

Research Article

Joyjit Ghosh*, Sk Tarik Ali

“Can I become a tree?”: Plant Imagination in Contemporary Indian Poetry in English

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2024-0023>

received April 21, 2024; accepted August 21, 2024

Abstract: Indian poetry in English has a deep engagement with plant imagination from its beginning. The discourse of plant imaginary, however, is never monolithic here. The early poems often use trees either as symbols or semantic entities. In other words, the representation of ontological identity of a tree is largely ignored in early Indian English poems barring a few remarkable exceptions. But contemporary Indian English poetry looks beyond the anthropomorphic vision of a tree and portrays plant subjectivity and plant agency. The depiction of a symbiotic relation between the human world and the arboreal world is also at the centre of this poetry. Some poems speak of plant personhood and even human aspiration for becoming a tree. The present paper critically reads the relevant poems of poets like Toru Dutt, Keki N. Daruwalla, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Dilip Chitre, Temsula Ao, Sumana Roy, Paresch Tiwari, Kiriti Sengupta among others, and explores all these issues from the perspectives of Critical Plant Studies. The paper also examines how Indian poetry in English is at times implicated in didacticism when it critiques the unprecedented botanical loss in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: plant imagination, plant subjectivity, plant otherness, Anthropocene, botanical loss

1 Introduction

In today's world of climate peril when the intensification of global habitat loss, species extinction, and pollution continue to wreak havoc on non-human life, environmental thinkers call for an understanding of the interconnectedness of all forms of life on planet earth. In fact, in the last few years, there has been a significant upsurge in vigorous debate about nonhuman agency and subjectivity, propelled by the increasing influence of posthumanism and its critique of human supremacism. While posthuman philosophy has largely been concerned with interrogating the myth of human exceptionalism in relation to their zoological fellow species, it is only recently that self-claimed human superiority to and difference from their botanical counterpart has been brought under critical scrutiny. This decentring of humanity's privileged position in relation to plant life has led to the establishment of the interdisciplinary field of Critical Plant Studies (CPS) which questions the neurocentric/anthropocentric discourse privileging humanity and animality regarding the presumed shortcomings of vegetal life (Bergson, 1998). While drawing on perspectives from a wide diversity of fields such as ecology, anthropology, philosophy, and cultural studies, Critical Plant Studies contests the dominant hierarchies that give precedence to human interests over those of the botanical realm. Central to this discourse is the recognition of plants as autonomous complex life forms with their inherent value, possessing their own forms of agency, subjectivity, vitality, and communication systems. Much of the current

* **Corresponding author: Joyjit Ghosh**, English Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, Vidyasagar University, Vidyasagar University Road, Midnapore, 721102, West Bengal, India, e-mail: joyjitghosh@mail.vidyasagar.ac.in

Sk Tarik Ali: PG Department of English, Hooghly Mohsin College, Chinsurah, Hooghly, West Bengal, 712101, India, e-mail: alitarik09@gmail.com

critical focus on plants and human–plant interactions can be attributed to Michael Marder’s 2013 book *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. Marder’s ideas of “plant-thinking” and “plant-being” serve as a call to reflect on the very essence of plant existence and nurture a profound respect for the human–plant entanglement beyond the traditional neglect of vegetal life in Western metaphysics (Marder, 2013a). In Marder’s celebration of vegetal ontology, the plant “turns to be not only a what but also a who, an agent in its milieu, with its own intrinsic value or version of the good” (Marder, 2016, p. 42). However, the idea of plant sentience and plant intelligence actually dates back to Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose’s exploration of “plant nerve” and “plant response” in the early twentieth century which has contributed to the emergence of the discipline presently known as “plant neurobiology.” Plant neurobiology acknowledges plants as autonomous organisms that “perceive, assess, interact and even facilitate each other’s life by actively acquiring information from their environment” (Gagliano et al., 2012, p. 325). The recent growth of Critical Plant Studies seems to have been informed by the Western plant sciences’ shift of attention towards understanding plants “in their own terms and offering a more integrated, ecological approach to plant life” (Gagliano et al., 2017, p. xiii). After the sustained focus on molecular biology and plant genetic engineering in plant sciences for some decades, there is a paradigm shift in the approaches of plant sciences which have, in recent years, engaged more and more with studying plants in dynamic relation to the outside environments (Gagliano et al., 2017). From Dov Koller’s *The Restless Plant* (2011) to Richard Karban’s *Plant Sensing and Communication* (2015), plant sciences, over the last few years, have drawn on the observations of plant neurobiologists like Jagadish Chandra Bose and Charles Darwin to come to a recognition of the agency, cognition and communication of plant life. While plant sciences involve an empirical study of plant anatomy, physiology, and ecology, Critical Plant Studies extends the focus to a social, cultural, and political reading of human–plant interactions. In the continuous dialogue between these two domains, ideas like plant agency, plant health, ethical considerations of plant life, and adoptive power of plants frequently tether plant sciences to Critical Plant Studies.

Since ancient times, plants appeared as a predominant presence in different cultural traditions around the world contributing significantly to the making of cultural identities. From the Olive tree, the sacred tree in Greek culture, to Sakura, the holy tree of Japanese life, from the Baobab tree, Africa’s symbolic Tree of Life to Asvattha, the divine tree of the Upanishads – plants have played a pivotal role in the mythic imagination of almost all ancient cultures in the world (Laist, 2013). Some Adivasi societies in India during the Karam festival (a kind of harvest ceremony) worship the Karam plant as a god. In concurrence with the significant presence of vegetal life in cultural practices and performances, plants have also featured significantly in literary/cultural imagination across all periods and civilizations. However, as Ryan has observed, in most cases, the vegetal world has been represented “through the human proclivities for aestheticization (plants as pretty objects and picturesque scenery), appropriation (as expendable materials or throwaway matter), and figuration (as symbols, tropes, and linguistic artifices rather than presences, bodies, and sensory entanglements)” (Ryan, 2018, pp. 14–15). In this context, Literary Plant Studies, a branch of Critical Plant Studies, looks beyond the symbolic potentialities of botanical life with a sustained focus on the agencies, subjectivities, and communicativeness of vegetal life. The contemporary vegetal turn in literary studies addresses the re-consideration of plants as our “companion species” (Haraway, 2003), and in botanical imaginings today, the main focus is on the ontological, rather than the semantic significance of plants. As Randy Laist has observed: “More interesting than the question of what plants mean is the question of what they are” (Laist, 2013, p. 14). Beyond the symbolic prominence of vegetal life in traditional literary criticism, Literary Plant Studies centres on the representation of the vegetal body as a corporeal and sentient presence in the literary imagination.

