Bhagat is also a very productive columnist, contributing to both English-language and Hindi-language newspapers like *The Times of India* and *Dainik Bhaskar*, and has authored three non-fictional volumes, i.e. *What Young India Wants* (2012), *Making India Awesome* (2015) and the recent *India Positive* (2019). These texts almost become a sort of how-to-do manual in their attempt to resolve difficulties of India today, thus revealing their kinship to forms of neoliberalism (Simpson, Mayir 2010, 39), but at the same time they openly seek to raise awareness, construct community and promote values. Frequently they deal with macro issues such as politics, economics and human rights and they encourage the adoption of new or different manners, with the ultimate purpose to reach high levels of prosperity and wealth for all. However, a discourse of general reform and democratic enhancement should not avoid a serious reflection on the environment and its deep connection with the world's human component to trigger a rethinking of the binary polarity of nature and culture. Bhagat sincerely commits himself to a debate on the improvements of various portions of the Indian population, but he does not specifically include the question of ecology in his writing, and somehow blends auspicious objectives, wise suggestions and nationalist pride, proposing what Daftuar (2015) terms “easy advice”.

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Endowed with a title that almost seems to anticipate Trumpian populism, *Making India Awesome* (2015) collects a series of pieces and columns about the main social, economic and political challenges of India, originally written for newspapers and magazines. From the very title, the buzzword ‘awesome’ is emphatically utilised to portray an improved, ideal and perhaps even utopian general canvas for the country. The book is organised in four parts: “Awesome Governance: Politics and Economy”, “Awesome Society: Who We are as a People and What We Need to Change”, “Awesome Equality: Women’s Rights, Gay Rights and Minority Rights”, and “Awesome Resources: The Youth”. Overall, the writer unravels the textual rendition of ‘change’, either desirable or already achieved, for instance with examples or situations, behaviours and conditions seen before and after the colonial period, the development of certain territories, or the promulgation of specific laws. Many of these narratives hint at implicit environmental topics, from the provision of services to slums and districts to the preparation of food, and the related themes of developing agriculture and alimentary industry. In my analysis, I consider how the rhetorical and narrative format chosen by Bhagat activates the types of ideological patterning that are ecolinguistically salient (Stibbe 2015, 35).

#### **4 Bhagat’s Writing: Changing India and Persuading People**

One of the pieces in which the environmental intertext particularly stands out is entitled “Cleanliness Begins at Home”, and is in line with a general discourse about the conditions of hygiene and sanitation structures in the country. Often associated with stereotyped images of dirt, insalubrity and pollution, this is a motif that dominated the colonial era (Schülting 2016), but also resonates across postcolonial texts, from the novels by Mulk Raj Anand such as *Untouchable* (1935) to the 2017 film *Toilet: a Love Story*, directed by Shree Narayan Singh. In his unsophisticated prose, the author starts by triggering a comparison: “Indians who travel abroad are often awestruck by cleanliness levels in the developed world” (Bhagat 2015, 99) and then develops his argument with examples, metaphors and other linguistic devices. He also openly mentions the Swachh Bharat project, a nationwide initiative that took place between 2014 and 2019 to eradicate problems derived from open defecation and improve solid waste management. However, while praising the initiative as a whole, Bhagat stresses how such issues should not be viewed merely in terms of campaigns showcasing the establishment or celebrities, because they concern everyday routines adopted by millions of citizens, with a great impact on society and the environment. In fact, the real question at stake here is about identity and not merely a lack of cleanliness

in the Indian population, since for the author "we are not dirty people. Indians keep their homes scrupulously clean" (99). In this way, a collective identity is built and foregrounded and serves as a starting point for the promotion of behavioural change.

Rather than linking the problem to the authorities' role, the essay brings in the sense of individual responsibility by suggesting public involvement and effort: "if we truly want to be a clean country, we need to take steps to ensure we minimize filth in the first place, rather than hope someone will pick up a broom and clean it" (100). The sense of the citation is marked by the manner adverb 'truly' whilst the writer's personal commitment emerges from inclusive pronouns ('we'). To construct and validate a pragmatic persuasive discourse, i.e. to convince people to change or modify quotidian habits, Bhagat utilises various rhetorical techniques. A micro-level linguistic analysis here can unveil how modality in particular is instrumental for the assemblage of the text and the promotion of a specific viewpoint. For Griffiths (2006, 110), "modality is a term for a cluster of meanings centred on the notions of necessity and possibility", although in reality its conceptual scope is larger and typically refers to the speaker's (or writer's) attitude toward an object or topic, therefore determining how the language used conveys specific meanings and feelings. Modality can be labelled as deontic, bouloaic and epistemic, respectively referring to sense of duty, idea of desire and knowledge system, and operates by various means such as verbs, evaluative terms and expressions of perception. Bhagat's essay, and in general the entire book, displays a positive modal shading (Gibbons, Whiteley 2018, 113), which profiles an opinionated narrating voice expressing volition, obligation and judgement.

