Re-viewing the Anthropocene
Ecofeminism and Decoloniality in Dhruv Bhatt's Akoopār (2010)

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Abstract
Theoretical research on Dhruv Bhatt – one of the most important contemporary Gujarati novelists – has remained restricted to simplistic ecocritical reading(s). In this article, I analyse Bhatt's novel *Akoopār* (2010) to investigate how layered exploration(s) of the 'female' as human, ancestor, myth, or affective attitude, as negotiated by the artist-anthropologist narrator, prises open the violence of centres (the Anglophone/the urban/colonialist) and offers an alternative narrative of the Anthropocene by tracing human intervention in the environment through local-cultural mytho-history. In doing so, the novel recentres the subject from eco-'logy' whose definition is often hijacked by the 'logos' of 'discovery', to 'ecosystem' depicted as a complex network of environment, cultural knowledge(s), linguistic practices, myth, memory, and collective action. I also use the theoretical approach of ecofeminism to highlight the use of 'female' as an approach of resistance in battling ecological crises in postcolonial regions structured through the complex collusion of colonial and traditional patriarchy, and the framework of decoloniality to foreground the significance of epistemic revisions in re-viewing the human-nonhuman divide.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Decoloniality, Ecofeminism, Dhruv Bhatt, Gujarati

Introduction

Since the use of the term in 2000 by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer to define "the current epoch of geological and historical time…in which humans have become the single most potent force in shaping terrestrial and marine ecology, global geology, and the atmosphere", the Anthropocene has emerged as a frame dominating critical discussions in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities (Mikhail 2016, 211). Alan Mikhail (2016) has discussed the lack of unanimity regarding the periodization of the Anthropocene, and the centrality that the term lends to the *anthropos* or human in imagining planetary challenges (220-23). Yet, in spite of its biases, it continues to be an important "discursive frame" generating significant questions (Gibson and Venkateswar 2015, 6).

The notion of anthropogenic impact on the planet was not unheard of before the term Anthropocene emerged, but this term highlighted the scale and permanence of the impact of human activity on the environment (Mikhail 2016, 214). The disproportionate importance attached to human agency in the idea of the Anthropocene draws from its grounding in the knowledge project of the Enlightenment. The dovetailing of the Anthropocene and Enlightenment allows (western) modernity to be understood as a shift in perspective – when nature came to be defined and delimited with human subjectivity at its centre (Mikhail 2016, 212). Gibson and Venkateswar (2015) concur in reading the alienation of the human from his/her surroundings as a consequence of the "[d]ualisms" inherent in "Western configurations of knowledge" such as "nature/culture, organic/inorganic, alive/dead, human/animal" (6). Such epistemic binaries have framed conservation in the West within a paternalist and romanticist approach that imagines humans as saviours of nature (Philip 2014, 978). Ecofeminism, further, points out the investment of western epistemic binaries with gendered notions such as "nature/female and culture/male" (Diamond 2017, 72).

Walter D. Mignolo (2018) views the imbrication of the modern view of nature within western knowledge frames in terms of "epistemic coloniality" (214). Thereby, he advocates the strategy of epistemic reconstitution to re-claim non-western and non-modern

approaches to knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology). Combatting epistemic violence is viewed, here, as the initial step to combat other forms of violence that emerge in its wake.

Edmund Burke and Kenneth Pomeranz (2009) and Karen L. Thornber (2014) have emphasised the role of (South) Asian studies in bringing into relief the impact of colonialism on the environment while also offering alternative modes of relationality between the human and nature. For Gregory D. Smithers (2019), this alternative is, specifically, offered by native ecologies – the ecological knowledge and practices of Native people – that allow the relationality between different species and the environment to be viewed in terms of interconnectedness (268-9). Barbara T. Gates points out the allied approach "[i]nherent in ecofeminism" marked by "a belief in the interconnectedness of all living things" (quoted in Diamond 2017, 72).

