

# Modern Durgas fighting against the demons of globalization

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen  
Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société  
Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **73 (2019)**

Heft 3

PDF erstellt am: **29.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-869368>

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## Modern Durgas Fighting against the Demons of Globalization

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2019-0046>

**Abstract:** The analysis presented here focuses on the way the antithesis between the global and the local is approached from a literary point of view in the contemporary Indian context. Assuming an ecocritical perspective, it reinterprets literature on ecological themes as a tool to negotiate some spaces of autonomy from hegemonic models imposed by globalization on an economic, technological and cultural level. Global plans often collide with local ecosystems, upsetting their pre-existent equilibrium and always more frequently producing antagonism, resistance and overt conflicts. The claim for the management of local resources and the safeguard of traditional lore become a response to the “allegedly value-neutral global market” (Eaton / Lorentzen (eds.) (2003): *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, and Religion*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 4). Filtering the discussion through an ecofeminist critique, it is possible to find a connection between the abuse of power that underlies human oppression and the exploitation of the environment. Women and nature are, in fact, connected in the dominant masculine discourse by the rhetoric of submission, which is harmful to both of them (Zimmerman, et al. (ed.) (1993): *Environmental Philosophy: from Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.; Warren / Cheney. (1991): “Ecological Feminism and Ecosystem Ecology”. *Hypatia* 6/1 *Ecological Feminism*: 179–197.). As an example of resistance strategy to these dynamics and a means to give voice to women through literature, this article proposes a critical reading of the novel *Betvā bahtī rahī* by Maitreyī Puṣpā (“The Betvā River was flowing”).

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, ecosophy, ecopoetics, Maitreyī Puṣpā, *Betvā bahtī rahī*

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# 1 Ecofeminism, ecocriticism, ecosophy

The fundamental claim of ecofeminism<sup>1</sup> is that all structures of domination – especially those perpetrated against women and nature – are socially constructed by the same despotic system and must be addressed in their totality in order to be confronted and dismantled (Warren 1987). Most ecofeminists point the fact that the connections between women and nature are based on theories and conceptual frameworks rather than on a supposed substantial affinity (Eaton/Lorentzen 2003: 3). Leaving aside any essentialist drift, which has sometimes been seen in some ecofeminist rhetoric,<sup>2</sup> this critique has the merit of revealing how the policies promoted by patriarchal ideologies and models of development “are impoverishing the planet and the majority of its peoples, with women and children as primary victims” (Eaton/Lorentzen 2003: X). Environmental activist Vandana Shiva, who weaves her socioeconomic analysis

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**1** Encompassing a variety of theoretical and practical approaches, ecofeminism explores the interconnections between the subjugation of women, as the weakest among subordinated social groups, and the exploitation of nonhuman nature. It argues that these systems of dominance arise for the same reason, being the objectification of nature and women on behalf of male hegemonic power. This dichotomous construction of reality has led to the supremacy of patriarchal ideologies and institutions, which are reinforced in the contemporary world through the tools of science and technology and deferred to the globalization’s promises of development, often irrespective of environmental and social boundaries. On this point, the ecofeminist debate subscribes to the critique that globalization “produced a vast human misery and degradation of the environment that is being wrought by the Western corporate domination of the world economy” (Eaton and Lorentzen 2003: VII). The term ecofeminism was introduced by Francoise d’Eaubonne in the book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, published in 1974, “to bring attention to women’s potential for ecological revolution” (Warren 1995: 172). Ecological feminism covers a variety of approaches, from Vandana Shiva’s social activism to Karen Warren’s Western theoretical position (Eaton and Lorentzen 2003: 1) reflecting several feminist perspectives (e. g., liberal, Marxist, radical, socialist, Third World etc.), and different attitudes to environmental problems (King 1989). About environmental theory and implications of social practice, see for example Agarwal 1992; Biehl 1991; Gaard 1993a; Gerda 1986; Manisha 2012; Plumwood 1993; Shiva 1988; Warren 2000.

**2** A major criticism towards ecofeminism is ascribed to its essentialist equation of nature with woman as a homogeneous whole, alleging a biological connection or a spiritual affinity between them, and without making any distinctions of ethnicity, nationalities, classes etc. As a main concern of feminism is to affirm that gender is shaped by culture, ideology and history, “and how one experiences nature is culturally mediated”, then it is “gender conditioning to shape our experience of nature” (Gaard 1993b: 22, 2011). The Indian economist Bina Agarwal criticized the essentialism of the unitary category of woman, stressing the “specific class-gender as well as locational implications” because of which women cannot be posited “as a unitary category, even within a country, let alone across the Third World or globally” (Gaard 2011: 35).