A recurrent textual pattern that strengthens the author's view lies in the use of conditional constructions, a modal strategy that allows a speculative process, in which we imagine the consequence or effect of a certain action. The quotation above has an example of hypothetical form ("if we truly"), but more can be found in following excerpt, along with other modalised items and stylistic devices:

The only way it can, and will, become clean is if we minimize and prevent the creation of filth in the first place, and the only way that will happen is when all of us together think, 'What is outside my home is also mine'.

This sense of community recognition of a greater good and collective ownership is the only way for the situation to change. Else, we risk this cleanliness drive becoming another social fad that will be forgotten when the novelty wears off.

Of course, infrastructural improvements, such as new treatment plants for solid, sewage, industrial and agricultural waste, are required. New sets of indices, whether they be measures of

cleanliness or density of dustbin distribution, too are needed. Laws and fines have their place as well. All that is indeed the government’s job and it will be judged on it.

However, all this will come to naught if we Indians don’t change our mentality about what is my space and what isn’t. The country is ours. You obviously can’t clean all of it, but you can be aware of at least a little bit of area around you. If every Indian has a concept of ‘my 10 metres’, or a sense of ownership about a 10-metre radius around him or her, magic can happen. [...]

Whenever there is a collective sense of ownership, we have higher cleanliness levels. It is for this reason that most college campuses are cleaner than the city outside, despite housing thousands of youngsters inside.

So get out there, scan your 10 metres. Can you improve anything? A swachh Bharat is indeed possible. The first step is ‘swachh manasikta’ or clean mindsets. Are you game? (100-1)

As Jeffries (2010, 123-4) argues, “modality also draws on the issues of hypothetical worlds and speaker preferences/certainties, and the focus here is on persuasion by evaluative opinion, as well as persuasion by imagining different possibilities”. The rhetorical dimension of the extract is intensified by the use of conditional forms, or hypothetical syllogism, triggered by what Cockcroft, Cockcroft (2005, 128, emphasis in the original) define as “the big IF”, in this case the speculation about the possibility for Indians to modify their lifestyles to improve the living condition of the country. We should also notice how the conjecture proposed by the writer is activated by a rather emphatic phrase (‘the only way’), a sort of slogan or ‘sound bite’ that generates unilateral hypothetical thinking and speculation. In this light, Bhagat’s text uses various modal means, in particular of boulomaic kind, to conceptualise an alternative, but somehow feasible, reality, in which India is imagined as a clean and unpolluted country. Modal items include conditional structures (‘if/whether’), modal auxiliary verbs (for possibility like ‘can’, and volition like ‘will’) and adjectives/adverbs (‘obviously, possible’), which deliver an ideological message because they sustain the promotion of hygiene, here seen as a component not only for individual life but also for collective wellbeing.

A remarkable aspect of the text regards the representation of the sense of community, with the creation of complicity and solidarity, and this is marked by the use of inclusive pronoun ‘we’ (thus identifying the writer as part of a national community) and especially by the use of evaluative language. For Stibbe (2015, 83), “appraisal patterns are of key interest in ecolinguistics because of their power to influence whether people think of an area of life positively or negatively”. In the passage, Bhagat’s vocabulary in fact comprises a range of appraising words, for example adjectives, both explicit,



in particular through comparatives like ‘higher/cleaner’, and implicit, e.g. terms with positive connotations such as ‘new’ or ‘improvement’. But evaluative language can also be realised via other linguistic categories, for instance with positively-oriented lexis (‘minimize and prevent the creation of filth’), or on the contrary inherently negative lexis (‘naught’). To reinforce the power of appraising items, the author also employs apostrophic address (Gibbons, Whiteley 2018, 168) by asking his readers direct questions (‘Can you improve anything? Are you game?’) to further motivate and engage with them to take action, and therefore raise ecological sensitivity, foregrounded by symbolic and loaded terms such as ‘treatment plants’.

