ECOLOGY AS A NATURE-CULTURAL PROCESS IN RAJA RAO'S *KANTHAPURA*

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Abstract - This article investigates a largely overlooked dimension of Raja Rao's literary corpus, focusing on the depiction of ecological themes and Indian landscapes in his debut novel, *Kanthapura*. Drawing on recent scholarship in the Environmental Humanities, it adopts an integrated theoretical framework, combining Hubert Zapf's *Cultural Ecology* (2016), the new materialist concept of the *nature-culture continuum* (Iovino and Opperman 2013), and Niccolò Scaffai's *Ecocritique* (2017). This framework is applied to highlight how Rao's novel integrates material and political issues with a reflection on affective and spiritual connections between the human and the nonhuman world that is rooted in local traditions and beliefs. On a thematic level, what emerges in *Kanthapura* is the search for a new eco-social balance in a nation on the verge of independence. However, in this work, ecology is not only a narrative theme used to criticise colonial ideologies and eco-social legacies, but it also permeates the text in its narratological and semiotical dimensions, challenging colonial literary conventions. On a textual level, this article intends to discuss the *effects of nature* (Scaffai 2017) in *Kanthapura* by analysing the literary strategies employed by the author to depict the interactions between the human and the nonhuman world.

Keywords: Raja Rao; *Kanthapura*; ecocriticism; nature-culture; effects of nature.

1. For an Ecological Critique of the Modern Indian Novel: Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

1.1. Introduction

Ecological and ecocritical frameworks have become essential tools to study the relationships between climate change and the legacy of colonialism. Since the publication of Pablo Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments*: *Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (2010) and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2015), great degree of attention has been devoted to the representation of *postcolonial environments,* i.e. the network "of human and non-human material existence that is marked by the particular dynamics of historical capital at a specific stage and location" (Mukherjee 2010, p. 15). Through its historicist and Marxist approach, Mukherjee's Postcolonial Ecocriticism focuses on contemporary texts, stressing how postcolonial literature "continues to play a valuable role […] in imagining more sustainable alternatives to the current world order" and "in prefiguring what happens when that order collapses, bringing planetary chaos in its wake" (p. 80).

Despite its persisting relevance, Mukherjee's approach – and, by extension postcolonial ecocritical perspectives – have certain limitations. Postcolonial Ecocriticism, for example, has not given sufficient attention to Modern Indian novels in English, written at that very specific stage and location when the British control over India was faltering and things were about to radically change on a political, economic, and sociocultural level.

This lack of critical engagement has been partly shaped by dominant paradigms in

the study of this genre. Research on the Indian Novel in English has often followed fixed trajectories, mostly oriented by Postcolonial Studies. On this point, literary critic Ulka Anjaria (2015) has argued how critical approaches to Indian English fiction have tended to adopt a thematic perspective mostly concerned with political discourses and the nation-critique. In her view, after the publication of Rushdie's *Midnight Children,* postcolonial readings of Indo-English literature "quickly turned into a kind of interpretation-machine that verged on monotony" and "on keywords such as displacement […], nation, diaspora, hybridity, alterity, and subaltern" (Anjaria 2015, pp. 15-16). Basically, only works fulfilling the critics' expectations, namely those works that dealt with such political and sociological themes, were studied in universities. The selection criteria were therefore more ideologically than theoretically or aesthetically motivated.

This dominant paradigm has the potential to diminish our perception of the heterogeneity of Indo-English literary culture. By precluding the application of "the myriad other approaches that might potentially be mobilized" (Anjaria 2015, p. 17), the main risk is to eventually repropose a new centre-periphery dichotomy, not in spatial but in temporal terms. Indeed, the canonisation of Postcolonial Thought, combined with the political context and the emerging suspicion targeted at the violence of the nation-state, especially after the *Emergency*, are all factors which contributed to an increasing disregard with the writers who used to openly engage with nationalism. Consequently, diasporic and more cosmopolitan voices were favoured by critics. This could be perhaps one of the possible reasons why the generation of Indian writers from the 1930s has hardly been approached by scholars of ecocriticism. Novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and Ahmed Alì (except perhaps for R. K. A. Narayan, who has been met with more enthusiasm by Western criticism), are underrepresented in books for the study of Postcolonial Literature and Anglophone Literature[1]. Nonetheless, their production exhibits a high degree of social commitment and sense of responsibility[2], which could feature as a possible *trait d'union* with today's Environmental justice movements. Just to make an example, Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), one of the first Indian anglophone novels, deals precisely with the problems of untouchability. This theme is explored not only from a social perspective but also for its consequences in terms of the environmental and sociosanitary risks faced by the casteless community. As the novel tells the story of a single day in the life of a young toilet sweeper, Bakha, Anand seizes the opportunity to inform his targeted Western Audience about the unhealthful slums in which the *avarna* live. There, the Dalit are deprived of access to fresh water, while their quarter is flooded with "the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it" (Anand [1935] 1940, p. 9). Hence, throughout the novel, Anand reflects on possible solutions to caste inequalities and

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[1] This aspect would deserve perhaps further scrutiny, not the least because Anand's and Narayan's last works, respectively *Reflections on a White Elephant* (2002) and *Grandmother's Tale* (1992), were published just a couple of years before Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), whereas Rao's *The Chessmaster and His Moves* was published in 1988, the same year of *The Satanic Verses.* See Bertinetti (2002); Crisafulli and Elam (2009); Gopal (2009), Walsh (1990).

[2] The so-called first generations of Indian Writers in English exhibit a profound sense of political commitment, devoting themselves to the "betterment of our social life" after having gained awareness of "what we are, what we were, what we should or can be" (Ali [1936] 1979, p. 78-70). Inevitably influenced by Gandhian philosophy, Marxism and the emerging nationalist ideology, several writers from the 1930s also founded and joined the All-India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA), the most important literary association of South Asia, whose agenda encouraged "The new literature of India […] [to] deal with the basic problems of our existence today-the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection" (Malik 1967, p. 651).

the practice of the so-called *manual scavenging*, evaluating the feasible introduction of "a machine [...] which can remove dung without anyone having to handle it" (p. 156), i.e. the pipe system.

South Asian ecocriticism's focus on environmental justice and decolonising climate discourse could also be a possible reason behind the limited attention devoted to Modern Indian English Novels. These priorities often shift critical engagement toward contemporary texts and marginalised voices to decenter Western views on climate change and empower marginalised voices of indigenous resistance. In a 2021 special issue of *South Asian Review* edited by Shazia Rahman, scholars have sought to "open debates that address ethical questions about how to move forward with regard to environmental issues" (Rahman 2021, p. 322) in South Asia. This initiative has significantly broadened the scope of Postcolonial Ecocriticism by extending ecocritical frameworks to the analysis of texts from beyond Anglophone India, such as those from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the essays collected in the issue primarily examine the cultural response to the ecological emergency, including the genre of Postcolonial Anthropocene fictions, the questions of animality and the consequences of global capitalism on *Adivasi* communities. However, this recurring lack of engagement with older texts potentially skews the historical understanding of postcolonial literature and its relationships with colonial interventions on the environment. In a nutshell, contemporary criticism risks perpetuating the idea that pre-independence Indian writers were disengaged from issues of ecology, development, and modernity.

In this respect, ecology belongs to the past just as much as it does to the present. Ecological transformations have been set in motion for longer periods than those in which human civilisations have developed an ecological consciousness in the sense of contemporary environmentalism. Besides, as the global planetary crisis worsens year after year, gaining *momentum*, it becomes even more important to address, along with what the future might have in store for us, the former stages of global environmental exploitation. In postcolonial contexts, Indigenous populations have witnessed a radical alteration of the material conditions of their life and the forced entry into the capitalist circuits. Texts written in colonial periods or at the verge of postcoloniality could then shed light on a time when humans' relations with the environment were conceived under different modes of existence, or when they were about to be radically transformed. Therefore, it might still be profitable to experiment with ecocritical theories, which can investigate the semiotics of literary ecologies in different stages of time and different *con-texts*.