with notions derived from Indian philosophy, offers her own ‘glocalised’ interpretation of ecofeminism, by tracing a parallel between *prakṛti*, as the creative energy and the primordial source of riches, and Indian rural women, who derive sustenance from nature, through their systematic and profound knowledge of the physical processes of reproducing wealth. According to Shiva (1988: 228), “the domination of nature by western industrial culture, and the domination of women by western industrial man” belong to the same process of devaluation and destruction justified in “masculinist history as the ‘enlightenment’.” She identifies two critical points in Indian political economy of the last decades that represent the culmination of this logic: the Green Revolution of the 1970s, which has turned out as an extension of the tendency to increase profit embedded in the modern economic thought, and the building projects of modern infrastructures such as huge dams, as the only way to progress. As is well known, this controversial issue of international relevance involves resources that are largely contended by states, private corporations, and local communities.<sup>3</sup> Among the victims of environmental degradation, women suffer disproportionately higher risks and harms especially in poor rural areas. In response to global trade policies unconcerned about ethical and ecological commitment, environmental movements propose a radically reverse paradigm. They call on a sustainable management of local resources with respect for their biological cycle and the participation of local people – especially of women.<sup>4</sup> In the last years, the safeguard of local resources, both as a reaction to exploitation policies and as a key for a sustainable development, has become a matter of utmost importance in India.<sup>5</sup> After decades of economic growth strategies and plans for futuristic

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<sup>3</sup> For a general introduction to some environmental issues in India, see V. Shiva, *Ecology and the Politics of Survival. Conflicts Over Natural Resources in India*, New Delhi: Sage Publication India, 1991 and *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace*, Zed Books Ltd., London, 2005; C.M. Jariwala, *Environment and Justice* New Delhi: APH Publishing, 2004; K.R. Gupta (ed.), *Global Environment: Problems and Policies*, Vol. 2, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> In parallel, often female-gender roles (as managers of rural and domestic economies) engage in particular ecological issues with a specific perspective, which focuses on biodiversity and interacts “more closely with their local environment” Eaton and Lorentzen (2003: 13).

<sup>5</sup> From its constitution as a modern democratic state, India has always demonstrated a strong sensibility to defend its cultural diversity, which has actualized in delegating, as much as possible, resources management to the local level. The country strives to find its own way to meet the challenges of the present age, by combining the efforts to achieve a global dimension of progress with the safeguard of local features and the social demand for diffused benefits. Still, an increasing awareness of the environmental crisis in the country spurs more and more people to struggle with social activists and intellectuals against the exploiters of their natural resources for the safeguard of their land.

projects, a new attention to local issue is given, both on behalf of the civil society and the institutions.<sup>6</sup> The Nehruvian dream of progress that involved generations of Indians in the post-independence period, inspiring them to align their country with international standards, had to face social inequities and the commitment to local requirements. Environmental themes are assuming an increasing importance in the Indian public sphere, since the return to local peculiarities can turn into a development strategy, according to more sustainable glocal models.

This seems to be involved in the ecological import of Maitreyī Puṣpā's novels,<sup>7</sup> where the incongruity between technological development of the country and the backwardness of its women is exposed as one of the most common paradoxes of modernity. Puṣpā's 'indigenous feminism' focuses on Indian rural women as a 'lost territory', constantly neglected even in the feminist and post-colonial critique, which is dominated by the modern, urban, middle-class woman.<sup>8</sup> The author calls for an "imperative need to relocate the marginalized rural centre and reclaim rural women's voice and image" (Dimri 2012:11) in the literary canon, in order to rewrite a more authentic and multifaceted narrative on women. Defusing the dominant discourse with local tones, this approach

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**6** For example, taking the vanguard of the international environmental laws, in 2010 India established a National Green Tribunal for disposal of cases relating to the protection of nature and compensation for damages to persons connected with ecological disasters, water pollution etc. (<http://www.greentribunal.gov.in/index.php>).

**7** Maitreyī Puṣpā is a prolific author in the panorama of contemporary Hindi literature, mainly concerned with the condition of women in rural India epitomizing a retrograde men dominated society, and their struggles to escape the traps of an invisible web of oppression. Among her works there are the novels *Idannamam* (All this is an homage [to You, God], 1994), *Cāk* (The potter's wheel, 1997), *Almā Kabūtārī* (Almā of the kabūtārā community, 2006), *Triyā haṭh* (The strength of women, 2006), *Fariṣṭe nikle* (Angels came out, 2014), the autobiographic novel *Kastūrī kuṇḍal basai* (The musk dwelling in the deer, 2002) and short story collections *Faislā* (The verdict, 1993), *Cinhār* (Acquaintance, 2004), *Gomā haṁstī hai* (Gomā laughs, 1995) *Piyarī kā sapnā* (The beloved's dream, 2009). She also writes for newspapers on current issues concerning women. She was awarded many prizes among which the Premchand Samān in 1995 for the novel *Betvā bahtī rahī*, the Sahityakar Samman by Hindi Academy in 1991 and 1998, the SAARC Literary Award in 2001 and the Sarojini Naidu Award in 2003.