I now tackle the theme of food, namely another topic that can be fruitfully investigated from an ecostylistic viewpoint, given its correlation with significant mechanisms such as exploitation of territories (e.g. intensive agriculture), production (e.g. the use of chemicals or unhealthy ingredients), and distribution, (e.g. the transport systems necessary for carrying products across a country). Historically and culturally, food in India constitutes a domain that deeply ties up with the environmental sphere at different levels, and as illustrations I can mention widespread alimentary practices such as vegetarianism (followed by many religious communities throughout the country) or the Ayurvedic diet, whose guidelines follow principles of physical and spiritual wellbeing, acknowledging the role of humans within a multifaceted scenario. Bhagat specifically treats the idea of food in two essays, “Our fatal attraction to food” and “Junk food’s siren appeal”, which essentially deal with the sophistication of common foods. From the former, I extract the following parts:

This reminds me of a study released by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in 2012, referring to harmful substances in some of the yummiest snacks brought into India by our caring MNCs. A huge reaction ensued. Over tea and bhujias, cold drinks and samosas, butter chicken and naan, Indian held discussions on how what they considered the love of their life - delicious, yummy food - could be harming them. The CSE study hit where it hurt most - instant noodles, potato chips and cold drinks are all middle-class indulgences. In scientific mumbo-jumbo, like trans-fat content and percentage daily intake, terms few understand, it said something like ‘This stuff is bad for you’.

The MNCs jumped, engaging public-relations firms to clarify that they had been misunderstood. After all, anybody advertising their products with cute baby voices or other emotional tugs like grandparent-hugging, could hardly be making anything harmful. If you believe the ads, chips and colas make you a more loving, endearing person and burgers and burgers and fried chicken help you make better friends. [...]

The CSE and FDA report aside, one doesn't need a laboratory to figure out that some of the things we eat are bad for us. Here are some simple facts. A juice brand sells mango nectar that can have eight spoons of sugar per glass. A pack of instant noodles is nothing but refined processed starch (plus MSG and lead, it seems). The malt-based so-called nutritional milk additives for children are mostly sugar. Expensive breakfast cereals can't beat the health value inherent in a few simple rotis. Fried potato chips and burgers with patties that were frozen months ago are quite obviously not healthy.

It isn't just the MNCs. The mithais and namkeens that are part of our traditional heritage, the thick gravies served in Indian restaurants and some homes, and the samosas and pakodas we regularly see being sold at railway stations are equally bad for us. Simple, healthy meals with low oil and sugar are the best. And yet, no one - the government, the MNCs or people like us - seems to care. We shall pay the price in the next ten years. Obesity levels will increase, fitness will decline and healthcare costs will rise. The affluence we feel so proud of will actually come back to us. (Bhagat 2015, 97-8)

The linguistic choices that characterise this passage confirms the author's persuasive aim and his interest in environmental issues, in particular by calibrating different registers, varieties and usages. Indeed, on the one hand the text exhibits specialised terminology with acronyms (e.g. FDA: Food Drug Administration; MSG: monosodium glutamate; MNCs: multinational companies), as well as exact dates and technical details from authoritative sources, often described as 'facts', and therefore true things that can be accessed and verified by anyone. But on the other it incorporates forms of jargon ('mumbo-jumbo') and diatopic items of Indian English (Sailaja 2009), in particular food terms such as *bhujia* (a crispy snack), *mithai* (a dry sweet), and *namkeen* (a savoury snack). The effect that derives from this heteroglossic style is to gain trust from the readers, who are glad to see precise and reliable scientific references, as well as to establish proximity that leads to an inclusive sense of community and denounces problems stemming from the use of processed and unhealthy foods.

The entire essay seems to be grounded upon a particular type of frame (Stibbe 2015, 46-8), namely a cognitive structure through which a story and certain aspects of reality are defined and constructed, which can be spelled out as 'food is life', thus establishing links with society, tradition and identity. However, the author develops such a frame to produce a message of warning by means of opposition and negation (Jeffries 2010, 108-9), i.e. signalling a threat to healthy food, which in turn embeds a threat to the environment and life in general. The good properties of traditional food are here re-

placed by the characteristics of heavy and unhealthy products (sweet drinks, frozen meat), which appear to be connected with the activity of multinational corporations, often seen as prototypes of global exploitation in both natural and human terms. The premodifying adjective ‘caring’, moreover, carries a judgement of irony for the work of these companies.