This article reads select Indian plant poems in English (including a couple of poems in English translation) to explore how plant imaginaries constitute a significant aspect of poetic imagination in Indian poetry in English. The first two sections of the article trace the journey from the plant symbol in early Indian English poetry to plant personhood in contemporary Indian English poetry with a critical reading of select poems of Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, K.D. Sethna, Keki N. Daruwalla, Shanta Acharya, Sugathakumari, and others. The third and fourth sections engage with the increasing focus on plant agency and plant subjectivity in contemporary Indian poetry in English. Select canonical and lesser-known texts of poets like Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Gieve Patel, Dilip Chitre, Sumana Roy, Kiriti Sengupta, and Pratishtha Pandya have been read through the phytocritical lens to see how these poems celebrate transcorporeal interconnectedness beyond the

cerebrocentric/anthropocentric discourse. The next section sheds light on the portrayal of plant imagination in the poetry of Temsula Ao, Paresh Tiwari, Gayatri Majumdar, and others in the context of climate change and unprecedented botanical loss in the Anthropocene. The final section addresses the question of didacticism in Indian plant poetry with a study of selected plant poems of poets like Kunwar Narain and Sunanda Pradhan.

2 Tree as a Semantic/Symbolic Entity

Early Indian poetry in English often represents tree as a semantic/symbolic entity. A tree with its parts evokes the poet's imagination but it is scarcely the botanical imagination. The tree is here either largely personified or reduced to a symbol or used as an aesthetic instrument. In other words, the arboreal entity of a tree is marginalized, and it yields its place to its semantic entity. Sri Aurobindo's "A Tree" or K.D. Sethna's "Tree of Time" may at once come to a reader's mind. The opening four lines of Sri Aurobindo's "A Tree" are as follows:

A tree beside the sandy river-beach
Holds up its topmost boughs
Like fingers towards the skies they cannot reach,
Earth-bound, heaven-amorous. (Aurobindo, 1993, p. 51)

The tree is obviously personified. The "topmost boughs" of the tree are compared to "fingers" that rise towards the "skies." The poet strikes a fine point of balance between rootedness and limitless aspiration of the tree when we read that its boughs are "earth-bound" but "heaven-amorous" at the same time. The poet himself clarifies: "This is the soul of man" (p. 51). The soul is caught in an eternal conflict between an earthly bondage and the thirst for spiritual realms. The tree in the poet's imagination thus gains in symbolic density and marvellously represents the poet's philosophical explorations of the soul.

K.D. Sethna's "Tree of Time" at the very outset identifies the poetic persona with the "tree of time." This tree is "a swaying shadow." But it has "one sole branch lit by eternity." This branch is imagined as the poet's "song-fruitful hand" that traces "On life's uncoloured air a burning cry/From God-abysses to God-pinnacles" (Sethna, 2005, p. 214). The poet is hopeful that his kinship with the "height of heaven" will wake one day, and "through each quivering cell," he will realize not a "feeble brightness" but a "nectar flame." The tree here does not obviously evoke a reader's arboreal imagination although plant-specific terms like "branch," "outflower," and "rooted" may strike one's attention. Actually, the poet's purpose is to bring home his own spiritual growth from a "self-consumed" joy to bliss that has its "own infinitude," and the title of the poem is deeply suggestive of this perspective.

Sri Aurobindo's "A Tree" and K.D. Sethna's "Tree of Time," therefore, have a sense of aesthetic affinity as both the poems explore symbolic/semantic connections between the spiritual quest of a man and the growth of a plant. Interestingly, Keki N. Daruwalla's "Suddenly the Tree," belonging to the modern phase of Indian English poetry, also uses the tree as a semantic entity. One may quote a few lines from the opening section of the poem:

Suddenly the tree near our window shook,
its whiskers twitched,
its leaves, yellow and ochrous
like henna-smeared hands
fell severed from the wrists. (Daruwalla, 2006, p. 127)

The lines depict a tree shaking its leaves one wintry night. The "yellow and ochrous" leaves symbolize decay and death. But the poet imagines them as "henna-smeared hands" that are "severed from the wrists." The lines thus evoke an eerie picture. And the sense of eeriness continues in the later lines:

The tree is now all bark and bough.
 Leafless twigs scratch
 against the glass
 like skeletal children
 scribbling on a slate,
 chalk-fingered. (Daruwalla, 2006, p. 127)

The winter has finally robbed the tree of its leaves. The “leafless twigs” hitting against the glass panes bring to the poet’s uncanny imagination the fingers of “skeletal children” that scribble with chalks on a slate. The plant imagination in the poem is thus overwhelmed by an anthropomorphic imagination. The reader appreciates the symbols and images involved in the portrayal of the tree but at the same time s/he notices how the figurative representation of the tree relegates its ontological identity to the background.