Methodology

In this article, I draw on the ecofeminist idea of interconnectedness to analyse a Gujarati novel – *Akoopār (2010)* – as an instance of native ecology that structures a dynamic idea of 'female/feminine' at the centre of the given region's ecosystem. I approach the novel using the decolonial premise that "ontology is an epistemological concept" (Mignolo 2018, 134). This premise not only privileges modes of (knowledge) perception in constituting the intelligibility of being(s), but also focuses on the role of narration in the process. In mediating the constitution of ontology through epistemological frames, the act of narration signifies an act of representation. I problematize representation in the novel through the figure of the narrator. The narrator's engagement with modes of verbal representation (language) and visual representation (painting) to map *Gir* – the region where the novel is based, is structured to match the figure of a colonial anthropologist and his effort to name/represent that which he observes. The process of naming and recording serves to legitimise and delegitimise what constitutes (authoritative) information, while engendering a distance between a subject who names and the object that is named. I, thus, use representation to engender an analytic connection between epistemic violence and environmental violence. In doing so, I foreground the role of language.

The analysis of language draws on Mignolo's insights regarding the etymology of the term 'human' drawn from Greek and Roman linguistic-epistemic traditions (2018, 157-8), and how the so-called equivalent terms for 'human' in other languages like the Andean "[r]*unas*, *sallqas*, and *huacas*" do not denote the same field of signification or relationality with nature, as the English-language term 'human' (2018, 161). Thus, language is used as an entry point to critique the Anthropocene, and the ontological hierarchies generated by modern/colonial epistemic frames.

I further examine alternative modes of representation, consistent with alternative relationalities between knowing and being,[1] and the central role of the 'female' in sustaining the interconnectedness between the two. I explore whether the specific imaginary in the given native ecology is marked by essentialisation of the female with nature or an alternative conception of gender.

Denotation and Delimitation

Bhatt's narrative directly broaches the complexity of concerns structuring the ecological crises by locating it within *Gir* – the protected region for Asiatic lions and other wildlife in the western part of the state of Gujarat in western India. This area came under the territory of the Nawab of Junagadh in the nineteenth century and was used as his "private hunting grounds", where British colonial officials were often invited for "hunting expeditions" (Wikipedia 2022). During this time, it is reported that the population of the Asiatic lion had dwindled to only a dozen which led to the prohibition on hunting and the conversion of the area into a protected zone for wildlife.

Bhatt uses location as a device to not only highlight the environmental impact of colonisation but also question the idea of 'protection' – he questions the discursive content of the idea of 'protection' as well as whether such 'protected' regions truly are environmentally secure in the contemporary period of the story.

The figure of the narrator brings into relief the cognitive biases structured into these discursive modes framed by secular western epistemology. While the narrator is a painter by profession, in his approach and practice, he embodies an anthropologist. Bhatt structures the narrator's visit to *Gir* in terms of a 'project' that involves the process of observation and meaning making by an outsider.

When the narrator enters the region, his observations of the landscape around him make him wonder whether it could be called a "jungle" (Bhatt 2010, 9). He considers it strange to find people casually walking across a territory populated by wild animals. Further, when Sãsāī uses the term "*jaṇī*"[2] to refer to a lioness, the narrator finds this to be an aberration caused by Sãsāī's uncultivated language (Bhatt 2010, 27). Thus, the narrator approaches his surroundings through preconceived categories such as 'jungle', 'animal', 'human', and attempts to mould what he views in the limits set by the terms available in his cognitive-linguistic repertoire. Mignolo has argued that "[w]estern civilization was built on *entities* and *de-notation*, not in *relations* and *fluidity*" (2018, 135). Thus, the narrator's consternation with fluidity between separate entities indicates the nature of his epistemological biases.

The narrator embarks on his 'project' to create a series of paintings that capture the Earth as an element. The act of painting the landscape, then, becomes a trope for the anthropological process of attempting to make what is 'strange' intelligible by representing it in and through pre-existing terminology and categories. As a result, he often finds what he views to be 'incomprehensible'; in other words, resisting intelligibility within his epistemological framework. The novel does not elaborate on the nature of the paintings. Yet, the narrator's dissatisfaction with his own visual depictions indicate that he had begun to recognise the gap between the perception of *Gir* by those who were part of its ecosystem, and his own cognitive location as an outsider.