This article proposes an ecocritical reading of Raja Rao's debut novel *Kanthapura* (1938). Its scope is to examine the novel's portrayal of the environment and ecological relationships. Indeed, these aspects of *Kanthapura* are still underdressed, as "the question of which role nature and landscape play in Rao's writing has never been asked seriously" (Riemenschneider 2022, p. 171). On a theoretical level, this article draws on Hubert Zapf's Cultural Ecology, new materialist theory and Niccolò Scaffai's concept of "Effects of Nature"; on a methodological level, it investigates Rao's representation of different eco-cultural relationships within the Indian environment to highlight how they frame the novel's settings and orient the narratological development of the story; from an eco-philosophical perspective, it aims to demonstrate how *Kanthapura* fosters the necessity of new relationships with the Indian environment on a cultural and spiritual level to address the challenges emerging during the fight for independence.

1.2. *The Dimensions of Ecology in* Kanthapura

Rao's engagement with ecology can be a relevant topic of ecocritical inquiry because it encompasses questions of historical material exploitation, cultural marginalisation and aesthetical renovation of existing cultural forms.

Political and social ecology are among the core themes developed in the novel. *Kanthapura*'s realist narrative recounts the story of the riots that broke out in a fictional village located in the Western Ghats, when the peasant community began its fight against the colonial government to defend its rights of land ownership[3]. Their upsurge, captained by the Gandhian activist Moorthy, ultimately resulted in the destruction of the village and the forced relocation of the protesters, who failed to take control of the colonial plantations owned by the *Skeffington Coffee Estate*. On an ecological level, villages the likes of Kanthapura, being rural societies, are considerable social entities mostly composed of *ecosystem people*, i.e. "the economically weaker rural population tied to the health of natural resources of their surroundings" (Gadgil 2023, p. 8). Historically, it was this very population who paid the highest price in terms of environmental damage, firstly endangered by colonial land policies and then by the aftermaths of wild industrialising. In the words of the ecologists Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, the British Government of India "deprived the tribals and peasants of […] produce they depended on (Gadgil and Guha 1995, p. 10), thus retaining the control on natural "resources by using the state apparatus, while passing its costs of resource capture on to the rest of the population" (p. 45)[4]. In one of the most dramatic moments of *Kanthapura*, the reader is taken to side with the Gandhian protesters on the village barricades, shouting how "The fields are ours […] it's we who have put the plough to the earth and fed her with water" (Rao [1938] 2014, p. 100). In this sense, the novel's interconnection of ecology, colonial exploitation and anticolonial struggle mirrors the material dynamics of colonial terraforming, and, most importantly, the local practices of resistance to it.

Discourse on nature and the environment has played a crucial role in postcolonial thinking. The process of *otherization*, stroked at both humans and animals (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, p. 152) has been widely investigated to discuss the ideologies of white suprematism, Western civilisation, and the doctrine of *terra nullius*. The Bengali Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, for example, has put under scrutiny how human and environmental exploitation have been sharing a common ideological matrix, which framed the conquered land and its inhabitants as *brute beings*. In his thought-provoking essay, *The Nutmeg's Curse. Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021), he highlights how, in the eyes of the invaders, the idea of 'Land' in the Colonies was mostly regarded for the commercial values of what could be extracted from it. Consequently, profit-oriented and extractive interventions on the environment led to the progressive disruption of "the entire web of

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[3] At the beginning, Indian nationalist struggle was concentrated in urban areas during the 1920s. However, by the 1930s, anti-governmental movements shifted towards the countryside to mobilize peasants. In Karnataka, as in other parts of Southwest India, Gandhi's rural campaigns set the model for organising peasants' resistance through Congress's infrastructures, leveraging land disputes, tax increases and conflicts over access to forest resources. See Shingavi (2013, pp. 86-88).

[4] It is then not surprising that, against European biopolitical imperialism, Gandhi's political philosophy, another important theme of *Kanthapura*, advocated for India to become *a land of village republics*. Gandhi's doctrine preached the importance of the Janian principle "aparigraha", i.e. "non-possessiveness", which has been seen as part of an attitude of care towards the environment, especially in the light of Gandhi's dismissal of the global market and his support to local production of goods. See Patel (2014, p. 293).

non-human connections that sustained a certain way of life" (p. 41), along with that of the sociocultural beliefs and practices associated with it. According to Ghosh, such governmental policies and practices betray an ideological *omnicidal* imperative, "the desire to destroy everything" (p. 75). In one passage of his essay, Ghosh perfectly summarises this concept and the tragic consequences for the whole world:

> As a process, then, the muting of a large part of humanity by European colonizers cannot be separated from the simultaneous muting of "Nature". Colonization was thus not merely a process of establishing dominion over human beings; it was also a process of subjugating, and reducing to muteness, an entire universe of beings that was once thought of as having agency, powers of communication, and the ability to make meaning. (p. 190)

In Ghosh's view, Western colonialism reduced Indigenous people and nature to silence to legitimise their exploitation. The voices, identities and agencies of the nonhuman world were obliterated and replaced with the celebration of the 'Anthropos' as the embodiment of the Western civilisation. Therefore, Raja Rao's stylistic choices, as an Indian writer with access to Western culture and audiences, merit in-depth analysis to uncover the environmental symbolism in his work and explore potential counter-discourses that reimagine human-nature relationships.

Some critical studies on Rao's literary production have not grasped the ecocritical dimension of his works, limiting themselves to emphasising the author's search for personal, cultural, and national identity. Meenakshi Mukherjee, for example, identified Rao's "Anxiety of Indianness", i.e. an obsessive deployment of "certain thematic or formal devices to tether their texts to indigenous contexts" (Mukherjee 1993, p. 2608), which ultimately betrayed a deep-seated "desire to be rooted" (p. 2611). A similar view was also proposed by critic Tabish Khair, who developed Mukherjee's thesis to frame Rao's cultural anxiety as an attempt at rendering an idealisation of rural life, to repropose the view of an *eternal India*, in compliance with the mainstream ideology "that has dominated Hindu establishment thinking for centuries" (Khair 1998, p. 83).

In his short essay *Return to the Jungle? Colonial and Post-colonial Landscapes in Indian-English Literature* (1995), German critic Gerhard Stilz has been one of the few scholars, according to Riemenschneider (2022), who has surveyed the representation of landscapes in Rao's *Kanthapura*. Through his brief close readings of texts, written by both British and Indian origin writers, Stilz states that Indian writers "do carry on presenting Indian nature in the colonialist tradition with its culturalist concerns" (Stilz 1995, p. 330). According to Stilz, Rao's description of landscape and his attention to natural hazards are interpreted as a device to balance the dangers of nature "by poetic construction of harmony" (p. 330). In *Kanthapura*, Stilz sees Rao's representation as a response to the rhetoric of British writers, like Prinsep, Kipling or Forster, who expressed the colonisers' ambivalent feelings towards that land which was only partially conquered and still threatened the colonised. If Anglo-Indian writers exploited natural dangers to "thwart the colonizer's purpose and drive him either back into safer and more familiar places or into madness or death" (p. 325), Rao is seen as one of the first to introduce the "concept of balancing nature as a survival principle in Indian communal life, which will ultimately win out over colonialism" (p. 331).