3 Ontological Identity of Tree and the Ethic of Connection

In the Introduction to *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (2013), Laist observes, “The underlying witchery of plants is that they are more than mere symbols, although they do of course have a robust symbolic potency” (Laist, 2013, p. 13). This observation is central to the discourse of Critical Plant Studies as it lays emphasis on the ontological identity of a plant rather than its symbolic and even semantic significance. It is interesting to note that Sangam poetry of ancient times often provides a fascinating insight into the human-plant affective relations and plant agency in literary creations and cultural imaginary. One may remember the poem No. 18 under *Kurunthogai* (Subjective Poetry), by the ancient Tamil poet Kabilar here. The translator of the poem R. Sivakumar attaches a note to the poem: “The female friend of the lady makes an appeal to the lord to marry her mistress at the earliest” (Sivakumar, 2000, p. 189). The “lord” (the lover of the mistress), as introduced by the speaker, belongs to a hill that abounds in “bamboo-fenced jack trees/Whose roots bear bunches of fruit” (p. 189). The lines shed light on India’s unique ecocritical theory – the *Tinai* poetics of ancient Tamil poetry – that often integrates the flora and fauna in the landscape with the lifestyle, occupation, and peculiarities of settlements of the people who belong to that land. The lover of the lady might very well be a cultivator as we gather from the description of the landscape. The confidante of the lady makes a passionate appeal to him:

You know you deserve her,
 Who else knows?
 As a large jack fruit hangs from a tiny twig
 Her lust is too intense for her tender being. (Sivakumar, 2000, p. 189)

This is exactly where the affective relation between the “large jack fruit” hanging from “a tiny twig” and the lady’s enormous “lust” contained in her “tender being” is struck. Here, the ancient poet thinks of human craving and desire through a powerful floral image.

Regarding the representation of plant agency in Sangam poetry, one may refer to the poem “What Her Girl-Friend Said to Her” by the Tamil poet Kōvatattāṇ. The poem begins thus: “These fat *koṇṇai* trees/are gullible.” They mistakenly believe that it is “the season of rains.” Thus, they

have put out
 their long arrangements of flowers
 on the twigs
 as if for a proper monsoon. (Ramanujan, 1967, p. 33)

The lines unambiguously shed light on the ontological identity of plants. Plants have their own logic (that goes beyond human understanding) when they make themselves ready for the monsoon with their “arrangement of flowers.” This monsoon is not “proper” to humans, and therefore, the epithet “gullible” is applied to the

konrai trees. The poet thus very delicately draws a line of demarcation between the world of plants and that of humans here.

Toru Dutt's "Our Casuarina Tree," an early Indian English poem, recognizes and appreciates the ontological identity of an old casuarina tree. The opening lines of the poem depict a tree with a "huge Python" like creeper winding around its "rugged trunk." The poet then draws our attention to its "crimson clusters" and boughs "Whereon all day are gathered bird and bee" among other things (Dutt, 1993, p. 42). The second stanza gives a detailed description of the symbiotic connection between the tree and other living creatures:

Sometimes, and most in winter,—on its crest
A gray baboon sits statue-like alone
Watching the sunrise; while on lower boughs
His puny offspring leap about and play;
And far and near kokilas hail the day; (p. 42)

In the ecological imagination of the poet, the casuarina tree thus exists in an organic relationship with the bees, baboons and the kokilas. But one must not ignore the emphasis on the word "Our" in the title of the poem. It sharply signals the human connection with the tree. The tree is "dear" to the poet because it poignantly reminds her of her siblings who along with her played beneath the tree and whom she lost at an early age:

Blent with your images, it shall arise
In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes! (p. 43)

The casuarina tree is therefore envisioned as the poet's soul-mate. And the poet makes a passionate prayer in the last line of the poem: "May Love defend thee from Oblivion's curse" (p. 43).

Trees were soul-mates to those who sacrificed their lives for protecting the trees in Khejarli, Rajasthan in 1730 from the soldiers of the Maharaja who planned to build a palace erasing the grove of Khejri trees. Shanta Acharya's "The Tree Huggers" poignantly renders the ethic of connection between humans and trees. The voice of the protesters was: "You have to kill me first before you kill this tree—/a chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree" (Acharya, 2023, p. 92). The portrayal of the killing of Amrita Devi and her three daughters by the royal soldiers will touch the reader's heart:

She saw the sky fall through the branches as soldiers axed her
And her three daughters –
Each clinging to Khejri, joined in protest. (p. 92)

The earth became "red" with the blood of the martyrs. And the gruesome act made the creatures of the earth restless:

Blackbucks, their spiral horns sticking out in dissent,
Skittered with the gazelles, partridges and quails. (p. 92)

The poem thus sends a message to us that if we bring disharmony to the botanical world it will jeopardise the existence of other creatures too.

The movement led by Amrita Devi inspired many non-violent protests against thoughtless killing of trees across India. The "Chipko Movement" that started in the 1970s in the Himalayan hills of northern India (when the local peasants clung to trees to protect them from being felled) deserves a special mention here. Manjula Reddy's "Chipko - Lets stick with it" brings forward the message of this forest "satyagraha":

Until this day sweet nature's "Chipko" folk
Refuse to bear development's choking yoke (Reddy, 2014)

The word "development" is often fraught with the hermeneutics of suspicion. If development is the other name of deforestation, if development is a threat to the habitat of wild animals, then what is the use of it? The poem therefore carries a strong message against "doing wrong" to the environment.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, writers and activists in Kerala raised their voices against the proposed construction of a hydroelectric dam that threatened to destroy the Silent Valley, a huge tropical evergreen forest in the Palakkad district of the state. Representative poets who gave momentum to the Silent Valley Movement include Sugathakumari (whose iconic poem “Hymn to a Tree” was recited at all protest gatherings to save the valley), ONV Kurup, Kadamanitta Ramakrishnan, Ayyappa Panikkar, and D Vinayachandran among others. Their poems were brought out in *Vana Parvam*, (an anthology of 31 eco-poems and a One Act Play by Vyloppilly Sreedharamenon) by “Prakrithi Samrakshna Samiti” (Society for Conservation of Nature) in 1980. The volume was republished by the Kerala Sahitya Akademi in 1996¹. Ayappa Panikkar’s poem “Where are the Woods, My Children?” is a representative poem of this anthology, and it speaks of a “creative revolution” (Paul C., 2023, p. 49) against the calculated environmental ravage in the name of development. One may quote the opening lines of the poem:

Where are the woods, my children?
Where are the meadows?
Where are the roots of the wild lawns?
Where is that garden that homed the winds?²

The lines mourn for the loss of the woods, the meadows, and the wild expanse of nature as mankind has destroyed everything and defamiliarized the face of the earth. Sugathakumari’s poem titled “Silent Valley” may also come to the mind of the informed reader. The poem gives voice to the protest against those who marked the “silent blue forest” to be “butchered.” In the poem, we have a poignant expression of the poetic persona’s horrid experiences as she passes “anxious” nights without sleep while thinking of the destruction of the forest:

How many times shocked seeing bad dreams!
Your sacred chest burning in raging fire!
The giant trees falling fatigued, grief stricken!
The reflected moonlight
from the silently drying up River Kunthi [...] (Sugathakumari, 2021, p. 42)

The nightmarish images of ecological disaster terrify us when we brood on them. The ending of the poem is, however, positive where the poetic persona offers her “respects” not only to the “bright sun” but also to the “compassionate dark green” of the valley. The concluding lines will touch every eco-sensitive soul:

with a heart fully gratified
I am tempted to call out to you loudly,
“Oh Mother! ...”
And as I stand listening
every tree, every leaf and the whole forest
mercifully respond – “Dear Child ...” (p. 43)

The forest is therefore “compassionate” to mankind, and the forest can respond to the human call when mankind completely submits to mother earth. In his article titled “In Defence of Plant Personhood,” Hall observes that “in a world in which human societies have constructed and emphasized difference in order to justify domination...the ethic of connection is a powerful countervailing force” (Hall, 2019, p. 9). Shanta Acharya’s “The Tree Huggers,” Manjula Reddy’s “Chipko – Lets stick with it,” and Sugathakumari’s “Silent Valley” champion the ethic of connection as a weapon against “difference” and “domination.”

¹ For the details of the publication of *Vana Parvam* in connection with the Silent Valley Movement, we are indebted to Dr Betsy Paul C.’s article titled ‘Sustaining Sustainability: Re- reading the “Tree Poets” in Malayalam Literature’ in *Literary Oracle*, ed. Shruti Das, Vol.7, Issue II, December 2023. <https://literaryoracle.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/3.-Sustaining-Sustainability.pdf>.

² The lines are borrowed from the unpublished translation of Ayappa Panikkar’s poem “Where are the Woods, My Children?” by Dr Betsy Paul C., Professor & Director of Research, St Aloysius College, Elthuruth, Thrissur, Kerala.

4 Becoming a Plant

But is it possible to completely erase the idea of “difference” between the world of plants and that of humans? Can one ignore the question of plant otherness in the discourse of plant-human entanglement? Kiriti Sengupta’s “Hibiscus” raises a profound question: “Can I become a tree?”.³ The poetic persona seems to believe in the affirmative:

As I rampart the sinew
With my root embedded
In her tissue, I’ll bloom
Like a hibiscus:
The blush will endorse my bloodline. (Sengupta, 2023, p. 52)

The words like “sinew,” “root,” “tissue,” and “bloodline” all speak of the vivid interface between plant life and human life. Through an imaginative route, the poet here penetrates the inward parts of the hibiscus with his own human parts and aspires for a “bloom.” Taking a cue from Gaston Bachelard, Ryan interprets his own idea of “botanical imagination” as the “material becoming, a becoming which has a deep and inner source” (Bachelard, 1991, p. 105), and according to Ryan, this “becoming with plants through poetry” is at the heart of “botanical imagination” (2018, p. 9). The lines quoted from “Hibiscus” thus perfectly fit in the poet’s botanical imagination as the poet is able to become one with the “deep and inner source” of the flower.

But the discourse on identifying with a tree has a different dimension as well. Sumana Roy’s “I Want to be a Tree” posits a problematic issue that when one wishes to become a tree the very desire banks on irrationality:

I know that this desire lives outside the curriculum.
Irrationality is man’s favourite home –
One man’s love is another’s superstition. (Roy, 2022a, p. 23)

But the poetic persona can’t resist the very craving for becoming a tree. She would be a tree:

as naturally branched as the body’s posture in sleep.
To woo birds – they avoid men and motion to sit on trees. (p. 24)

The voice of the feminine self is dominant here because it consciously brackets “men and motion.” This self wants to be “naturally branched,” and wants to imitate “the body’s posture in sleep” so that the birds may easily alight on her as they do on trees. But even then, there is a gap between human consciousness and plant consciousness:

I am leaning against a statue of sunlight.
The wind affects us unequally.
I wonder why tree branches
do not behave like curtains in the wind.
Or why we fail to hear creepers knocking at the door. (p. 24)

The wind indeed “affects” humans and plants differently. The behaviour of a plant (Vieira et al., 2016) goes beyond the limits of human understanding and analysis. In the view of Ryan, “After all, plants can be hard to get to know, and there is, at the same time, the issue of translation: their semiosis of chemicals and corporealities does not readily align with the linguistic pronouncements we generally regard as intelligible communication” (2016, p. 66). The implication is that an “intelligible communication” is almost impossible between the plant world and the human world. With her plant-sensitivity, the poet at best can imagine the “knocking” of the creepers at the human door but she can’t “hear” the very sound of knocking.

³ This line from the poem “Hibiscus” has been quoted in the first part of the title of the article.