The limits of his approach are highlighted using the narrative device of an 'unknown voice'. This voice appears at crucial moments in the plot. From the beginning to the end of the narrative, the origin or nature of this voice that the narrator hears from time to time, is not clarified. From a narratological perspective, the voice depicts the alternative forms of knowing/being that are marginalised by the logic of coloniality. According to Ashis Nandy (1983), the colonial culture made certain aspects of the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised dominant, while simultaneously marginalising others. G.N. Devy (1992) uses the term "amnesia" to describe such othering of aspects of non-colonial cultures and their banishment to categories like primitive, pre-modern, and obsolete, in the cultural memory of the colonized (55). The appearance of the voice,

then, depicts the breaking out of alternative ways of knowing through the authoritarian epistemic framework of the 'modern' mind. It functions to question the limitations of the narrator's perception at various junctures. For example, when the narrator questions whether the landscape around him rightfully fit into the idea of a 'jungle', the voice tells him, "Who talked about a jungle? As far as I understand Mītā had only spoken of *Gir*, hadn't she? Do we have anything to do with descriptors?" [3] (Bhatt 2010, 10). The voice, thus, makes the narrator and, by extension, the reader, conscious of the biases underscoring the process of categorisation in modern/colonial meaning-making systems.

More significantly, the narrator's lack of comprehension is not rooted in the conflict between two different languages (and the consonant knowledge perceptions structured in them), but the conflict between different usages of the *same* language – Gujarati.

In doing so, Bhatt complicates the idea of linguistic difference alluding to the role of colonial intervention in restructuring the relation of the colonised to their own languages, engendering development of an e-*strange*-ment from native languages, and the ways of knowing structured in the same.

Denotation, Difference, and Deference

It could be argued that the linguistic usage of the locals was a form of anthropomorphising the environment in *Gir*. However, the village-head at the coast of Ghed – Rāṇī – challenges this notion. The fishermen, here, were habituated to trapping whale-sharks who travelled to the coast to give birth to their offspring. Rāṇī exhorts the fishermen to refrain from this practice by projecting it as a moral-emotional crime equivalent to the murder of a daughter and an expectant mother, rather than reasoning with them based on scientific ideas of species extinction. The narrator realises that Rāṇī's argument was not a case of anthropomorphising but represented a perception that viewed all forms of existence as the same; that did not separate life forms into species and categories, or sought to establish a hierarchy of higher-lower, intelligent-unintelligent, civilized-primitive, and so on (Bhatt 2010, 224-5).

Neither is the idea of life romanticised as pacific and conducive to all life-forms in the native perception. Āīmā, the elderly matriarch of the region, stops the narrator from sitting on the floor after

nightfall to safeguard him from poisonous creatures. When the narrator reasons that the insects or creatures could also attack Āīmā sitting on the floor, she responds: "I have been living in *Gir* since my birth…With us, the insects maintain an *āmanyā*. You are a stranger. They wouldn't maintain it with you" (Bhatt 2010, 14).

The relationality of diverse species in *Gir* pivots on the idea of *āmanyā*. *Āmanyā* refers to a discretion in conduct based on deference for another. As Āīmā points out, humans, flora, fauna, and even the rocks and rivers of *Gir* have developed a fine balance after centuries of co-existence with one another. However, for the equilibrium to be maintained, every form of life must stay within the bounds of *āmanyā*, ensuring that the interests of one do not exceed those of the other. For the same reason, the locals in the region do not feel threatened by the presence of a predator like the Asiatic lion who is repeatedly referred to by the locals as a highly genteel creature.

The *āmanyā* a of every being in *Gir* is crucial to the character of Sãsāī. She is sceptical towards the presence in *Gir* of all those who do not comprehend the balance of life that preserves it. Sãsāī brings to Āīmā's attention the growth of the *kūvādiyo* plant in the forest which leads Āīmā to berate the herders who take their cattle grazing in the forest (Bhatt 2010, 83). Āīmā explains that the presence of the poisonous plant indicated that disequilibrium had set in. When the land of *Gir* allowed a plant to grow that could not be consumed by any animal, it was *Gir*'s way of indicating that the human community had begun to cross the *āmanyā* towards forest vegetation and consume faster than the rate of regeneration.