However, Stilz's final remarks are, to some extent, limiting for an ecocritical perspective and that the environmental representation offered by Indian authors should be approached with more complexity. While it is important to acknowledge that this essay was written in the 1990s and did not explicitly employ ecocritical methodology, Stilz's idea that "post-colonial literature should aim (if not arrive) at some construction of a peaceful balance regained between humans and nature" (p. 334) is problematic. In other

words, this view risks to oversimplify issues that require more subtle reflections. My point is that such a claim is vague and risks being orientalist. It is not clear why postcolonial authors ought to represent a peaceful balance with nature, when, at the current time, the Global South is the part of the world which is experiencing the most disruptive effects of climate change. To do so, it would be simply to oppose an ideological discourse, namely that of the colonisers, with another ideological one, Stilz's idea of Indians as *green natives,* ignoring the complexity of the real connections of these communities with their environment. Even if here it has been argued how rural communities can be regarded as ecosystem people, their dependency on the environment must not be idealised in some romantic or pastoral fashion. What can be perhaps better hypothesised is that Indian authors can rely on the variety of cultural repertoires sustaining their vision and the meanings their cultures have attached to the land where they live. Consequently, culture, in an ecological sense, can be interpreted as a set of tools used to negotiate the relationship with the environment, develop a common identity and help their survival as a socio-cultural community. Accordingly, traces of these instances can be mimetically or figuratively reproduced in literary representation. Similarly to what can be said of the sense of place, i.e. "the collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values, and feelings that individuals or groups associate with a particular locality" (Williams and Stewart 1998, p. 19), Indian novels the likes of *Kanthapura* can continuously construct and reconstruct the already existing meanings associated with the environment in the world beyond the novels. Thus, as advanced by Hubert Zapf's *Cultural Ecology*, the literary representation of marginalised others, such as nature in (post)colonial contexts, can be interpretable as part of a transformative process aimed at cultural renovation. Hence, ecological connections can foster a "constant renewal of the cultural centre from its margins […] [and] a tentative ground for systemic self-corrections and/or for potential new beginnings" (Zapf 2016a, p. 148).

2. Theories of nature, culture and literature

Cecilia Åsberg points out how the myriad of ecocritical approaches should be treated as "plethora of tools and guidelines facilitating and framing the research process in creative ways. Taken together, in an organic synthesis […] [they work] as one multivalent engine of discovery" (Åsberg 2024, p. 275). Following Åsberg's input, the methodology orienting this article wants to design an integrated ecocritical approach by combining some principles of Material Ecocriticism, such as the concept of a nature-culture *continuum*, with Scaffai's and Zapf's perspectives.

The designed approach presupposes the embrace of ecology as a category in its broader sense. This means going beyond the original definition of 'ecology' originated in the field of environmental sciences[5] and frames the study of life connections under a holistic approach, which also considers the role of human cultures. Similar conceptual models have been advanced in contemporary theory through the concepts of

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[5] The word ecology was coined by the German naturalist Ernst Haeckel in his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen* (1866): "die gesamte Wissenschaft von den Beziehungen des Organismus zur umgebenden Aussenwelt, wohin wir im weiteren Sinne alle, Existenz-Bedingungen rechnen können" (Haeckel 1866, p. 296).

naturecultures (Fuentes 2010; Haraway 2003)[6] or a nature-culture *continuum* (Iovino and Opperman 2013)*.* With the advent of Material Ecocriticism*,* though, the idea of Haraway and Fuentes's 'naturecultures' was later redesigned in the form of a non-dualistic ontological model, i.e. a nature-culture *continuum.* Such spectrum has been theorised to critique the persistence of dichotomies, the likes of 'discourse-matter', 'body-mind' and 'nature-culture', overcoming the theoretical limit sustained by those categories in the comprehension of the climate emergency. According to Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman, behind the ecological crisis, there "are tangles of natures and cultures that can be unravelled only by interpreting them as narratives about the way humans and their agentic partners intersect in the making of the world." (Iovino and Opperman 2013, p. 6). The choice of the term 'narrative' is not by chance, and it signals a core attribute of matter, namely its ability to act in the world through its agentic property. From an eco-material perspective, material phenomena are interpreted as concurring factors in the production of texts and meanings, i.e. they are "storied matter" (Iovino 2013, p. 98), because "the human agency meets the narrative agency of matter halfway, generating material-discursive phenomena in the forms of literature and other cultural creations" (Iovino and Opperman 2013, p. 9). Neo-materialist assumptions are thus important as they support a deeper vision of our relationship with the natural world, in which ecology is to be seen as a multivalent discourse of nature-cultural entanglements that penetrates multiple aspects of life and cross-contaminates several levels related to the experience of reality, including the cultural and literary dimension.

Within this theoretical framework, literature can be seen as a form of 'Cultural Ecology'. This term was first introduced by Julian Steward to designate the study of the environment's influences on socio-cultural institutions and productions. In the view of German ecocritic Hubert Zapf, the idea was later developed for a theory of literature as "an ecological force within the larger system of culture and of cultural discourses" (Zapf 2016a, p. 140). Drawing on W. Iser's 'Literary Anthropology' and G. Bateson's 'Ecology of Mind', Zapf argues in favour of a triadic model, in which literature simultaneously operates three modes of discourse: 1) culture-critical metadiscourse, 2) imaginative counter-discourse, 3) reintegrative inter-discourse. In this light, creative representations can connect states of crisis and unrelated aspects of reality to renovate the eco-cultural system through an imaginative empowerment of marginalised entities. Thus, literary texts entail "functional and discursive features that lend [them] a special potential of representing, exploring, and communicating fundamental dimensions of human life within the overarching culture-nature-relationship" (Zapf 2016b, p. 89).

However, it is necessary to stress how any exploration of eco-cultural entanglements occurs from specific perspectives. In this respect, I think Zapf's abstract model benefits from the integration of Scaffai's 'ecocritique'. As he has exposed in his *Letteratura e ecologia. Forme e temi di una relazione narrative* (2017), in cultural artefacts, such as literary texts, paintings and photos, the representation of places, landscapes and environments is determined by the framing effect, which gives back a

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[6] Originally, the concept of 'naturecultures' was designed to address multispecies interfaces where the terms of relationships, namely human and other-than-human beings, are entangled "in co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exist the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all" (Haraway 2003, p. 12). Since different species "are simultaneously actors and participants in sharing and shaping mutual ecologies" (Fuentes 2010, p. 600), one can deduce how human interactions with its Earth-others shape, not solely the physical and biotic structures of the environment, but also our social and cultural institutions, forming a complex socio-natural network which every actants is compelled to navigate within.

figurative copy of the original referent. What is represented is an *effect of nature*, in the sense of "the effect of a perspective, which is in itself the product of a code, of old and established cultural habits" (Scaffai 2017, p. 24, *my translation*). This effect may involve the description of landscape, the representation of the characters' emotions, and authorial comments on philosophical themes such as the uncanny or the sublime. In the case of Rao, it will be seen how the *storyworld* in *Kanthapura* is conceived and represented according to the fictionalised worldview of an Indian rural peasant and on her Traditional Ecological Knowledges (TEKs)[7].

One last point to highlight is that the deployment of any 'effect of nature' is not limited to the level of content. This argument is a common standpoint of both Zapf and Scaffai's eco-thoeries. Accordingly, the representation of the environment, in the sense of *Umwelt,* can become an object of a critical study, i.e. a theme, "only when it interacts with the narratological structures of texts and when its references are filtered by semiotic codes" (71, *my translation*). This means that literary representations of eco-cultural entanglements must encompass the "complexities of character relations, the interaction between external environments and interior worlds, chronotopes of time and space, […] motifs, symbolism, language, and rhythm, as well as to the intertextual dynamics" (Zapf 2016b, p. 92). Therefore, my attempted reading of *Kanthapura* will be oriented to highlight how eco-cultural relationships permeate the novel on a narratological and semiotical level, to clarify how Rao's aesthetic choices contribute to represent non-Western worldviews and "the encounter, clash or the capsizing of different perspectives" (p. 72) on socio-ecological issues.

3. The Eco-Cultural Entanglements of Rao's *Kanthapura*

3.1. The Genre and Style of Rao's First Novel

Rao's poetics is founded on a creative use of language to express different and intertwining cultural identities. In his famous foreword to *Kanthapura,* Rao states how the core idea behind his first attempt to write a novel in English was to establish a new autonomous creative space for Indian writers. His goal was then pursued through a high degree of experimentalism, working both on the level of language and form:

> to convey the various shades and omissions of certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before-but not of our emotional make up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. (Rao 2014, p. xxxi)

In Rao's view, the act of writing becomes for Indian authors a *transcultural* practice to fully engage with the vast repertoire, inherited from the peoples who have crossed the history of his country. At the same time, Rao's claim about the impossibility for South

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[7] With this term I refer to the body of "of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment" (Berkes *et al.* 2000, p. 1152).