**8** A case in point in the novel is the issue of the marriage organization for the protagonist, a girl compressed between the old custom of the dowry system epitomized by her father and the modernity of her brother that wants to sell her based on her beauty and bypassing the tradition. Both approaches merchandise the woman and show the double yoke to which she is bound. Cf. pp. 24–25 and 26 "*Rokne-ṭokne ke ādhikārī to ve tabhī ho sakte haiṁ jab Urvaṣī kī śādī karne kī sāmārthya rakhte hoṁ, varan kaun hote haiṁ ve Urvaṣī ke ... Paṛaus merṁ rahne vāle kaka hī na! Isse adhik kuch bhī nahīṁ*".

comes close to an ecosophical perspective,<sup>9</sup> asserting the need for a renovated ethics to create ecological harmony, especially with regards to the construction of the subjectivity of rural marginalised Indian women.<sup>10</sup>

On a theoretic point of view, any analysis on the ways in which women construe their subjectivity in relation to their environment cannot disregard the need to articulate the same category of woman into class, ethnicity and other cultural facets, which indissolubly blend into the process of moulding identity. Therefore, in detecting some glocal processes in the Indian rural context which directly affect women's existence, we need to keep in mind the radical diversity between Western feminist models and women belonging to a postcolonial reality, who require new categorizations to reshape themselves and adapt to the postmodern world. This analysis can be further carried on from different perspectives, by mingling with ecocriticism, which adopts a nature-centred approach to literary studies and examines the ways literature treats environmental concerns.<sup>11</sup> Maitreyī Puṣpā's novel is an exemplum of "literature from the margins" deeply interwoven with ecocritical aesthetics, and can be interpreted as an attempt to deflate the cultural imperialism that annihilates local

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**9** Félix Guattari proposes to face ecological disequilibrium generated by the intense techno-scientific exploitation of the earth through an authentic political, social and cultural revolution that he calls "Social ecosophy". In particular, in order to "ward off [...] the entropic rise of a dominant subjectivity" (Guattari 2000: 68) ruled only by the logic of economic competition and profit, human activities must be re-evaluated on an ethical-political perspective. In such a way, it will be possible to elaborate a distinctively feminist ecological ethic that acknowledges women and the environment as parts of the same expanded subjectivity encompassing an inextricable network of creative forces.

**10** According to Guattari (2000: 49–50), capitalist power extends "its influence over the whole social, economic and cultural life of the planet", infiltrating in the meantime the "most unconscious subjective strata" of the people, who become anaesthetized by a totalitarian logic of uniformity through mass-media standardization, the conformism of fashion, the manipulation of opinion, etc. The unfathomable threat in this situation is that "in a number of Third World countries we are also witnessing the superimposition of a post-industrial subjectivity onto a medieval subjectivity, as evidenced by submission to the clan, the total alienation of women and children, etc.," which often allows reactionary and oppressive nationalist discourses to prevail (Guattari 2000: 63).

**11** Among the various disciplines like environmental ethics, deep ecology, ecofeminism, and social ecology, concerned with the causes of environmental degradation in order "to formulate an alternative view of existence that will provide an ethical and conceptual foundation for right relations with the earth", ecocriticism adopts an earth-centered approach to literary studies (Glottfelty 1996: XXI). It keeps some affinities with feminist and gender critiques, which "equate anatomy with geography, envisioning the female body/text as a no man's land aligned against a hostile masculine world, the patriarchal settlement" and criticize the dominant structures of Western culture as logocentrism, phallogocentrism and technocracy (Glottfelty 1996: 81–82, 127).



peculiarities. In the novel *Betvā bahtī rahī* a new epistemology of the mechanisms of production of the self within the rest of the society is depicted through the chronotope of the women-on-the-Betvā River.<sup>12</sup> As subjectivity builds simultaneously on different levels, involving the personal sphere, social relations and the environment (Guattari 2000: 27–35), therefore, a critical approach to the issue of human and technological exploitation, detecting the interactions between ecosystems, practices and interpretative paradigms can help reinstating a more balanced equilibrium of subjectivities and making an effective advancement in environmental, social and cultural conditions.