Bhagat also highlights the importance of participants in a frame, here his readers and people in general, who are asked to actively react to the text by changing their food and shopping habits. In fact, the writer insists on the agency of individuals, that is, the power of people to decide and pursue the goal of collective wellbeing. Although the passage implicitly celebrates the healthy nature of Indian food as a response to sophisticated (and clearly unsustainable) food production, the last paragraph condemns a host of popular foods too, which are bad for the body and whose regular consumption leads to serious problems. The argumentation is strategically built thanks to an adversative connective (‘yet’), which introduces a negative statement (‘no-one’) orchestrated as a form of meta-criticism since it is organised in an inclusive form (‘people like us’, implying the writer and the readers), which aims to shake people’s minds and generate awareness. Two other devices are worth noticing: the deontic modal auxiliary verb ‘shall’, by which a certain bleak future scenario is mentally evoked in a categorical way, a sort of future obligation looming onto society, through an economic metaphor (‘to pay the price’) and then the key word ‘affluence’, whose positive semantic load is here nullified and turned into a negative element of suffering. The very harmful aspects of certain food habits are then rendered in a three-part list, a textual pattern that for Jeffries (2010, 73) “seems to imply completeness, without being comprehensive, and often appears to supplant real content”. In this way, linguistically and symbolically, the essay enhances its persuasive force and it also triggers a wide debate about ecological and social matters in postcolonial India.

## 5 Behind Ecocriticism: Ideology and the Nation?

Generally, Bhagat’s book represents an attempt to change and solve several pernicious situations that are at the heart of social and environmental injustice in India, spanning from uneven access to education to the management of airports, or the recognition of civil rights for the so-called minor communities. Taken together, these pieces corroborate ecological discourses of denunciation as they foster beneficial principles of ecosophy that sustain a rethinking of practices, attitudes and behaviours, with the general objective of improving life conditions and its related dimensions. However, as Stibbe (2015, 35) argues, discourses may also overarch ambivalent positions, and

embed elements that somehow depart from a consistently ecological orientation. Some sections of the book, in fact, seem to accord to other intentions, in particular a kind of rhetorical celebration of the nation that promotes the emergence of the country in all sectors. From this angle, the author’s slightly ambiguous attitude can be read against the broad social and cultural fabric of contemporary India, in which voices of nationalism are spreading and appropriating all social and cultural domains, in an effort to impose a certain view of the country, specifically crystallised as a Hindu-only nation. It is true that the writer dedicates some pages of his work to other religious groups (e.g. the Muslim community) and stigmatises communal violence, gender discrimination and other forms of intolerance, but nonetheless Bhagat’s writing does not seem to entirely detach itself from a form of unconscious pride and nationalistic rhetoric in spite of the writer’s progressive ideas and ecological hopes. Therefore, it is vital to detect whether language can generate rhetorical manipulations or camouflages.

The ideology of growth here does not specifically consider the environmental dimension, but simply foregrounds mythicized images of power and nation, as we can observe at the very beginning of the book, whose introductory section is arranged in an epistolary way to attract the reader’s attention and build consensus by highlighting ideas of cultural belonging. Let us look at the following extracts:

Dear Reader,

Thank you for picking up this book. This is not a story. There is no romance in here, nor are there page-turning, thrilling moments. Rather, this book is about a dream both you and I share – to make India a better place. (Bhagat 2015, 1)

By God’s grace and thanks to my readers’ love, my books have reached almost all corners of the country. Each book is a unique Indian story, about people from a particular place of India. The stories have worked all over India. Doesn’t this mean that, at some level, we are homogenous? We can and do emphasize with Krish Malhotra’s attempts at getting married to a girl outside his community (2 *States*). A reader in Rajasthan can relate to Madhav Jha’s struggle with spoken English (*Half Girlfriend*). As a motivational speaker, I have travelled across India; I have visited over a hundred cities in the last three years. While there are geographical differences, I find that ultimately, as Indians, we are the same. The average Indian anywhere in the country is looking for a better quality of life, a certain amount of hope and security and the freedom to make personal choices. The issues that really matter to us are the same. (11-13)

The tone of the writing is similar to a form of *captatio benevolentiae*, realised by a series of techniques such as the apostrophic address to the real/implied reader (‘Dear Reader’) and the balance with person deixis, namely pronouns that here give the impression of a sort of face-to-face, even intimate conversation (‘you and I’) in order to sanction empathetic bonds and closeness. But the extracts also piece together echoes from both non-fictional and fictional domains, the complex reality of the country and the literary worlds imagined by the author. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind the function of the persuasive text in which the author’s personality and stance are translated in terms of public image, political charisma and corporate identity. As a result, “the contemporary cult of celebrity commodifies and celebrates everyone in the public eye, from popular heroes such as footballers, musicians and film stars to bishops, politicians and even certain kinds of criminals” (Cockcroft, Cockcroft 2005, 30). Not only is Bhagat a very popular novelist in India, but he is also a journalist, a commentator and a public figure, whose opinions, views and beliefs are widely spread through a number of media. By mentioning some of his literary works (Viswamohan 2011), he authenticates the positive message of his stories, juxtaposing the real and the fictional, and therefore seems to augment the reliability of his position for the wide readership.