Asian writers to *write only as Indians* ought not be intended just in terms of language transfer. On a deeper level, Rao hoped that future generations of Indian novelists would find their voice and style to be able to express their multicultural identity. For him, the recovery of tradition was in this sense a simultaneous process of invention and *indigenisation*, as he re-writes, in his self-fashioned variety of Indian English, the genre of a *stahla-purana,* i.e. the legendary history in which "the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright" (p. 31).

Writing neither as a British nor solely as an Indian, Rao could invent his novelistic tradition as well as his literary language. However, as it has been correctly highlighted by Alessandro Vescovi, Rao's dialect between the English and the Indian cultural traditions (*parampara*) rejects the logic of postcolonial cultural hybridisation or synthesis. The author "does not include different genres in the omnivorous form of the novel, but rather the opposite: he adds the novel's form to the established Indian narrative genres" (Vescovi 2024, p. 95). What Rao did in *Kanthapura* was then to adapt and translate the puranic genre in English, recovering the conventions of this genre, such as the oral style or the religious motives.

From an ecocritical perspective, the recovery of the Parampara bears crucial implications for the novel's structure. Most of the story of *Kanthapura* is recounted by an intradiegetic narrator, namely an old village lady, Achakka, who frames the novel's view on landscape and nature. Achakka is indeed a character who has witnessed the facts narrated, and who posthumously informs her audience of the events which led to the disruption of *her* village. What is significant here is that, despite her quasi-omniscient perspective (for example, she has in-depth knowledge of the petty rivalries and the tribal lore of *Kanthapura*)*,* her point of view is always internal and limited to the epistemological level of the rural community she belongs to.

As a result, the narrator's voice is the product of an irreverent invention of a tribal widow speaking Rao's linguistic 'pastiche'. At the level of syntax, Rao's English constitutes an attempt to mimic Kannada's oral prosody through the heavy usage of anaphoric and paratactic structures. In parallel, the lexical terrain of the English language is invaded by 'alien' words. On this point, Stefano Mercanti (2009) has studied how the English of Rao's novel, among its many distinctive traits, is rich in Indian foreign loans, mostly employed to refer to the localities of the subcontinent or express, also through compounds, the natural referents of India[8]. On the one hand, the ancient intellectual, religious and folkloric traditions, and to a greater extent, the whole macrocosm of the Indian Peninsula, became artistic tools which Rao could use freely in his self-fashioning of a new literature for both India and the anglophone world. On the other hand, in the words of *Kanthapura*'s characters, mostly reported by Achakka's *diegesis*, the extra-linguistic referents are connoted by indigenous shades of meaning. For example, the scientific knowledge of characters who "got papers from the city" (Rao 2014, p. 33), such as Rangamma, is filtered through Achakka's knowledge. Analogously, Darwinism is exemplified as the story "of the monkeys that were the men we have become" (p. 33);

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[8] The language of *Kanthapura* features many zoonyms and phytonyms (*pipal, bandicoot, krait, neem, rudrakshi, bel, champak, paddy, margosa pipal-tree, field-bund, neem leaves, bel tree, pickle-pots, jack-fruit, toddy-pot, pipal-platform, kraaled elephants*), as well as hydronyms and toponyms (*Ganges, Godavary, Cauvery, Jumna, Saraswathi Ganges water, Parvathi- well; Gujerat, taluk, tirtham, maidan, thothi, mutt, Kabul, Bukhara, Lahore, Vedavathy, Kanchi, Jallianwalabagh, Kashi, Sahyadri, hobli, Siddapur, Sholapur, Kailas, Kanyakumari, Karachi, Kachar, Ghats, Gokarna, Gaya, Rameshwaram*), see Mercanti (2009, pp. 82-83).

viruses and germs are "the worms, thin-as-dust worms that get into your blood and give you dysentery and plague and cholera"; while Western Medicine is distrusted because the pills are "as bitter as the neem leaves" (p. 61) and does not always conform to religious orthodoxy. Regarding lexical choices, Rao uses the words 'worms' and 'neem', which refer to local ecology and vernacular medical knowledge. While it is true that Achakka's worldview can bear superstitious and harmful principles, even sometimes disapproved by the implied author[9], it is at the same time an interesting perspective, because it problematizes the assimilation of Western epistemologies within the local culture.

Specifically, the problems of assimilation and authenticity transgress the textual level, being an important part of Rao's intimate philosophical inquiry. These two poles can be traced back to Rao's intimate relation with the concept of tradition and with India. In a later essay, "The English Language and Us", published posthumously in the collection *The Sacred Wordsmith* (2022), Rao reaffirms the necessity to embrace the English language, of which he feels "creator and inheritor" (Rao 2022, p. 107), as the only possible to way to "to be authentic" (p. 110). His idea of authenticity is conceived as the product of a complex process of cultural and inner self-exploration, explained through the metaphors of sacrifice and anthropophagy. Speaking to the Indian writers, Rao stresses that "unless we eat ourselves, symbolically […] we could never write, or see the true linkage between words" (p. 109). The implicit intertextual reference here is to Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto antropofago* (1928), where the Brazilian author used the imagery of cannibalism to refer to the process of assimilation of the colonial and European cultural models enacted by the emerging post-colonial writers. On the one hand, for Andrade, devouring the colonizer was conceived as "a necessary and irreverent act of love, a form of cultural resistance, a way to get rid of Western influence, a violation of the code, but also an act of praise" (Albertazzi 2013, p. 48, *my translation*). According to Rao, the metaphor of ritual anthropophagy is not targeted at the European cultural antagonists but is instead an act of self-sacrifice. The poet does not absorb the energies of the enemy but those deep-seated within oneself:

> Sacrifice is the process by which one's self withdraws in the background and becomes *Purusha,* the Primal Man, *the* Self. According to the Rig Veda, this is what the gods did: they bound Him, Purusha, the Primal man, bound Him to the earth and sacrificed him. Purusha as offering... the devas and gods performed sacrifice, and here sacrifice itself was worshipped as sacrifice by the gods […] And from the sacrifice of Purusha arouse the world […] Poetry then is the Self speaking of the Self, Purusha, to Itself. Hence, poetry *is* sacrifice. The poetic experience is a eucharistic rite. (Rao 2022, pp. 105-106)

Only after a sacrifice, the poets can create art. However, this process of self-renunciation is not to be understood as a solipsistic retreat in a vague ascetic experience. On the contrary, it is the artist's ego which is withdrawn in the background of the mind, permitting the recollection or discovery of a higher truth. While the self becomes the context, poetry is thus the expression of a mindful observation of the absolute, gained only after a process of meditation and spiritual growth, of symbolical *auto-antropofagia*. It is from this new awareness that the author can then newly engage with the world.

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[9] In the novel, Madanna's child dies of fever after the lack of proper care, because his parents had too many hesitations in calling a doctor, being afraid to be hit by the god's wrath: "If the gods are angry – they'll take away not only your children but yourself, oh, you man… […] Kenchamma would not forgive" (Rao 2014, p. 61).

In Rao's poetics, then, literary language intimately relates to the ecological reality of India:

> I must make my English speak Sanskrit. My language must speak the hills, the Deccan Hills, and the Ganges, the changes she makes in her course, long and wide. We can only be epic [...] with our parable islands, muddy or clear according to how the snows on the Himalayas melt or freeze — fierce and pure to begin with, then ending in a million wandering streams, each one a Ganga before settling into the sands of Calcutta. (p. 110)

While the poet's self is symbolically transformed into Puruṣa – the soul of the universe –, the search for a language of poetic creation is also asked to go back to its ancient pasts. The new English poetic language must then be inspired by the history of Indian cultures and the way they engaged with landscape, its most ancient poetic referents. In this sense, one can interpret Rao's poetics of the recovery and actualisation of Indian traditions as a form of *becoming earth*, in the sense of an inward movement, both on the level of language and form, towards a mythical cultural *humus* perceived as a possible bearer of higher philosophical truths.