## 2 Ecopoetics of the novel *Betvā bahtī rahī*

Maitreyī Puṣpā's *Betvā bahtī rahī* was published in 1994 by Kitāb Ghar of Delhi and awarded the Premchand Sammān by the Uttar Pradeś Sāhitya Samsthān in 1995. It has the characteristics of an *āñcalik* novel, describing the microcosm of life on the bank of the Betvā River in Northern India, across the states of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

The name of the village is Rājgiri, what would have been the difference if it was Sirsā or Candrapur? Is the pain of abuse not similar everywhere? (p. 6)<sup>13</sup>

In the text, women are related to the natural world as the representatives of a feminine cosmic force, especially through the metaphor of the river – it being the essential resource of life and a symbol of femininity. This becomes a key to investigate some dynamics of globalization in postcolonial social contexts,

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**12** As discussed in the next paragraph, the story is set against the background of the river that marks the pace of life of the main characters. Both quiet and sorrowful moments can be lived in full awareness only if they are associated with the Betvā. In the beginning of the novel it represents the place of escape from the restrictions of everyday life,

*Mīrā der tak nadī ke pāṭ par akeli bhaṭaktī. devghar se chichalī caṭṭān tak. Thak-hārkār kināre par baiṭ gāī, pānī ke bahāv ko aise hī dekhtī rahī – be earth (pag. 9)*

while at the end the river reflects the desire of death of the main character,

*O Betvā mayā, ab kisī par ās-vīśvās nahīm, apnā mām-jāyā bhāī hī dusman ban baiṭhā to ab kahām ṭhaur ... jahām kahīm gayī do ghaṛī cain se na kaṭ sakīm. prānoṃ ke lie pal-pal bhāī ... sameṭ mām mere pāp-punn ... (p. 113)*

**13** *Gāmv kā nām Rājgiri, Sirsā aur Candrapur na bhī hote to bhī kyā antar paṛtā? Yantrañāoṃ kī pīṛā kyā sarvatra samān nahīm?* All English translations from the novel *Betvā bahtī rahī* are mine. The page number refers to the Hindi text (Puṣpā 1996).

involving a model of progress, which rejects the global paradigm of growth and questions women's relationship with their own resources. This portrait of a backward strip of Bundelkhaṇḍ depicts how, despite the alleged advancement of modern urban settings, the situation of rural India is completely different. Nothing more than "a nostalgia for the myth of a village" (Dimri 2012: 7) remains, since all its contradictions have been exacerbated in the impact of the forces of globalization and market economy. In such contexts issues of women empowerment remain only theories, far from being achieved in real life.

The author has two objectives in mind. On one hand she follows the tendency of third world feminism engaged in conveying "the multiplicity of subject positions of women in term of class, race, nation, ethnicity, sex, age and gender [ ... in] the need for a more complex, nuanced, and relational vision of gendered power" (Dimri 2012: 88). Therefore, she abandons the logic of homogenizing women with an assumed common essence or identity, or even recognizing a shared condition of exploitation. On the other hand, Puṣpā describes rural women relegated to the margins – both in the private domain of the family, which is patriarchy's primary institution, and in the public sphere – in a different way compared to male-authored narratives. She is aware that the construction of the image of women is never an innocent act, since more than reflecting social forms and value systems it becomes a matrix to create myths and archetypes impacting on the dynamics of social hierarchy and subordination. Therefore, she describes rural women belonging to a specific region and class, searching for an indigenous theoretical framework through which they can perceive themselves and directly influence the process of the formation of their identity that displays both on a linguistic and social level (Dimri 2012: 49–50). This gynocritical<sup>14</sup> portrayal offers a counter-canonical representation of women's subjectivity and agency, while bargaining for areas of negotiation and resistance to the masculine paradigm (Dimri 2012: 89).

The main characters of the story are two friends, Urvaśī and Mīrā, who grow up together in the village of Rājgirī, letting their young lives go with the rhythm of the Betvā River. The river is a kind of shelter and a world apart, to which they have a special secret access. For the two girls it represents a doorway to a realm of imagination and intimate freedom:

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**14** Radical feminists claim that "methodology itself is an intellectual instrument of patriarchy, a tyrannical methodolatriy which sets implicit limits to what can be questioned" (Showalter 1986: 131). Gynocritics program is to analyze women's literature without recurring to male models and theories or adapting it to male tradition, but constructing a different framework, based on women's experience.



It was a colourful stage in their life: it was a doorway to adolescence, the time of playing with dolls was behind them. Thousands of things started agitating in their heart. They whispered them secretly in the ears. Something shimmered on the lips – something they both wanted to say to someone, to hear ...

They had thousand fancies – which appeared one by one. In Rājgiri the first light of day sprung up as brilliant as gold. The evening was soaked with colours and descended upon the waves of the calm Betvā. The night covered the entire village with its moon rays. If they had looked at it from a roof, the moonlight on the shadowy surface of the sky would have flowed on the water of the river, as an oarsman without its vessel.