To understand the language of plants, therefore, always poses a challenge to humans. Yet a plant-sensitive human will try to merge her/his self in the depths of a tree. Pratistha Pandya's "The Old Tree" is a classic case in point. In the early section of the poem, the poet presents herself as a close and sensitive watcher of an old tree:

who keeps the count
when leaves fall, one after another?
Who notices the greying of the resolve,
Time meditating, precariously,
On brittle branches,
...
Who watches the army of carpenter ants
drilling holes in the confident bark? (Pandya, 2023, p. 72)

The images of the decay of the tree are powerful. Leaves fall. Branches become "brittle." The "confident bark" develops "holes" as the "carpenter ants" drill into it, and the bark becomes vulnerable. But towards the close of the poem, the poetic persona's identification with the tree becomes distinctly visible:

Who fathoms the depths my roots,
The blind distance they dig,
...
Who feels my ever tightening grip
On the slippery soil,
The drying of the sap in my veins
Scorched by forest fire?
They only see the final fall. (p. 73)

The repeated use of the word "my" (the possessive form of I) in the phrases like "my roots," "my ever tightening grip," "my veins," etc., speaks volumes about the merging of the poetic persona's consciousness in that of the old declining tree. On the other hand, the word "they" represents those who are not only insensitive but even cruel as they "dig" into the roots of the tree. So, the poem in its own way captivates our attention to a seminal point of difference between those who possess plant imagination and those who don't. But it reveals that it is possible (at least in imaginative terms) to feel the agony of a tree when it faces a crisis.

5 Plants and the Experience of Being Human

Laist significantly observes, "Plants play a vital role in the experience of being human" (2013, p. 9). It is a revolutionary statement as it opens new avenues to the field of Critical Plant Studies and motivates us to consider plants beyond the rhetoric of utility. We eat plants, we use plants as raw materials and for other purposes too but beyond all these there is a space for considering our relations with plants within a broader context of shared life (Sandler, 2018). One may be reminded of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's "Machete" at this point. The poem opens dramatically and at once brings home a violent image of felling a tree:

A few blows of the machete
And the young tree
Lay sprawled on the ground. (Mehrotra, 2022, p. 210)

While dragging across the tree the poet-narrator did not notice that he had destroyed a nest as well that looked "warm" and "hospitable" like his own house: "Its leaves joined as firmly/As bricks" (p. 210). While putting away the machete in a table drawer he muttered "Sorry, bird" but to "no one in particular." This brief

poem poignantly strikes the point of affinity between home and nest and opens our eyes to the idea of shared life. The tree here challenges us to recognize its ontological identity as well as to connect with our immediate environment.

Mehrotra's "Construction Site" is another fascinating poem in this context. It vividly describes the human violence perpetrated on a tree:

It went on all morning,
The sound of axe on wood,
Followed by the sound
Of a branch creaking. (Mehrotra, 2022, p. 209)

The sound of "a branch creaking" by the blow of an axe would send a shiver down our spine when one imagines the branch to be a limb. The tree at length becomes "limbless" and "bare," and with its "twisted leaves," it resembles a "wreath":

The tree looked
Like a war memorial. (p. 209)

The comparison of the lifeless tree with a "war memorial" would at once evoke in us an elegiac mood. We become sad. The last lines of the poem are profoundly disturbing:

By evening even this was gone,
Leaving, where the crown was,
A neat hole in the sky,
As though made by a bullet. (p. 209)

While writing on the language of modern poetry D.H. Lawrence wrote, "The essence of poetry with us in this age of stark and unlovely actualities is a stark directness, without a shadow of a lie, or a shadow of deflection anywhere" (Lawrence, 1981, p. 503). One may note that Mehrotra's language here has "a stark directness." The disappearance of the tree, in the poet's imagination, has created a "neat hole in the sky," as if a bullet has pierced it. Again, echoing Lawrence, one may say that Mehrotra entertains no "shadow of a lie" here. He renders a scene of devastation to the best of his capacity with no superfluous images, no empty rhetoric.

But felling a tree is not always an easy task. A tree draws its energy and vitality from the earth for years. Sunlight, air, and water – all contribute to its growth and sustenance. A poet knows it. And he can articulate:

So hack and chop
But this alone won't do it.
...
The bleeding bark will heal
And from close to the ground
Will rise curled green twigs,
Miniature boughs
Which if unchecked will expand again
To former size. (Patel, 1993, p. 155)

The above lines are quoted from Gieve Patel's "On Killing a Tree." The lines depict the spirit of survival of a tree. The "curled green twigs" and the "miniature branches" are all clear manifestations that the tree will again assert its identity if its root is not pulled out of "the anchoring earth" and scorched in the sun.

Anna M. Lawrence in "Listening to Plants: Conversations between critical plant studies and vegetal geography" writes, "Plant bodies are not contained within a finite skin, but can spread rhizomatically until we are not quite sure whether we can count ten primroses beneath the oak or only one; fifty aspens or one suckering clonal colony" (2022, p. 641). The grandeur of a plant body finds an amazing representation in Dilip Chitre's "Felling of the Banyan Tree." The poem again reveals that the task of felling a tree is a stupendous one

particularly when its “trunk had a circumference of fifty feet.” The poem thus depicts the chopping of the trunk of the ancient banyan tree:

And then they came to its massive trunk
Fifty men with axes chopped and chopped
The great tree revealed its rings of two hundred years
We watched in terror and fascination this slaughter
As a raw mythology revealed to us its age (Chitre, 1992, p. 112)

The lines obviously draw our attention to the “massive trunk” of the tree which exposes “its rings of two hundred years.” These rings reveal the miracle of nature and create in us a feeling of “fascination” and even “terror” when a man contemplates the ancientness of the tree. The concluding lines touch our hearts:

Soon afterwards we left Baroda for Bombay
Where there are no trees except the one
Which grows and seethes in one’s dreams, its aerial roots
Looking for the ground to strike. (p. 112)

The banyan tree in reality thus yields its place to a tree that “grows and seethes in one’s dreams.” This tree develops “aerial roots” which anxiously look “for the ground to strike.” In “What is Plant-Thinking?”, Marder argues, “The intentionality of the plant is not unidirectional, given that the roots, too, seek nutrients, navigating a veritable environmental maze, sensing humidity gradients of the soil” (2013b, p. 129). The “intentionality” of the imaginary tree in the poem is obvious but it does not have a “veritable” ground where it can strike its “aerial roots.” Herein lies the pathos of the poem.