In this view, Achakka, as a narrator, symbolically embodies the Indian cultural *humus*. Her tale, which "may have been told of an evening […] on the veranda" (Rao 2014, p. 32) frames the peasants' upsurge as a legendary history, acquiring quasi-mythical value. Within this framework, Rao's poetics also recover Indian eco-cultural relations, which are approachable on a linguistic and symbolical level, as the 'primitive soil' of Indian intellectual cultures. Accordingly, Rao saw an unbreakable bond between the poles of culture and nature, testified for example in the relationships between Sanskrit epics and Indian localities, but also in his interests in the localist genre of *puranas*. The description of the Indian natural world might thus follow the rhetoric of an actualised tradition. However, as artistic expression is also the site of transmission of philosophical truths, it can be hypothesised that the representation of ecology would be employed to convey multiple messages. For instance, it could be employed for political discussions, addressing the relationship among the rural community, the government and land. In parallel, the representation of ecology becomes suitable for ecosophical speculation, discussing the values attributed to the environment and the metaphysical principles which determine human attachment to it. The analysis of the effects of nature in *Kanthapura* will then be oriented along these two axes.

3.2. Land and Water in the Village's Religion

The first framing perspective employed in the novel to represent Indian eco-cultural entanglements is the village's religion. The local community is mostly devoted to the cult of the *grama-devata* Kenchamma. Here, the goddess is identified through several epithets related to the semantic sphere of fertility, including "Mother of earth, blood of life //, Harvest-queen, rain-crowned // […], Goddess benign and bounteous" (Rao 2014, p. 3). Kenchamma's role is vividly illustrated through the seasonal celebrations, particularly the harvest rituals, where the community gathers to honour her. These gatherings also feature fervent dances and songs. "[T]hrough the harvest night shall we dance before you", says Achakka, "the fire in the middle and the horns about us, we shall sing and sing and sing, cloud our hands and sing" (p. 3), demonstrating the villager's deep connection to the goddess and her supposed life-sustaining powers. According to the local lore, the river village is also deified, as the river Himavathy is known as the goddess's son. Far from being a decorative motif, this element refers to widespread beliefs of South Asian water cultures, in which rivers are considered sacred spaces, especially within Hinduism

(Chattaraj 2022, pp. 170-71). Accordingly, the narrator openly testifies how "in Kashi, when the night fell, gods seemed to rise from the caverns of the Ganges, to rise sheer over the river, each one with his consort, and each one with his bull or peacock or flower throne" (p. 154). Thus, the local cult serves not merely as a religious practice but works as a lens through which the villagers understand and interact with the world around them.

Such a view of the world is also oriented by the symbols and meanings associated with the deity, which can be approached from different perspectives. From a Hindu point of view, Kenchamma features as one of the several manifestations of *Mahadevi*, the great Goddess, consort and *Shakti* of the god Shiva. Within the Partnership Framework adopted by Stefano Mercanti, the figure of Kenchamma is also interpreted as a «gylanic world-accepting, presence […] symbol of a life-affirming and world-accepting religion rather than of a world-renouncing one» (Mercanti 2009, p. 72). Mercanti's analysis suggests that Kenchamma's portrayal echoes ancient Neolithic female deities, emphasising a connection to the sacred experienced through the natural world. Indeed, her blessings predominantly focus on safeguarding and enhancing the ecological well-being of her devotees. Kenchamma's acts of care encompass ensuring bountiful harvests and protecting the village from natural disasters such as floods, epidemics, and famines. However, Kenchamma's significance extends beyond the religious and holy, because her cult plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and positive environmental attitudes.

The village of Kanthapura is characterised by social inequalities and caste segregation. This condition is openly manifested in the division of its urban space into distinct quarters: "Our village had a Pariah quarter too, a Potter's quarter, a Weavers' quarter and a Sudra Quarter" (Rao 2014, p. 6). The risk of social inequality and disruption related to caste segregation seems to be mitigated by the awareness of a shared identity rooted in the Goddess's adoration. Ideally, Kenchamma serves then as a common myth of origin, with village lore recounting her descent from the heavens to slay a demon threatening women and children. Despite the seemingly simplistic nature of this narrative, its plausibility is tried to be reinforced by the tangible landscape. The red hue of Kenchamma's hill, attributed to the Goddess's battles, provides the material manifestation of the legend, when "the blood soaked and soaked into the earth, and that is why the Kenchamma hill is all red" (Rao 2014, p. 2). The villagers have built the temple dedicated to Kenchamma upon the hill, and the whole space is consecrated to her. On a deeper level, Kenchamma's hill represents, in its memorial function, a "time gathering site" (Tylor 2021, p. 54), where events from the past are intermingled with those of the present. Following a cyclical model of epochs and eras typical of Hinduism, sites like Kenchamma's temple are socially functional as they gather "knots of time […] around them" (p. 53), allowing the community to preserve the cultural memory of foundational events.

As a result, the villagers' identities are deeply rooted in their relationship with *land*. From their perspective on nature, land is not just a resource but a sacred space where humans, other-than-human beings, and the divine converge, fostering a sense of collective belonging and environmental communion. To stress the importance of this latter point further, Rao highlights how this sense of interconnectedness is reinforced by recurring religious celebrations, such as fertility rites marking the arrival of seasonal spring rains.

> In Vaisakh men plough the fields of Kanthapura. The rains have come, the fine, first-footing rains that skip over the bronze mountains, tiptoe the crags, and leaping into the valleys, go splashing and wind-swung, a winnowed pour, and the coconuts and the betel nuts and the cardamom plants choke with it and hiss back. And there it comes over Bebbur hill and the Kanthur hill and begins to paw upon tiles, and the cattle come running home [...] and people

> leave their querns and rush to the courtyard, and turning towards the Kenchamma temple send forth a prayer, saying, 'There, there, the rains have come, Kenchamma; may our houses be white as silver'. (Rao 2014, p. 127)

According to the peasants' mentality, spring rains are a divine blessing, whose positive effects on the community are recorded by the text in the description of water's personified and playful movements. The imagery employed also frames water as agential matter. The sounds produced by the pouring water and its gush are evoked through the alliteration of /s/, /t/ and /p/, while the incessant downward movement is marked through the series of verbal phrases occurring one after the other and mainly constituted by motion verbs. In this passage, the rains do not simply fall but 'come', 'skip', 'tiptoe', 'leap', 'go splashing' with the plants and 'paw upon the tiles'. Quite interestingly, the movements described point out to different moments of intensity and speed for the cloudburst. First, they arrive rapidly from 'the mountains', only to diminish when passing over the crags and finally outburst once they reach the village's valleys.

However, the reaction to the arrival of rains is experienced differently by the plantscape and the human community. While the unexpected rains are not much welcomed by 'betel nuts' and 'cardamom plants', who 'hiss back' after being soaked, the children cannot wait to ran "to the gutter-slabs to sail paper boats down to Kashi" (p. 127). Their joy is shared by the adult workers, who humbly thank the *deva* and set off to prepare the cattle for the ceremony and the beginning of ploughing. The rains have indeed made the soil as "soft as a pumpkin's kernel" (p. 130), which simplifies their work while "the plough cuts the earth and spatters the clods, and the farther they go the lighter does it cut" (p. 130).

The *puja* held in the month of *Vaisakha* involves the care and connection of the village people with their earth-others and the divine. These offerings and adorations are addressed to both the idol of the *devata* and the bulls ploughing the fields. Both these holy presences are washed, adorned with garlands and blessed with holy water. After this first phase of preparation, the rite involves the choice of the fairest and strongest exemplar, which must run three times around the temple, while the devotees sing religious hymns and throw rice and flowers at it. The community welcomes this moment with extreme joy, "with their hearts rich in holiness" (p. 130), praying for Kenchamma to "Send us rain for three days, dry weather for two days, and rain again, soft rain, Kenchamma [...] Kenchamma will protect us all..." (p. 131). The rains retain, therefore, a symbolic value for the village, being associated with the goddess's blessings and the possibility to sustain the community thanks to lighter labour and bountiful harvests.