Both of them had left their footprints on the wet sand of the wide bank of the river. They were twisting in the pure water, splashing around with their clothes pulled up to their knees. Urvaśī had only a couple of clothes to wash, but still she would make an excuse to stay long by the river. She could expect a good scolding when she was back home. Even if someone would have scolded them, or given a reprimand, they would have turned a deaf ear. They were both consumed with their own things. They felt no anger at what was said. There was no logic that could explain it. But things were different at that time. (pp. 14–15)<sup>15</sup>

When the girls grow up, Mīrā, who had lost her mother many years back, is sent to Jhansi to study. Urvaśī is married to a young boy, Sarvadaman, who unfortunately dies leaving her a widow at the mercy of his family. Urvaśī's brother Ajit – a corrupted functionary in the Forest Department – compels her to marry Mīrā's father who is much older than her. Mīrā is sorrowful and unable to accept Urvaśī as a step-mother; still she is helpless with her father's decision. Urvaśī cannot endure such agony and subconsciously decides to allow death to overtake her.<sup>16</sup> She only finds a new spur for life going to the bank of the Betvā River and recovering a kind of equilibrium in her existence.

It would have been better if she sank in the river and merged with the Betvā ... that she came back to that water and clay from which she was born ... If her destiny is to play also in the

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**15** Umar kā satraṅgī paṛāv thā – kiśorāvasthā kā praveśadvār, guṛiyā khelne kī umr pīche chūṭ calī. Hajārom bāteṁ man meṁ hilorne lagīm. Gupcup kānom-hī-kānom meṁ phusphusāhaṭ baṛhne lagī. Adharom par kuch larjatā thā – kisī se kuch kahne ko, kuch sunne ko man kartā thā donom kā. Hajārom umaṅgeṁ thīm – ek-se-ek caṛhtī huī. Rājgiri meṁ kaisī sone-sī damkatī manmohak bhor ugṭī thī. Raṅgom-nahāyī sāmjh Betvā kī śānt laharom par utar ātī aur junhaiyā-bharī rāt sameṭ leṭī pūre gāmv ko. Chat par caṛhkar dekhtīm to āsmān kī chāmṁ-tale candramā nadī ke jal par tair rahā hotā – binā nāv ke mānjhī-sā. Donom nadī ke caude pāṭ par gīlī ret meṁ pāvom ke cinh banātīm. Nirmal jal ke manthar pravāh meṁ ghuṭnom tak dhotī sameṭkar chapāk-chapāk ḍoltī phirtīm. Urvaśī ke pās kapṛe dhone ko to do-cār hī hote, lekin nadī par ṭik jāne kā lambā bahānā mil jātā. Ghar ākar acchī-khāsī ḍāmṭ paṛṭī thī. Magar kisne ḍāmṭā, kisne phaṭkārā, sab kān ke pardom se bāhar sarak jātā. Donom hī apne kāmom meṁ līn rahtīm. Kahe-sune ka krodh-gussā bhī nahīm. Safāi meṁ koī dalīl bhī nahīm. Pahle kī bāt aur thī.

**16** Ātm-hanan kā dṛṅh vicar man ke bīc khaṛā ho gayā aṭal stambh-sā – aisī ḍhorom kī-sī zindagī jīne se mar jānā lakh gunā acchā hai.

next life the same role she played in this life, then, Mother Betvā, do not give her another life! What did you do, daughter, unable to spend a moment in peace ... (pp. 98–99)<sup>17</sup>

Her psychological malaise comes out as physical pain that makes her burning before her time. At the end her illness gets worse and she must be taken to the hospital in Delhi. But, as soon as she comes to the river to take her leave, she dies. This moving conclusion inextricably links the life of the woman to the rhythm of the river.

To tell the truth, some people still say: – It is Urvaśī on the bank of the Betvā ... You can see her still today, wandering as a cursed demon. Sometimes she laughs deliriously. Sometimes she cries without a reason.

It does not seem real ... still it is. Since she is a woman, and she will always remain a woman.

To forbear, to tolerate, to struggle ... (p. 8)<sup>18</sup>

Trying to unveil the ecopoetics of *Betvā bahī rahī*, we can try to call attention to the chronotopic dimension of the novel, being the interplay between temporality and spatiality of the narratives. This interpretative criterion allows exceeding the individual subjective time of the psyche and the abstract objective time of physics and merges them in a superior entity resulting from the interaction between human beings and their environment (Bakhtin 1981). The chronotope is a narrative core for the events of the novel, since it binds together “elements of story, geography and self, reminding us of the local, vernacular, folk elements of literature” (Glotfelty 1996: 378). The representation of reality turns out to be an interplay of social voices and a variety of relationships interacting in a kind of intertextual dialogue with the landscape, leading to the discovery of “connections between a literary work and its past, present, and future environments” (Glotfelty 1996: 374).