The writer repeatedly communicates a sense of belonging as a form of collective identity for the nation (‘we are the same’), for example with the invocation to God, astutely defined via generic label, and therefore with an inclusive value for numerous religious groups, as well as the use of hyperbolic expressions (‘all over India’), which reinforce other positively connoted phrases (‘a better place’, ‘a better quality of life’). However, there are hedges, i.e. expressions used to mitigate the force of an utterance (Wales 1995, 15), in this case the sense of national rhetoric, for example when he confesses “I am not perfect, nor are all my thoughts”. The main effect of this type of wording is to exhibit a collaborative attitude as readers are advised to do certain things (through the mechanics of persuasive language), but at the same time they are attributed an active role in the process of change, which is ultimately targeted at reaching wellbeing and welfare, metaphorically viewed as awesomeness.

Bhagat’s project appears to adhere to a host of different cultural, social and economic initiatives that celebrate the country’s efforts to become a new world superpower and that seem to hide the complexities (and flaws) of a country like India. An example of such tendency can be seen in the tourism campaign known as ‘India Shining’, which is meant on the one hand to attract international visitors, and therefore to engender positive results in commercial terms, and on the other to play a part in a broader process of development and amelioration for the country. The author does not speak about this

programme, but the 'dream' of awesomeness that he unceasingly presents as an umbrella term for welfare and progress to some extent shares the same principles. In so doing, the author builds up a hypothetical demarcation line, before and after the 'real' change, with the realisations of "the spectacular embodiment of the postcolony's transition to capitalism in the twenty-first century that potentially not only enhance the national reputation but also lay bare the conflicts and anxieties under the full global gaze" (Kaur 2016, 622). In a nutshell, the writer's intention to provide readers with suggestions and reflections about a new way to understand society, nature and the world with the goal to improve prosperity for all takes the form of denouncing narratives, but is not devoid of partial evaluations and prejudices that pivot around national pride, mythicize the image of the country, and ultimately seem to endorse consumerist (and therefore markedly damaging) perspectives.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have endeavoured to integrate different analytical approaches, from postcolonial criticism to environmental studies and critical stylistics, to offer a reading of Chetan Bhagat's *Making India Awesome*, a non-fictional text that thanks to its persuasive style encourages readers to change old habits to improve welfare and well-being. The author's intention is to assess challenging or unhealthy situations, and pragmatically generate a reaction in people, thus fulfilling a beneficial purpose in terms of awareness to the environment, both natural and human. Yet, a closer reading of some extracts of the volume permits to see how the writer's project is still marked by a certain dose of ambiguity, whereby the aim of improving society, and the territory, is not accompanied by a full reflection on how certain measures need to be implemented, bearing in mind that 'development' can be a dense word not necessarily meaning the amelioration of the entire society and the country. The term indeed complicates its semantic (and ideological) weight because it may weave in layers of meaning by hiding "a predatory socio-economic system - global capitalism - that effectively spreads inequality at the same time as it champions its own adherence to freedom, democracy and human rights" (Huggan, Tiffin 2015, 32).

The often monolithic rhetoric of the nation, moreover, seems to illuminate only the presence of upper classes and the rising bourgeoisie, thus further marginalising those peripheral subjects that constitute specific micro-contexts. From this perspective, the celebratory and populist notion of 'awesomeness', similarly to what happens with the expanding power of news media (Nambiar 2014), appropriates echoes of ecological discourse too, but it finally emerges as a driving

(often acritical) force that may run across unwise practices, whose impact is frequently destructive and affect both material and immaterial life, for example with the disfigurement of the land, the annihilation of autochthonous populations or the increment of pollution with the excuse of more opportunities for people. The risk here is to lose the interconnectedness of fields and domains, or, to put it in Mukherjee's (2010, 15) words, "precisely this network of politics, culture, ecology, physical space and non-human matter that we should understand as 'environment'".

In his essays, Bhagat has employed the reader-oriented narrative format to encode possible worlds by setting up particular frames, i.e. attention-getting stories of pride, appeal and redemption that shake off the postcolonial frustration of the global margins to embrace and foreground ambitious targets. Ultimately, the author's persuasive discourse can be interpreted as an idea of social, cultural and environmental renovation, supporting a form of ecosophy, albeit a linguistic and stylistic investigation discloses its limits and partial criticalities.

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