The advent of the spring rains does not bear significance only for the representation of 'rural ecologies' but is also related to the perception of time as it is expressed in the novel. Throughout *Kanthapura* the passage of time is mostly signalled by the recurrence of religious events and the cycle of seasons. Although references to contemporary events, like Gandhi's imprisonment or the Dandi march, are limited but still present, the novel often relies on monthly festivals associated with the Hindu calendar (*Panchanga*) to mark the passage of time. For example, the beginning of Moorthy's predicament coincides with the preparation of the "Ganesh festival" (p. 9) in Summer. Moorthy's imprisonment occurs after the *divali,* the feast dedicated to light (*Śrī*) in the month of *Kārtika* (Oct.-Nov.), when "gods walk by lighted streets, blue gods and quiet gods […] and many a child in Kanthapura sits late into the night to see the crown of this god and that god» (Rao 2014, p. 95). The begin of the month *Vaisakha* (Apr.- Mai) signals instead the passing of a year from the beginning of the narration, bringing a double blessing for the community, i.e. the rain and, most importantly, Moorthy's release.

In this light, *Kanthapura*'s religious views are the code through which the villagers can make sense of time as well as their precariousness and material dependency on the environment. The villagers' ecological relationships are culturally projected on a higher level and the protection of their vulnerable lives is entrusted to a divine entity who embodies the spirit of nature. By this equivalence, the village religion promotes a cultural model of sustainability based on the core belief that if the community takes care and celebrates nature/Kenchamma, nature/Kenchamma will take care of them. However, although this religious creed constitutes a useful chronotope to orient the village's life, the eco-cultural relationships represented are far from ideal. The ecological principles and values promoted by the cult of Kenchamma are partially disattended in practice, because they are ineffective in the contrast of social inequalities. From the traditional, Hindu mentality, the caste system is perfectly understandable. In addition, the local beliefs do not prescribe acts of care to fields other than those in Kanthapura, which, not the least, are mostly owned by Dorè, the local landowner. Even though this paradigm does not align with our contemporary idea of 'ecocentric approaches to the environment', the effects of nature expressed through the village religion retain a significant role for the novel. On the narrative level, the eco-cultural relationships developed by the rural community will constitute the basis upon which the Gandhian movement attempts to launch its reforms. On a rhetorical level, instead, the effect of nature framed within the Hindu tradition and TEKs represents a first attempt to counter-discourse colonial stances on Indian environments and their people, portraying natural matters as a vital and sacred being.

3.3. The Colonial Ecologies of the Skeffington Coffee Estate

The villagers' worldview on nature, embedded in the local material and religious culture, offers a less edifying representation of the ecological assets in the colonial plantations. This contrast is openly manifested by drawing a comparison between the textual descriptions of these two nature-cultural spaces. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains how her village is situated:

> in the province of Kara. High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugar cane. Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through the forest of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambè and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade. There, on the blue waters, they say, our carted cardamoms and coffee get into the ships the Red-men bring, and, so they say, the go across the seven oceans into the countries where our rulers live. (p. 1)

Kanthapura is thus located in the valleys of the Western Ghats and Achakka offers a precise description of her homeplace, rich in toponymies which collocate this setting within the geography of the subcontinent. Similarly, the *Skeffington Coffee Estate* is also introduced through an analogous detailed topography:

> The Skeffington Coffee Estate rises beyond the Bebbur mound over the Bear's hill, and hanging over Tippur and Subbur and Kunthur, it swings round the Elephant valley, and rising to shoulder the Snow Mountains and the Beda Ghats, it dips sheer into the Himavathy, and follow on from the Balèpur tollgate corner to the Kenchamma hill, where it turns again and skirts Bhatta's Devil's fields and Rangè Gowda's coconut garden, and at the Tippur stream it rises again and it is lost amidst the jungle growths of the Horse-head hill. (p. 51)

Differently from the village, though, the plantations do not have a steady location. This aspect is first signalled by a different linguistic choice. For Kanthapura, the narrator opts for a stative construction with the verb 'to be' simply followed by the spatial referent, whereas the plantations are located through motion verbs. Accordingly, the estates 'rise', 'hangs over', 'swings', 'dips', 'follow', 'turn again' and 'skirts', till is 'lost amidst the jungle growths'. The borders of *Skeffington* are thus not clearly delimited nor easily traceable. This ambiguity in terms of spatial-temporal collocation is also reflected by the local cultural memory. Similarly to the plantations' end, the memory of its foundation is lost not in space but in time, since "nobody knows how large it is or when it was founded; but they all say it is at least ten thousand acres wide" (p. 51). Attached to these fields, there is no presiding deity whose deeds are worthy of remembrance. On the contrary, its founding figure is connoted perhaps more similarly to a demonic presence, as "some people in Kanthapura can still remember having heard of the hunter sahib who used his hunter and his hand to reap the first fruits of his plantation" (p. 51).

According to the local lore, the founding of the estates is imagined through the metaphor of *hunting*. While Skeffington was perhaps established during the first phases of colonialism, with the colonial state apparatus disposed to extract and amass natural resources, it is significant to reflect on the word choice adopted by Rao. Although the space is composed of fields, the harvest was first not collected by farmers but by a *hunter sahib*. In opposition once again to the situation in the village, in which agriculture is the product of an ideal communion with nature *via* Kenchamma, the Skeffington Estates were built thanks to the *predation* of the land. Moreover, the legacy of hunting and violence is still visible in the ecology of the plantation as it is represented in the novel. Its expansion englobes other fields, "growing from the Bear's hill to Kanthur hill" (p. 51) and prepares the arrival of several coolies, who were uprooted from different regions of India and forced to relocate there. Initially, the indentured workers were optimistic and showed a high degree of mutual collaboration. As soon as they arrive there, each coolie took a hut "and each one began to put up a thatch for the one that had no thatch, a wall for the one that had no wall, a floor for the one that had no floor, and they spent the whole afternoon thatching and patching and plastering" (p. 54)

Quite interestingly, the coolies also started developing their forms of eco-cultural practices. Being a mixed group of people coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds, the representation of coolies' community in Skeffington shows a partial integration of their own environmental experiences in the ecological culture of the villagers from Kanthapura. Being first displaced and then cast in an alien environment, the coolies' community was forced to come to terms with the oppression of indentured labour as well as the perils of wild environments. These dangers are epitomised by snakes, a daily encounter in the life of coolies. The fear posed by the risk of this animal is tried to be mitigated by the storytelling of experienced workers like Pariah Siddayya. Indeed, Siddaya's storytelling revisits for his audience of workers the popular Indian genre of *naga stories,* "an ancient literary tradition characterised by the mixture of folklore and Hindu and Muslim cults" (Mercanti 2006, p. 51, *my translation*)[10], which could therefore be appreciated by the different ethnic groups living together at Skeffington. For instance, Siddaya tells how water snakes "just hang over a streamlet or pond [...] you can pick them up by their tails and swing them round and round" (pp. 55-56). Those which must be avoided at any cost

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[10] Rao had a deep knowledge of this genre and even wrote *naga stories*. In his collection *The Cow of the Barricades,* begun in the 1930s but published only in 1947, the author inserted two short stories following the model of *naga stories,* namely "Kanakapala Protector of Gold" and "Companions".

are instead the green snakes, as it is testified by what happened to Sankamma, who, having misunderstood it for a bamboo leaf, risked his life. The tales go on and the reader learns how flying snakes love cardamoms and are used to get under turbans, and that is why "these cardamom-garden coolies wear, you know, a slab thin as cloth on their heads" (p. 56). Cobras, instead, are said to possess a particular behaviour. According to the plantation lore, "cobras never harm anyone unless you poke your fuel chip at them" and they seem to privilege evil people, as "Never, I tell you, has a cobra bitten an innocent man" (p. 57). For instance, Pariah Siddaya remembers the story of a sahib attacked by a *dasara havu,* in a tragicomical series of events:

> the other day, when the sahib goes to the bathroom, a lamp in his hand, and opens the drawer to take out some soap, what does he see but our maharaja, nice and clean and shining with his eyes glittering in the lamplight, and the sahib, he closes the drawer calmly as a prince; but by the time he is back with his pistol, our maharaja has given him the slip. And the sahib opens towel after towel to greet the maharaja, but the maharaja has gone to his nuptial ceremony and he will never be found. (p. 55)

Through his anecdotes, Siddaya can then transmit important information for survival within the plantation while simultaneously cementing a sense of unity against the sahib through satire. However, his *naga stories* are not welcomed by the *maistri,* who wants to avoid at any cost distractions from work and beat the coolies to ensure silence, till "everyone is at his axe or scissors and never a word is said. And they work on with axe and scissors till the sun's shadow is dead" (p. 57).