The narrator realises that the perception of life as reflected in the language of these people neither signified their imagination nor the incompleteness of their knowledge. Rather, it reflected their perception of a consciousness in every aspect of nature around them – whether animate or inanimate (Bhatt 2010, 97). It is this consciousness that pulsates in the rhythm of *Gir* – from the rhythmic pace of the walk of the lady bearing pots of water, the flow of the river, the murmur of the insects, to the cycle of the seasons and *Gir*'s shifting landscapes. Walking through the forest at midnight, the narrator experiences the oscillation of this rhythm in his own being: "Right now I can consciously experience that the supreme rhythm is also making every pore of my being sway to its beat. Perhaps this is the rhythm of a universal dance and this dance is what life is" (Bhatt

2010, 143). The conscious experience of the narrator, here, has moved on from conscious-as-rational perception of *Gir*, to conscious in terms of partaking in the shared conscious-ness of the network of life in the forest. In this transition, Bhatt challenges the idea of knowledge in empirical and cognitive terms and revalidates forms of intuitive and experiential knowledges that do not draw a stark distinction between knowing and being.

Female Alter-Natives

Bhatt invests the mystery of Gir in the personage of two female protagonists – Āīmā and Sãsāī. However, while Āīmā explicitly elucidates the meaning of, what to the narrator is a mysterious utterance, Sãsāī remains an enigma. Āīmā mentions that Sãsāī understands everything about the forest. Āīmā reasons that although Sãsāī was a *chāraṇ*,[4] she understood the behaviour of all the animals in the forest as she had grown up roaming it, and had touched it every day (Bhatt 2010, 95). The narrator later understands that the name Sãsāī was that of the younger sister of the Mother Goddess *Khōdiyār* who is also imagined as a *chāraṇ*, and who, in local mythology, is believed to have created *Gir*. By interlacing the elusive figure of Sãsāī with the mythical figure of the Goddess, Bhatt turns her character into a trope for the region, while also highlighting the complex intersections of social, mythological-cosmological, and ecological perspectives and practices. Further, Bhatt reverses the ecofeminist perspective that equates the exploitation of nature with the exploitation of women. He signifies the essence of the female *Gir* in the figure of a fierce, fearless, outspoken, often aggressive, and protective *chāraṇ* female.

Sãsāī is not pitied but empowered in her singularity. She is identified as the descendant of the family of the legendary Ravā'ātā – the blind *chāraṇ* who walked from his remote hamlet in the forest to the seat of the Nawab of Junagadh to stall the impending hunt being organised for a British official as well as undertake steps to prevent the extinction of the Asiatic lions. On his return to his village from the historic meeting which led to the conversion of *Gir* into a protected wildlife area, Ravā'ātā adopted the hill *Ghaṇṭlō* as his son, asked the Diwan to adopt the *Ghaṇṭlī* as his daughter, and celebrated the wedding with the entire community. It is on this occasion that he demanded a promise from the community to not use these

two hills to graze their cattle. The narrator later realizes the significance of this seemingly 'strange' act in maintaining the forest cover.

The direct line of descent of Ravā'ātā in the same community as the Mother Goddess who created the forest, does not entail Ravā'ātā's rights over the forest, but defines his duties towards the land. Thus, in the cosmology of *Gir*, the forest and the forms of life within it are imagined in a model of relationality where each sustains the other. The dance of the universe that the narrator discovers in *Gir*, draws on the music of life – where each note must perform its function in the larger composition.

Ratanbā, the mother of the forest guard Dhānū, bears no resentment towards the tourist who fled the scene after disturbing a lion in heat who attacks Dhānū. She draws on the cosmological understanding of the community where the earth is imagined as balanced on the back of a turtle. Ratanbā argues that the turtle had no reason to bear such a heavy burden, but because it does its duty, life on the planet can exist; similarly, Dhānū had the duty of mediating between the lions of *Gir* and outsiders (Bhatt 2010, 167).