6 Anthropocene, Climate Change and Botanical Loss

Temsula Ao’s “Jacaranda Longings” also represents the “intentionality” of a tree but this time it is not a tree with “aerial roots” as in Dilip Chitre’s “Felling of the Banyan Tree.” This tree is a real one, and it represents those that “stay” in the poet’s “mind.” They all stand by a lake and shine: “Like a string of amethyst/Round a princess’ neck” (Ao, 2013, p. 188). The poet, however, speaks of a certain tree that

Bends inward
Spreading its roots
As though
Looking for more space
In the immensity
Of the man-made lake. (p. 189)

The tree, it is obvious, looks for more soil and for more nutrients for its survival but the lake frustrates its search. The agony of the tree finds its voice in the concluding lines of the poem:

Each year it gives
Less colour and
Bends more inward as if to say
I’ve done with my bloomings
I now have only jacaranda longings. (p. 189)

The jacaranda tree is recognized by its gorgeous clusters of purple blooms. But the colour of the flower grows pale year by year. The underlying idea is that it is all due to the unkind human intervention. The phrase “man-made lake” can’t escape our attention. The tree is given a voice (“I’ve done with my blooming”) at the end of the poem to warn mankind against its thoughtless exploitation of nature.

A subtle note of warning is also heard in Paresh Tiwari's "Milk" – a warning against deforestation:

Forest is the cigarette between my fingers.
 Unsmoked. Memory is what's fading now.
 It begins losing colour long before it
 Loses shape or sound.
 ...
 Branch by branch, the forest disappears. Its collective
 howl now curdled milk over the upturned night sky.
 1500 is the number slain in a night. Including the Ban-
 yan on which you had carved your name in a moment
 Of juvenile ribaldry. (Tiwari, 2020, p. 51)

The first line of the quote is suggestive of the fast disappearance of forests. The poet is only left with the memory of a forest that once existed. But the colour of memory is also "fading now." The lines that follow give an almost surrealistic description of the agony and angst of deforestation. The expression "collective howl," charged with the idea of plant subjectivity, will immediately arrest the attention of a reader and entice him/her to imagine the agony of trees as they are felled mercilessly. The poem ends on an exclusively personal note where we find that the banyan tree on which the poet's ladylove carved out her name also disappears. The charm of the poem lies in its unobtrusive message.

Gayatri Majumdar's poem "Untitled" opens our eyes to botanical loss and climate change. The opening stanza of the poem may be quoted here in full:

A tree remembers –
 remembers the fruits it would
 surely bear if the sky fails to rain.
 These are austere days
 of bleeding beneath a sun;
 moments before being logged away
 In unmarked heavy trucks. (Majumdar, 2020, p. 44)

The first three lines speak of the plant as a person (Hall, 2011). The repeated use of the word "remembers" is significant here. There is a subtle hint that the tree can forecast climate change ("if the sky fails to rain"). In the next two lines, the reader gets a bleak description of global warming. The days are "austere." The tree suffers beneath the pitiless eye of the sun before it is felled and made into a lifeless log. "The notion of having discourse with plants," writes Ryan, "is generally viewed as an absurd flight of fancy" (2016, p. 66). The question that is additionally raised (to which Ryan gives voice) is: "why should poets and other narrators presume to penetrate the inner domain of plants and interpret their responses to environmental degradation?" (p. 66). In Ryan's argument, we often characterize trees as "secret," "veiled," and "cryptic" and thereby marginalize their identities. Critical Plant Studies, of course, alerts us to the "risk of marginalizing their [plants'] lives as well as our responsibility for their futures as sentient non-human beings" (p. 66). Gayatri Majumdar's poem under concern respects the human engagement with trees and voices the responsibility for the future of trees as "sentient non-human beings" (Ryan, 2016, p. 66). The tone of the poem, it goes without saying, is never loud. Its message is left to the imagination of the reader.

7 Didacticism and Advocacy for the Arboreal

In a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds (dated 3 February 1818), John Keats wrote, "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us...Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject" (Keats, 2002, p. 58). The "palpable design" implies a didactic note that may destroy the aesthetic integrity of a text. The message of a poem, if it has any, must be

“unobtrusive.” The plant poetry in Indian English literature has often a message, and in some cases, it has a didactic design. “The Killing of a Tree,” originally written in Hindi by Kunwar Narain and translated into English by Apurva Narain may come to one’s mind at this point. The poem has an interesting opening:

This time he was not there –
the old tree that always stood at attention,
like a guard at the door to my house. (Narain, 2015)

In the next lines, the representation of the old tree as an upright and alert guard will immediately fascinate a reader:

His worn leathery trunk
weather-beaten life
wrinkled rough upright shabby,
withered branch like a rifle,
turban of leafy flowers,
rugged boots on feet,
creaking, but full of vigorous courage (Narain, 2015)

The lines draw a remarkable line of similarity between the old tree and an old guard. The expressions like “leathery trunk,” “withered branch like a rifle” and the “turban of leafy flowers” will at once engage us, and the image of a tree-guard arises in front of our eyes:

He’d accost from afar, “Who goes there?”
“A friend,” I’d answer
and sit down for a moment
under his benign shade. (Narain, 2015)

But then the plant imagination flags. The tree as a subject becomes peripheral – almost a nonentity. It is reduced to a didactic instrument. It is projected as a guard against “some common foe”:

the house had to be saved from thieves
...
river from becoming drain
air from becoming smoke
...
jungles from becoming deserts (Narain, 2015)

The message of the poem therefore does not evolve from within, and it is rather imposed on the reader from outside.