In the case of Maitreyī Puṣpā’s novel, the text displays a constant dialogue between women and the natural ecosystems in which they live, disclosing a delicate balance in their reciprocal equilibrium. Detecting the mechanisms of intertwining humanscape and landscape, the novel can be analysed as a portrait not only of an individual story, but as a collective story of environmental inspiration (Rath/Malshe 2010: 17).

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**17** *Isse acchā hai ki nadī meṁ chalāṅg lagā de ... samā jay Betvā meṁ. Jis jal-miṭṭī se janmī thī usī god meṁ phir ... “Is janam meṁ jaisā bhāg likhākar lāī, agle janam meṁ bhī aisā hī ho Betvā maiyā ... to janam mat denā. Kaun-sī bhūl ho baiṭhī ki do ghaṛī cain se nahīṁ kāṭ pātīṁ.”*

**18** *Sac kahūṁ to log āj bhī kahte haiṁ, Urvaśī hai. Betvā ke kachāroṁ meṁ ... Abhī bhī vah bhūle-bhaṭake kabhī-kabhī dīkh jātī hai. Śāpagraṣṭ yakṣiṇī-sī. Kabhī unmukt haṁsī meṁ haṁsī. Kabhī akāraṇ rotī. Sac nahīṁ lagtā ... Maḡar sac hai. Kyorṅki vah aurat hai, aurat sadaiva rahtī hai – sahne ke lie, jhelne ke lie aur jūjhne ke lie ...*

This story of Urvaśī is not only hers, it can be the sorrow of any village girl. The curse of being wretched: exploitation and eternal struggle. A helpless, torturous, infernal life. Urvaśī, Dāū and Uday were constantly compelled to crash with this sick society. Puppets with a body and a soul wiggling out of the pressures coming from the society ... what else? (p. 6)<sup>19</sup>

The women of the novel are deeply sensitive to the spatial-temporal dimensions of the Betvā River, as a symbolic place of encounter and a repository of stories, which allows them to reconceptualize their collective cultural memory through folksongs and feminine secular rites. It offers an alternative universe to frames of meaning carved on patriarchal models.

The river is the place where the ritualistic life of the community takes place, especially of women, who are close to the cyclic rhythms of the nature. The river represents an ‘idyllic chronotope’, where ritual and everyday life are interwoven with each other and acquire a magic significance (Bakhtin 1981: 212). It constitutes the point where the ego-consciousness of the main characters changes into the eco-consciousness of the environment in which they live, substituting separate individualities and independent systems of values with the idea of a network of subjectivities finding their meaning and realization only in their interconnection (Glotfelty 1996: 131, 232). We can see a conflict between human-space – where the patriarchal mindscape rules with its stronghold institutions of caste, family and marriage (Dimri 2012: 94) – and nature-space, which becomes also the space for women and their intimate freedom.

Unfortunately, the idyllic dimension of the women-and-the-river is harshly broken in the clash with reality and the logic of domination. The parallel between the condition of women and the flow of the river echoes the condemnation of an abuse going on for centuries.<sup>20</sup> Women are forced to subalternity and violence to the same extent as nature, while in the background of this natural ecosystem we can recognize the evidence of human intervention in the huge skeleton of an electricity plant, whose blazes reflect in the river making it

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**19** *Urvaśī kī yah kathā usī kī kyā, kisī bhī grāmīṅ kanyā kī vyathā ho saktī hai. Vipannatā kā abhiśāp – śoṣaṅ aur sanātan saṅgharṣ. Ek vivaś yātnāmay nārakīy jīvan! Urvaśī, Dāū aur Uday is kṣayagrast samāj meṅ nirantar ḍhahne ko abhiśapt rahe. Pariveśagat dabāvom ke chaṭpaṭāte saprāṅ, sadeh putle nahīm to aur kyā the?*

**20** An interesting hint to this topic is found Aruna Gnanadason’s paper “Traditions of Prudence Lost: A tragic World of Broken Relationships” (in Eaton/Lorentzen 2003: 73–87), referring to the story of a tribal queen called Thadhagathi from a *Rāmāyaṅa*. She is supposed to have challenged Rāma asking him to desist from hunting and destroying the wildlife of the territory over which she ruled, and was killed for that. According to the author, this story reflects *dalit* culture with its protective attitude to the earth and the defense of natural resources, which are unscrupulously destroyed and offered as a sacrifice to the dominant reason represented in the contemporary world by industrial projects.

burn away. In this mention, we can trace the author's environmental concern and the blaming of any interference with the forces of nature only in the name of economic development. The flames of the plant are transfigured into the flames of cremation, since they bring death to that land and its inhabitants.

Surrounded by the mountains there is green valley of the Betvā River. The sun sets down on trees of *Jāmun*, *Arjun* and *Palās*.<sup>21</sup> I am standing waiting for a ship on the bank together with other people. In those instants, I don't know what am I searching for everywhere around ... But nothing ... Only one or two canoes trembling on the abyss just as leaves. People are afraid, not even one week passed that right on this bank a boat collapsed for the excessive load and nobody survived.