Such effortless application of cosmology to everyday life occurs through stories. The cosmology of the turtle, the mythology of the *chāraṇ* goddess, or the legend of Ravā'ātā are stories that structure their perception of consciousness which is cosmic in its scale; it is through stories that this distinct eco-consciousness is passed down from one generation to another.

Alter-Native Pasts and Possible Futures

Bhatt counters the amnesia engendered by the colonial intervention by centralising the role of memory in maintaining cultural systems bearing an intricate balance with ecology. The unknown voice that the narrator hears, then, is nothing but the long-lost memory that may have faded in one's consciousness, but which carries the lessons learnt in living alongside nature. Consciousness emerges as a hybrid time-space constituted by memory and experience; located between knowing and being. Memory and experience interact in the consciousness to re-legitimize alternative modalities of knowing and reclaim them from the universalising and linear time of coloniality/modernity. Memory and consciousness overlap in their collective and non-linear nature. The recourse to memory depicts a circular notion of time and the imagination of life as a cycle and

circle. This memory is further not restricted to human cognition but also includes the impressions of the transactions between life forms that the nonhuman carry.

This idea is symbolised in the title of the novel. Akoopār is the name of the mythical turtle who balances the earth on his back. However, he is also the oldest being on the planet – in other words, an ancestor. He is the only one who remembers the meritorious deed of the king Indradyūmna who is re-admitted to *swarga* or heaven based on Akoopār's testimony. The story of Akoopār, thus, underlines the idea that the earth remembers; that actions can have consequences which cumulatively span centuries and generations. A simple mythological tale drawn from native cosmology, thus, carries within it the worldview of the people of *Gir* who perceive space, time, and life, on a planetary scale. This realisation illuminates the strange utterance of Āīmā with which the novel opens: "*Khamā gyarné*" (Bhatt 2010, 3). The subjunctive form '*khamā*' derives from the root verb '*khamvū*' in Gujarati which means 'to be able to bear or endure'. Thus, what affects any form of life on the land, affects the entire *Gir*, the entire planet, and thus Āīmā prays that may *Gir* be able to endure it, rather than praying for any single form of life that is affected by the single action.

Conclusion

Thus, Bhatt's novel establishes a critique of the idea of the Anthropocene and foregrounds narration as a central mechanism of representation and resistance. On one hand, it mediates the constitution of an ontology based on a distinctly colonial epistemology. On the other hand, it preserves the delegitimised pasts and modes of knowing through stories passed down across generations.

The novel presents an alternative ecofeminism where the imagination of earth as female is empowering. Set in *Gir* – a region uniquely identified as female, it presents the land as female exploited for its resources, yet possessing the ability to fight back. Her gatekeepers exist in the form of the commanding Rāṇī who dictates the commercial activities of a male-dominated profession, to the fierce Sāsāī who fearlessly questions those who exceed the balance of the forest including her own husband, to the wise Āīmā who berates a group of village elders for being ecologically indifferent. The creator of the forest and its fierce women is also an adventurous

unmarried *chāraṇ* Goddess, while the cosmology identifies the feminine traits of patient forbearance in the turtle as the reason for life on the planet. This consciousness, however, equally permeates the understanding of Ravā'ātā, Vikram, and Dhānū resisting an essentialisation of traits with biological sex or gender.

In re-legitimising non-rational and non-empirical modes of knowing, the novel breaks down the distinction between knowing and being. It, thus, indicates the reclaiming of alternative vocabularies and imaginaries as a fruitful direction in reimagining alternative relationalities of life on the planet.

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Notes

1   The separation between knowing and being is maintained here for clarity of argument and does not represent an underlying assumption that the distinction between knowing and being is universal across human societies.

2   This is a noun used in standard Gujarati to refer to a person/individual who is female.

3   All translations and paraphrases are mine.

4   A herder.