This is, however, not true of “The Felled Tree” originally written by Sunanda Pradhan in Oriya and translated into English by Ramakanta Rath. It unobtrusively gives a message that we can’t kill a tree because trees were there before mankind, and trees will survive on the face of the earth even after the extinction of humans. Speaking for nature and letting nature’s voice be heard are important methodologies in ecocriticism. For instance, one may go back to Seneca’s maxim that advice-giving is of paramount importance since Nature does not teach what ought to be done in every specific circumstance (“quid autem cuique debeatur officio natura non docet”). The poem speaks for nature in an allegorical fashion. At the beginning of the poem, we read that some people “laboured hard” and felled a tree. But astonishingly: “With every stroke of the axe new leaves appeared on the tree” (Pradhan, 2009, p. 34). The labourers then changed their strategy:

They dug out its roots
and shot their missiles
at the roots,
at the felled branches.
The tree was on fire. (p. 35)

They were “happy” as their mission was “fulfilled.” Then, the miracle took place. They were chased by the fire. When no escape route was left for them:

They jumped into the water;
the water was on fire.
They flew;
the wind was on fire.
Pursued by the fire,
they ran
and fell unconscious. (p. 35)

They came to consciousness by a “fragrance from some other world.” They followed the fragrance and finally reached the place where they had killed the tree. They were amazed to see: “A new tree had grown from its stump./Its leaves, its flowers/danced in the wind” (p. 35). But they could not touch the flowers as they could not locate their own palms. Either they were “severed from their hands/or/blown away by the wind” (p. 36). Thus, despite the poem’s allegorical orientation, the element of allegory does not diminish the representation of the tree as an agency. The poem may be read through a phytocritical lens. “A phytocritical outlook,” Ryan (2018, p. 14) writes, “emphasizes the agencies of botanical beings in poetic texts and considers how plants are rendered, evoked, mediated, or brought to life in and through language” (14). Pradhan’s “The Felled Tree” largely fits into this discourse. It advocates for the arboreal in the Anthropocene in a way that emphasizes the agency of the botanical being. The tree is indestructible, and it can always give birth to a “new tree” after its destruction. At the end of the poem, the felled tree is “brought to life” through the image of its leaves and flowers dancing in the wind.

8 Conclusion

In a recent interview with *Down to Earth* on “Ecopoetry is artistic resistance,” K. Satchidanandan observes that poetry alone can never change the world, “but it can contribute to that change by creating and promoting consciousness” (Satchidanandan, 2023). In the early phases of Indian English poetry, we don’t find the promotion of this eco-consciousness. The trees are used as symbols or tropes by the poets like Sri Aurobindo or K.D. Sethna. But in the later phases of this poetry, the trees are acknowledged as sentient non-human beings, as our fellow inheritors of the earth. The poems of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra or those of Tamsula Ao are fine examples of it. With the passage of time Indian English poetry takes a dynamic vegetal turn. It speaks of the “otherness” of plants, and at the same time, exhorts the readers to honour the “ethic of connection” with the arboreal world in the face of merciless deforestation in the Anthropocene. We can’t fell trees at our own sweet will nor we can pluck flowers or tread on them when they lie on the ground. In Shikhandin’s “Do Not Tread On These Flowers”, a mother asks her child to be sensitive to the blooms lying on the grass: “There are bees and butterflies/reaching deep into them for nectar, even now as we pass them” (Shikhandin, 2020, p. 154). The mother’s exhortation opens our eyes to the organic connection among the flowers, birds, and bees, thereby unfolding the beauty of the ecological chain. Thus, Indian English plant poetry in its different phases represents divergences in terms of its ecological imagination. Whether one can become a plant will always invite a debate but through poetry “the dialectics of strangeness and familiarity” will entice a reader “deeper into the lives of plants” (Ryan, 2018, p. 17). Sumana Roy’s “How to Console a Dying Plant” reveals that the boundaries between human and plant bodies can be crossed. A plant-sensitive soul can read the agony of a plant as it dies: “the loss of leaves, the softness of hard stem/the collapse of the dignified vertical into the battle-lost horizontal” (Roy, 2022b, p. 20). Herein lies the magic of interconnectedness between the world of humans and that of plants.

Acknowledgment: 1. The authors acknowledge their indebtedness to Dr Sumana Roy, a leading contemporary Indian author in English and Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Ashoka University,

Haryana, India, for sharing a soft copy of her anthology titled *V.I.P.: Very Important Plant* (2022). 2. The authors also acknowledge their debt to Dr Betsy Paul C., Professor & Director of Research, St Aloysius College, Elthuruth, Thrissur, Kerala, India, for sharing her unpublished translation of Ayyappa Panikkar's poem "Where are the Woods, My Children?"

Funding information: No funding has been received for doing the research in the relevant field and writing the article.