Right in front, there is the thermoelectric plant of Pārīchā.<sup>22</sup> A modern construction absorbed in a gleaming light. A jungle of cement. Burning the earth.

– Last year Dāū was not here. Deveś takes care of the fields. Their sister lives with them.

When happens to talk about Dāū's house, some of the travellers looking astonished says:

– Look, still today, from time to time, some flames happen to be seen waving in the water of the river. As though the Mother Betvā was burning in a rite of cremation. Every single wave burns. The water has a tinge of bloody red. Helmsmen do not loosen the boats at that point. (p. 6)<sup>23</sup>

This passage clearly traces a parallel between infrastructural growth of the country for the economic progress and the exploitation of nature, evoking a

<sup>21</sup> *Jāmun* (*Syzgium cumini*), is a tropical tree in the flowering plant family of Myrtaceae native to South and South-east Asia, *Arjun* (*Terminalia arjuna*) is one of the sacred trees of India that has been used in Ayurvedic medicine since ancient time and *Palās* (*Butea frondosa*) is native to tropical and sub-tropical parts of the Indian Subcontinent, it is celebrated in literature for its red flowerage.

<sup>22</sup> In the district of Jhansi, state of Uttar Pradesh.

<sup>23</sup> *Pahāriyom se ghirī Betvā kā Harā-bharā kachār. Jāmun, Arjun aur Palās-vṛkṣom par utartī sāmjh. Anya logom ke sāth ghāt par nāv kī pratīkṣā meṁ khaṛī hūm. Un kṣaṇom meṁ cārom or her-her kar na jāne kyā khoj lenā cāhtī hūm? Kintu kuch bhī to nahīm. Atal jal par kāmpṭe pattroṁ kī tarah tirtī ek-do ḍoṅgiyām. Logom meṁ dahaśat hai, abhī ek saptāh bhī nahīm huā, isī ghāt par adhik bhār ke kāraṇ nāv ulaṭ gāī thī. Koī nahīm bac pāyā.*

[...] Sāmne hī Parīchā tharmal pāvar plāṅṅ hai. Jhilmilātī rośanī meṁ ādhunik bastī. Sīmeṅṅ kā choṭā-sā jaṅgal. Tapṭī dhartī.

“Pichale sāl Dāū nahīm rahe. Deveś khetī saṁbhālṭe haiṁ, jijī unhīm ke sāth rahtī haiṁ!”

Dāū ke ghar ka prasaṅg āte hī sahayātriyoṁ meṁ se koī āmkherṁ phailākar batātā hai, “Lo, dekh lo. Āj bhī nadī ke pānī meṁ kabhī-kabhī laplapātī lapṭerṁ dikhlāī paṛṭī haiṁ. jyom Betvā maiyā agini-samādhi le rahī ho. Ek-ek lahar dahaktī hai. Pānī kā raṅg rakat lāl. Mallāh us samay nāverṁ nahīm ḍhīlṭe.”

tragedy that encompasses both the river and the people who live on its banks. The thermoelectric plant is the symbol of a globalised model of progress that destroys the ecosystem of the Betvā River. Assuming that “the process of writing a landscape is not an ‘innocent’ aesthetic act” (Rath/Malshe 2010: 29), the ecological dimension of the narrative displays on the various layers of this encounter between man and nature.

Following the rhythm of life on the river, also the novel has a circular trend. It opens with the commemoration of Mīrā, who comes to the Betvā River to mourn the tragic story of her friend Urvaśī.

As soon as she accesses the ‘sacred realm’ of the river, she enters in a deep contact not only with Urvaśī, but also with all the women that drag their existence unavoidably mingled with local misery, far away from the ‘India Shining’ of globalization. Through the words of her character, the same author makes her own declaration of poetics.

What epochs of epic wars I underwent within myself before writing? On which halts I lingered, while the value of life quickly changed? Empty movements of civilization. The achievements of a supposed advancement in forty years of freedom. And together, the conservative land of villages. The bad propensity to dissolve the realm of progress into contradictions ...

In this deceiving society composed of a progressed humanity, woman is still an object, a possession, a commodity. What a tragedy is [women’s] life, wandering in the raven gloom of time! The secret story of the anguishes that are not only theirs, but have somehow become also mine. (pp. 7–8)<sup>24</sup>

Looking at the past in quite an epic tone, she recognizes all the interconnections between the lives of the people, their environment, the immovable system of power that overwhelmed them for centuries and the new mechanisms of globalization that set up on this background to further exploit the natural resources, bringing death and devastation. On the same bank of the river the novel closes with the description of the funeral rites for Urvaśī and her final return to the water of the Betvā.