On this matter, one can call to mind the reflections of the Martinican philosopher and writer Èdouard Glissant on the conditions of life in the plantations in the Caribbean. There, Glissant explains how "oral production is the only possible way of communication, and it takes place in that mute universe in a discontinuous manner" (Glissant [1990] 2007, p. 73, *my translation*). Similarly to the case portrayed in the novel, the slave masters in the West Indies were determined to ensure any possible means of social aggregation and thus of insurrection. Therefore, the production of oral literature in the plantation-system is interpreted by Glissant as "an act of surviving" (p. 73, *my translation*), a practice of resistance, which attempted to raise the slave community's chance of survival in a harsh environment, like that lived by workers in the Skeffington estates.

Of course, the harshness of this environment is aggravated by the presence of the sahibs and of European commercial interests. In the estate fields, the coolies are beaten, abused, raped[11] or risk their lives because of snakes neither to produce their own goods nor to sustain the whole community. Their alienation is the price paid for the Empire's prosperity through exports. Many of the fields are dedicated to intensive agriculture and the cultivation of cardamom, coffee, sugar canes, all products destined to the "great granaries of trade […] into the ships the Red-men bring" (Rao 2014, p. 1). In addition, among these plants, there is also the cultivation of toddy palms, which retain a sacred value in many South Asian cultures but were mostly forested by the British to produce liquor, with devastating effects for the community, as "toddy booths are there to exploit the poor and the unhappy" (p. 114).

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[11] "he [the master] will have this woman and that woman, this daughter and that wife, and every day a new one and never the same two within a week. Sometimes when the weeds are being pulled or the vermin killed, he wanders into the plantation with his cane and pipe and puppy, and when he sees this wench of seventeen or that chit of nineteen, he goes to her, smiles at her, and pats her on her back and pats her on her breasts" (p. 63).

The environment of the plantation is thus framed through the perspective of the indentured community of workers forced to live there. The negative connotations*,* which orient the representation, are partially constructed in opposition to the village religion. At the same time, without the religious rituals, which guarantee positive attitudes to the environment, nature in the plantations is described more mimetically, with its wild and dangerous animals. If the hills near Kanthapura record the acts of care Kenchamma has always had for her children, the morphology of the plantation's fields is a product of the systemic oppression of Imperialism. More lethal than snakes, whose presence is partly exorcised through literary invention, colonialism, as a set of eco-cultural relations on its own, endangers the survival of the working population, constituting an ecological limit that the Gandhian movements will attempt to subvert.

3.4. Kanthapura's Gandhian Movements and Nature-Cultures as Process

As Ulka Anjaria has highlighted in her study *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel* (2012), in the literary production of the first generation of Indian Writers, mimetic realism extends beyond the mere extratextual reference. By writing in the colony, in a period of historical uncertainty but also of strong desires for change, Indian novelists like Rao inflected their modes of representation with a

> sense of futurity – what might be called utopianism, even though in none of these texts do we have the actual outlining of a new world order. Utopianism suggests that even when the ostensible object of representation is the present or the recent past, the sense of desire, of possibility, and even the disjunctures in form between representation and object create the outlines of an aesthetic that does not yet exist, and of a world that has yet to be realized. (Anjaria 2012, p. 15)

Despite the rioters' failure at creating a new community built upon Gandhi's *Dharma*, their protest engages with problems of finding new socio-political assets as well as ecological balances which would give more benefits for the local population. Therefore, *Kanthapura*'s mode of representation also affects the description of a new, desired nature-culture for the village. These new assets are imagined through the perspective of the rioters as obtainable only through a set of subversive practices and measured to overturn the *status quo*. This desired new relationship with land is thus a *process*, which involves the rioters as part of their spiritual and political growth.

The spiritual principle which supports such a process is the ascetic experience of Moorthy and his conversion to *bhakti.* His spiritual zeal is indeed the engine which drives his Gandhian propaganda and will be a source of inspiration for the anti-government campaign even after his imprisonment. Moorthy functions as an allegory for the *mahatma* and, although the novel lacks complex psychological characterisation, the narrative offers a glimpse into his spiritual growth, which, in imitation of the figure of Gandhi, is strictly jointed to his political activism. Indeed, Moorthy's affiliation with the Gandhian movement is strengthened by his staying in the city but started way before, thanks to his finding of "a half-sunk *linga"* (Rao 2014, p. 8) in a backyard. This *linga* is the sacred symbol of Śiva and, after its finding, is guarded in the shrine of a newly erected temple in Kanthapura. The edification of the new temple is thus significant, as it poses the basis for a new spirituality which will eventually accommodate the interiorisation of the Gandhian message by the village community.

In addition, this new temple is the place in which Moorthy's meditation leads to the experience a new conception of the world in terms of non-dualistic philosophy (*Advaita*). Sitting in the temples in a state of harsh fast, sustained only by salt and water, Moorthy:

loosens his limbs and, holding his breath, says to himself, 'I shall love even my enemies. The Mahatma says he would love even our enemies,' and closing his eyes, tighter, he slips back into the foldless sheath of the soul, and sends out rays of love to the east, rays of love to the west, rays of love to the north, rays of love to the south, and love to the earth below and to the sky above, and he feels such exaltation creeping his limbs and head that his heart begins to beat out a song, and the song of Kabir comes into his mind:

The road to the City of Love is hard, brother,
It's hard,
Take care, take care, as you walk along it. (pp. 72-73)

During his ascetic penances, Moorthy reaches a higher level of spiritual awareness thanks to the teachings of past mystics like Kabir and Gandhi. He also realises how the messages of unconditional love professed by the *Mahatma* are a long process of care and effort, but which ultimately leads to the absolute. As he is absorbed in his deep state of mindful contemplation, Moorthy experiences a state of communion with the world, when light seemed to "infuse itself through his very toes and fingertips and rise to the sun-centre of his heart" (p. 73), reaching a state of being that he later describes of "vital softness" (p. 73). This condition also brings Moorthy to recollect the memory of a prior encounter with the holy, when he fell asleep by the river Himavathy and dreamt of sinking into the earth to manifest in the form of a sparrow in a temple. There, for the first time in his life, he had a vision of *Hari*, before being swept away by a flood "like child Krishna on a the pipal leaf" (p. 74).

I think Moorthy's disposition of the soul can be interpreted as the sense of peace arose after his experience of a deeper level of existence. In the *Advaita* school followed by Rao, this condition is the existential state in which the self recognises of being a manifestation of the *Brahman,* the absolute Self. This non-dualistic philosophical approach also entails an ontological interconnection within the phenomenological reality as made of the same primordial substance of the universe. These metaphysical assumptions are then rendered in the text with imagery highlighting the communion of the spirit with the world. For instance, after his dream, Moorthy's holiness is said to be perceivable even by animals, which would not harm him even "if you send elephants to kill [him]" (p. 74) but would welcome him "throw a garland around [his] neck" (p. 74). Similarly, once Moorthy has ended his meditation in the temple, "he felt he could touch the stones and they would hang to his hands, he felt he could touch a snake, and it would spread its sheltering hood above him" (p. 76). For Moorthy, a higher spiritual awareness unlocks, therefore, a new vision of his relationships of belonging to the universe, according to which everything is interconnected as made of the same substance. Consequently, this new spiritual experience gives Moorthy the strength to openly fight the government and gain consensus among his fellow villagers who join his movement.