Author contributions: The authors have accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and consented to its submission to the journal, reviewed all the results and approved the final version of the manuscript. JG: Conceptualization, Theorization, Analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review and editing. STA: Theorization, Analysis, Writing – review and editing.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Acharya, S. (2023). The tree huggers. In V. Agrawal (Ed.), *Count every breath: A climate anthology* (pp. 91–92). Hawakal.
- Ao, T. (2013). *Book of songs. Collected poems: 1988–2007*. Heritage Publishing House.
- Aurobindo, S. (1993). A tree. In M. Paranjape (Ed.), *Indian poetry in English* (p. 51). Macmillan.
- Bachelard, G. (1991). The hand dreams: On material imagination. In M. M. Jones (Ed.), *Gaston Bachelard, subversive humanist: Texts and readings* (pp. 102–6). University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bergson, H. (1998). *Creative evolution*. Dover.
- Chitre, D. (1992). Felling of the banyan tree. In A. K. Mehrotra (Ed.), *The Oxford India anthology of twelve modern Indian poets* (pp. 111–112). Oxford University Press.
- Daruwalla, K. N. (2006). Suddenly the tree. *Collected poems (1970–2005)*. Penguin Books.
- Dutt, T. (1993). Our casuarina tree. In M. Paranjape (Ed.), *Indian poetry in English* (pp. 42–43). Macmillan.
- Gagliano, M., Mancuso, S., & Robert, D. (2012). Towards understanding plant bioacoustics. *Trends in Plant Science*, 17(6), 323–325. doi: 10.1016/j.tplants.2012.03.002.
- Gagliano, M., Ryan, John C., & Vieira, P. (2017). Introduction. In M. Gagliano, J. C. Ryan, & P. Vieira (Eds.), *The language of plants: Science, philosophy, literature* (pp. vii–xxxiii). University of Minnesota Press.
- Hall, M. (2011). *Plants as persons: A philosophical botany*. State University of New York Press.
- Hall, M. (2019). In defence of plant personhood. *Religions*, 10(5), 317. doi: 10.3390/rel10050317.
- Haraway, D. (2003). The companion species manifesto: Dogs, people, and significant otherness. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Keats, J. (2002). *Selected letters*. (R. Gittings, (Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Laist, R. (Ed.). (2013). *Plants and literature: Essays in critical plant studies*. Rodopi.
- Lawrence, A. M. (2022). Listening to plants: Conversations between critical plant studies and vegetal geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, 46(2), 629–651. doi: 10.1177/03091325211062167.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1981). *The Cambridge edition of the letters and works of D. H. Lawrence. [Letters], Volume 2: The letters of D. H. Lawrence/ general ed. James T. Boulton June 1913–October 1916*. (G. J. Zytaruk & J. T. Boulton, Eds.). Cambridge University Press.
- Majumdar, G. (2020). Untitled. In V. Agrawal (Ed.), *Open your eyes: An anthology of climate change poetry and prose* (pp. 44–45). Hawakal.
- Marder, M. (2013a). *Plant-thinking: A philosophy of vegetal life*. Columbia University Press.
- Marder, M. (2013b). What is plant-thinking? *Klēsis*, 25, 124–143. <https://www.revueklesis.org/pdf/Klesis-philosophies-nature-6-Marder.pdf>.
- Marder, M. (2016). *Grafts: Writings on plants*. Univocal.
- Mehrotra, A. K. (2022). *Arvind Krishna Mehrotra: Collected poems*. Shearsman Books.
- Narain, K. (2015). *The killing of a tree* (A. Narain, Trans.). https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-2916_THE-KILLING-OF-A-TREE.
- Pandya, P. (2023). The old tree. In V. Agrawal (Ed.), *Count every breath: A climate anthology* (pp. 72–73). Hawakal.
- Patel, G. (1993). On killing a tree. In M. Paranjape (Ed.), *Indian poetry in English* (pp. 155–156). Macmillan.
- Paul, C. B. (2023). Sustaining sustainability: Re-reading the “tree poets” in Malayalam literature. *Literary Oracle*, 7(2), 45–53. <https://literaryoracle.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/3.-Sustaining-Sustainability.pdf>.
- Pradhan, S. (2009). The felled tree (R. Rath, Trans.). *Indian Literature*, 53(3), 34–26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23340286>.
- Ramanujan, A. K. (1967). *The interior landscape: Classical Tamil love poems*. New York Review Books.

- Reddy, M. (2014). *Chipko - Lets stick with it*. <https://allpoetry.com/poem/11765435-Chipko—Lets-stick-with-it-by-Manjula-Reddy>.
- Roy, S. (2022a). How to console a dying plant. *V.I.P.: Very important plant*. Shearsman Books.
- Roy, S. (2022b). I want to be a tree. *V.I.P.: Very important plant*. Shearsman Books.
- Ryan, J. C. (2016). Planting the eco-humanities?: Climate change, poetic narratives, and botanical lives. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 8(3), 61–70. doi: 10.21659/rupkatha.v8n3.08.
- Ryan, J. C. (2018). *Plants in contemporary poetry: Ecocriticism and the botanical imagination*. Routledge.
- Sandler, R. (2018). Is considering the interests of plants absurd? In A. Kallhoff, M. D. Paola, & M. Schörgenhumer (Eds.), *Plant ethics: Concepts and applications* (pp. 40–50). Routledge.
- Satchidanandan, K. (2023). *Ecopoetry is artistic resistance, says K Satchidanandan*. [Interview]. Down to Earth. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/interviews/environment/ecopoetry-is-artistic-resistance-says-k-satchidanandan-89804>.
- Sengupta, K. (2023). Hibiscus. In V. Agrawal (Ed.), *Count every breath: A climate anthology* (pp. 51–52). Hawakal.
- Sethna, K. D. (2005). Tree of time. In V. K. Gokak (Ed.), *The golden treasury of Indo-Anglian poetry* (p. 214). Sahitya Akademi.
- Shikhandin. (2020). Do not tread on these flowers. In K. Sengupta et al. (Eds.), *Hibiscus: Poems that heal and empower* (p. 154). Hawakal.
- Sivakumar, R. (2000). Sangam poetry. *Indian Literature*, 44(2), 182–192. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23342790>.
- Sugathakumari. (2021). Silent valley. *Selected poems of Sugathakumari* (P. K. N Panicker, Trans.). Authorspress.
- Tiwari, P. (2020). Milk. In V. Agrawal (Ed.), *Open your eyes: An anthology of climate change poetry and prose* (pp. 50–51). Hawakal.
- Vieira, P., Monica, G, & John, R. (2016). Introduction. In P. Vieira, M. Gagliano, & J. Ryan (Eds.), *The green thread: Dialogues with the vegetal world* (pp. ix–xxvii). Lexington Books.