The cremation was arranged. The entire village gathered. A thick shadow of sorrow. A crowd of women and men. They were about to take the body away for the funeral. Deveś

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**24** *Likhne se pahle apne bhitar mace Mahābhārat ke kin-kin dauroṃ se gujarī hūm? Kis-kis paṛāv par ṭhaharī hūm – teḷī se badalte jīvan-mūly. Sabhyatā ke thothe āndolan. Āzādī ke cālīs varṣoṃ kī tathākathit vikās upalabdhīyām. Sāth hī gārv kī rūḥigrast dhartī. Pragati ke āyāmoṃ ko visaṅgatiyoṃ meṃ ghol dene kī kupravṛtti. Vipann mānāsiktā ke dumuṃhe samāj meṃ āj bhī nārī mātra vastu! Mātra sampatti! Vinimay kī ciz! Kāl ke syām aṃdheroṃ meṃ bhaṭkatī trāsad jindagī! Duḥkh-dardoṃ kī vyathā kathā, jo unkī nahīm, kahīm merī apnī bhī ho gayī.*



put a white cloth on the body of his mother who was dressed in a red *sārī*. Right in front, together with Deveś, the second shoulder was that of Uday. Behind Dāū and Bairāgī praying. And the widow of Sarvadaman ... Urvaśī, going to her last journey.

Blood red sun. The sky burnt in the twilight. The desolated bank of the Betvā. Funeral pyre was set on fire. A tendril of smoke slowly started to touch the sky. The mixed smell of incense and smoke spread on the bank of the Betvā.

The earth was still now. The sky held back.

Mirā, speechless, motionless as a stone statue was looking with wide-open eyes, standing far away.

Slowly the golden body of Urvaśī was placed into the pure water of the Betvā.

The sky burnt up. The earth burnt up and wrapping in itself all the burning, flaring up with the flames of fire, the Betvā was flowing furiously. (p. 150)<sup>25</sup>

### 3 Conclusion

Combining some interpretative tenets of ecofeminism, ecopoetics and ecosophy, we analysed the novel *Betvā bahtī rahī* by Maitreyī Puṣpā from the gynocritic perspective of its characters and the environment in which they live. The interconnections between the rhythm of life of women and that of nature are represented through the idyllic chronotope of the river, which is the ideal place in which women find a space of self-determination and autonomy from male authority and the restrictions of traditional society. In such marginal reality, women, as the most vulnerable social group, have to struggle against the deep-rooted prejudices and face the pains of poverty in rural areas, where the benefits of progress are still far away. The author blames the evil of globalization, which pollutes the rivers and kills the people, as though it were a new cancer simultaneously affecting the body of human beings, the society and the nature. Going back to the oppressive logic, which overwhelms women and nature in the same

<sup>25</sup> *Dāh-kriyā kī taiyārī ho gayī. gāmv-bhar ghir āyā. Śok kī ghanī chāyā. Strī-puruṣom kī bhārī bhīr. Miṭṭī uṭhne ko thī. Deveś ne lāl sārī se ḍhake māñ ke śarīr par safed korā vastr uṭhā diyā. Āge-āge Deveś ke sāth dūsrā kandhā Uday kā thā. Piche luṭe-luṭe-se Dāū aur Bairāgī. Aur mahāprayāñ kī or calī jā rahī thī—Sarvadaman kī vidhvā ... Urvaśī.*

*Lāl lohit sūrya. Sāmjh kā jhulsā āsmān. Betvā kā sunsān kinārā. Citā jal uṭhī. Dhīre-dhīre lapṭem dhuem ke sāth ākās ko chūne lagīm. Candan aur āg kī milī-julī gandh Betvā ke pāṭ par phail gayī. Dhartī sthīr thī ab. Ākās thamā huā. Niḥśabd, niḥścal Mirā pāṣāñ-pratimā-sī dūr khaṛī visphārit netrom se dekh rahī thī. Betvā ke nirmal jal meñ dhīre-dhīre Urvaśī kī kañcan kāyā samāne lagī. Āsmān jal uṭhā. Jal uṭhī dhartī aur sāre dāh ko svayam meñ sameṭe, āg kī lapṭom ke sāth-sāth dhadhaktī Betvā krudh bhāv se bahtī rahī.*

way, the women can reinterpret it according to their own conceptual framework, to find in themselves the power of creating and destroying, which comes from nature. They can assume to be like modern Durgas fighting against the evils, which continuously threaten their lives, either being the old phantoms of segregation or the new demons of globalization and depletion. As represented in Maitreyī Puṣpā's novel, women search for a space of autonomy from the dominant discourse to propose an alternative hermeneutical and ethical paradigm, which is more ecosophical and concerned with local sensitivities.

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