The villagers' protest is organised following Gandhi's *satyagraha*. Moorthy launches his *Don't-Touch-The-Government-Campaign* and founds the Congress Group in Kanthapura, determined to reform the village society and to break free from the colonial oppression. On an ethical level, Moorthy's movement embraces the non-violence doctrine of *ahimsa* and dismisses cast segregation, opening the temple to Pariahs without the fear of pollution. From a political perspective, the congress movement in Kanthapura adopts the ideology of *Swadeshi,* striving for economic autarchy by boycotting British trade and motivating the peasantry to spin and weave cloth to financially sustain the anti-government association. Although such initiatives are not unanimously greeted, especially by those who benefit the most by collaborating with the British government, such as the landowners and moneylenders Patel Rangè Gowda and Battha Dorè, many villagers take

the cause to heart and even imitate Gandhi's iconic salt march:

> And the next day the white papers told us the Mahatma had taken a handful of salt after his
> ablutions, and he had brought it home, and then everybody went to the sea to prepare salt, and
> cartloads and cartloads of it began to be brought back and distributed from house to house
> with music clapping of hands [...] And so day after day men go out to the sea to make salt, and
> day after day men are beaten back and put into prison, and yet village after village sends its
> women and men, and village after village grows empty, for the call of the mahatma had sung
> in their hearts, and they were for the mahatma and not for the Government. (pp. 140-41)

From an eco-materialist perspective, the Non-Cooperation Movement's initiatives can be seen as an effort to resist colonial exploitation and reframe narratives around material realities. In the view of the anti-government campaign, spinning for India becomes a sobering gesture, a sacred practice of self-purification for "millions and millions of yards of foreign cloth come to this country, and everything makes us poor and pollute us" (p. 19). Similarly, risking prison for extracting salt from the ocean is seen as an act of rebellion, through which Indians claim their right to dispose freely of the resources under state monopoly.

This climate of tension also prepares for more radical solutions. Despite the apparent downsides of mass imprisonment, this critical situation brings a group of women from Kanthapura to reunite and participate in the collective cause. This group is led by Rangamma, who instructs the villagers about politics while sitting by the river Himavathy doing the washing or during an hour which was supposedly dedicated to meditation and the reading of sacred texts. Once again, politics and religion in the novel are intertwined, as Rangamma's words point out: "Sister, if for the thorny pit the illusioned fall into, you put the foreign Government, and for the soul that searches for liberation, you put our India, everything is clear" (p. 120). It is Rangamma herself that launches a collective attack against the toddy fields planted in the Skeffington Estates, where the peasants and the coolies

> rush forward and the crow rushes behind us and the gate creaks and breaks and we all rush
> towards the tree, one to this and one to that, to sapling and twisted trees and arched trees and
> anthills crumble beneath our feet, and the leaves tear and crunch, and the lathis break on our
> back and hands and heads [...] and we see up there on the top of the toddy tree and the men
> gather them like sanctified flowers. (p. 150)

While the uprooting of the plants is for sure a damage towards the environment, the logic behind it is that the presence of colonial structures of power has already corrupted the land. Through their act of rebellion, the villagers express their wish for different ecological assets, which requires, first, the whole land of India to be free from the British control and violence. In today's popular mode of expression, one could say that by *acting locally,* the villagers are fighting both for themselves and for the new group they feel they belong to now, i.e. the Indian nation.

Despite the political and spiritual development of the Gandhians, the faith in traditional religion is never abandoned but integrated into a new reformist project. Fighting the government is an act of liberation intended to have a positive impact on nature. It is a political ritual, as it hopefully reclaims the fields from the oppressors, challenging colonial land policies. This aspect also presupposes that the villagers believe that Kenchamma is content with their actions and therefore sides with the protesters. Some of the plants are taken from Skeffington and are later replanted near Kenchamma's sacred grove at the temple: "five twigs of toddy trees were there, and a toddy pot" (p. 154). The Gandhian militant experience is a sort of no-turning point. The newly developed national

feeling is so deep that the peasants are determined even to burn the whole village "[i]n the name of Kenchamma" (p. 205). Unfortunately, despite the rioters' fierceness, their utopian project of creating a fairer society is doomed to fail.

However, the tragic ending of the anti-government campaign does not diminish the desire for change. In the letter which closes the novel, the reader is informed about the destinies of the displaced community. Most of the people from Kanthapura relocated to the village of Kashipura. Moorthy left the Gandhian movement and sided with the "equal-distributionist side" (p. 211) of future prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who was himself a former Gandhian. Therefore, his evolution towards a more pragmatic approach does not diminish his reformist effort. The inheritance of the Gandhian experience is however preserved by the former protesters, who says how things cannot be the same ever again, because: "there is something that has entered our hearts, an abundance like the Himavathy on Guari's night" (p. 210), a combative feeling which make the hearts of the former protesters still "bea[t] like a drum" (p. 210-12). For these reasons, the process of creating a new society for India and a new set of eco-cultural relations is not dismissed by the novel, which remains open to the need of that operation.

4. Conclusions

The hope preserved by those survived from the riots ought not to be something easily dismissed by today's readers, being, perhaps, a valuable lesson from past activism. Although the aftermath of 1947 and the entrance of India into the industrial global economy have shaped different ecologies from those wished by Gandhi's 'Land of village republics' and the peasants from Kanthapura, Rao's novel has been able to transmit the urgency of a fairer society. Accordingly, postcolonial ecocriticism should not overlook the ecological reflections of earlier texts or their perspectives on the environment. Future research could therefore explore other literary works written on the cusp of the postcolonial condition, possibly identifying recurring patterns or divergent solutions both on the level of content and of form, their visions of new eco-cultural relationships and their links with struggles for a more just society.

Kanthapura is a groundbreaking work not only within the literary production of Raja Rao but also in the vast panorama of Indian English novels. Written in a crucial period for global history, when European dictatorships were taking power and the British Empire was fighting to control the Indian Peninsula in a ferment for gaining political independence, Rao's narrative reveals itself to be a remarkable tale about rebellion, tradition and desire for change. The novel's experimental character is rendered in a creative engagement with the puranic tradition, recovering the customs and mentality of rural villages as well as those of Indian philosophical and religious thought. From the perspective adopted in this essay, these cultural codes embedded in the local traditions of the subcontinent can thus be considered the framing devices through which Rao represents both the environments and ecological relationships of his fictional rural community.

Accordingly, the analysis of the representation of ecology in the novel highlights how the villagers' struggle is mostly motivated not by a fight for abstract principles but to change social inequalities, signalled by the disparities in land ownership and the forced employment of cheap labour. The Gandhian movements in *Kanthapura* wished, with their mobilisation, to reach a fairer relationship with their land, epitomised in the disruption of the colonial plantations and the integration within indigenous beliefs of juster principles, inspired by Gandhian philosophy, such as the redistribution of land or the abolishment of

cast divisions.

The differences between the desired relationships and the actual assets are signalled by the texts through a different connotation for the eco-cultural relations represented. In the village where the free farmers live, nature is experienced as a lively entity, corroborated by the presence of the holy, although it entails remnants of superstitious beliefs. In the plantations, though, the natural space is described as dreadful and violent, inflated with the violence of colonial oppressions which poses a threat to the survival of the coolies. Quite interestingly, both representations dismiss essentialist and orientalist claims, portraying the environment, instead, as a dynamic set of nature-cultural relations which contrast colonial ideologies and their monolithic conceptions of India.

In conclusion, the representation of ecology in *Kanthapura* is thus interpretable as a process. Against a monologic perspective, Rao's portrayal of the Indian environment involves different sets of relationships, stemming from religious rituals to political activism, which negotiate characters' experience and feelings towards the places in which they live within a nature-culture continuum. Overall, the semiotics of ecology in the novel points to a polysemic conception of the environment, which is understood as a site for the construction of collective identity, the place of political self-determination and also the term of relation to discover a greater connection with the world.

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