

Creating Greener Narratives through the Environmental Arts and Humanities

A case study from ACU Summer School (August 2017)

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Introduction

The theme for our week with the ACU³ Summer School at Bath Spa University, UK, was 'Creating greener narratives through the environmental arts and humanities'. Spending this time at Bath Spa was a great opportunity to meet with so many postgraduate and other students from around the Commonwealth - a real mix of disciplines, backgrounds and cultures.

We all had group creative assignments to collaborate on, for a performance at the end of our time together. The two of us were fortunate to be assigned to the same study group, with Margaret Cook (University of Queensland, Australia), Kanza Islam (COMSATS Institute of Information Technology, Pakistan) and Temidayo Oniosun (Federal University of Technology, Nigeria). We settled pretty quickly on the topics of river pollution and biodiversity as being common to all of us; and the idea of two 'more-than-human' narratives with a presentation, a quiz and a website to link them to the topics seemed to use our different skills and to be right for the (hypothetical) target audience: a Sixth Form (16-18 years old) class at a local school.

Author's Statement: Khyati Tripathi ("Would she talk to me?")

Our 'nature' is not voiceless. Our trees, our rivers, our mountains, all have a voice but we humans are not capable enough of hearing or understanding it. Our nature loves us; it still considers us its protectors but we are not protectors, we are predators. The day nature would make sense of it, the day it will realize that we are killers, it won't forgive us. Now is the time to respect it and to preserve it in its most natural state.

I wanted a 'burnt mango tree' to have a voice that could be heard and felt. I wanted to make the audience absorb a tree's emotions and get absorbed into it. Because it is only through empathy that we humans can understand the extent of damage we have done to our nature.

My research interest in death rituals opened my eyes to what we in India are doing to our rivers and trees in the name of Hindu death rituals. Humans are ignorant beings with blindfolded eyes. We don't want to know, we don't want to see and even if someone tries to make us aware, we have our religion to blame. But isn't religion a human production too? We need to change our ways which can only be done through awareness and genuine empathy.

Author's Statement: Mark Goldthorpe ("Maybe the next return will be easier")

Khyati drafted her narrative first - we were in the same workshop on nature writing. My narrative followed on fairly easily, as I wanted to complement her story from the Ganges with one from the Avon, which passes through Bath: so bringing the message back home to our target audience of 16-18 year olds from the local area. I'd picked up the possibility of relating human actions from an eel's perspective from some of the projects we were introduced to in the talks, and a field trip to the nearby Avalon Marshes, where the eels are present. And making the direct connection with the Sargasso Sea in the Atlantic, where the eels spawn, appealed to me. 'Sargasso' seems such a magical word in its own right!

As a creative writing student, I try to explore ways of relating nature and culture as twin aspects of the predicaments of environmental change, and investigate creativity as a key part of how we can adapt to uncertain futures. This is something I work on with other artists, researchers and curators through www.climatecultures.net, a new website for creative conversations; the Summer School has sparked ideas for that too.

Would She Talk to Me? - Khyati Tripathi

I saw humans yesterday, five of them. Everyone dressed in the same colour, a little darker than my bark's shade. I have become beady eyed these days. Gone are the days when I was preoccupied with my beloved mangoes. What days were those! With my lush green arms and wavy branches, I stood magnificently on the way to Chunar⁴ village. I was the children's best friend and my shade, a lover's paradise. I can still hear the innocent giggling of children, I can still feel the sadness of a bereaved son, the intimacy between lovers, the contentment of a thirsty traveler on finding water, I still feel alive but when I look around, there is only dead silence.

I have been standing here for eighty years listening to stories of humans. Just listening. I don't have a voice of my own. Though I can hear myself say things, but humans don't. If they could, I would have shared with them the pain of being caged in one place all my life, of being able to feel emotions but not express them, of being helpless, of being alone. I would also have shared the happiness of being around them, around their excited faces when they used to come to me for my mangoes and when they hugged me tightly.

No one hugs me now. I am not lovable anymore.

It was the night of Diwali. That autumn was rough but my dry leaves started waving with joy looking at the blazingly bright crackers. In that moment of happiness, I didn't realize that a strand of my dry hair had caught fire which increased, increased and increased. The fire engulfed me, it burnt my body. I kept screaming in pain but no one listened to me. That's why I think I have no voice. Humans are not that bad otherwise.

Coming back to humans, I saw them yesterday. Hadn't seen them in a while. My burnt charcoal body felt warm after long. They visited me with something long with sharp teeth and have promised to come back. Wonder what that was!

Enough of my story, I want to talk to you about my mother--the Ganges. I feel alone and wait for humans because she doesn't talk to me anymore. Her eyes are always teary.

She is a river and I am a tree but her pure water has raised me to an 80-year-old. Her fearless candour taught me to be strong.

It was the day when I told her that her water was hurting my roots, she became quiet. Did I do that to her? Maybe not!

I think she has been eating wrong for last 15 years. She eats plastic, dead animals and dried flowers. I wonder if she likes it! Humans feed her a lot of plastic every day. They care for her because she is their sacred river and I am their sacred tree. Years ago, when I was still lush, they would first worship me, tie the sacred red thread around my waist, circumambulate with folded hands and then take a dip in the Ganges. When women in their colorful sarees⁵ and men in their white dhoti⁶ visited me on festivals, I felt like a King. But I must admit I felt ticklish every time they went around me tying the sacred red thread.

They still take a dip in the Ganges but then offer her fruits, incense sticks and also the plastic in which they found them. Sometimes she gets an exotic meal, earthen idols of Hindu deities which are ritualistically immersed in the Ganges after festivals.

Humans have created a way to impress her with their unending hospitality. They constantly supply her with what I once heard humans referring to as 'chemicals'. I don't like the sight of these chemicals because these make my mother go black. I am sure it tastes good because my mother never refuses to have it.

I remember Ramanathan. He lives in Chunar. His one-year-old son died two years ago. He confided in me. He told me how his heart wrenched on flowing his son's body in the Ganges but only this sacred river's water could open the doors of heaven for his son and not the mighty fire which can only help those older than two years.

My mother is considered the most pious. Humans bring ashes of their loved ones and offer it to my mother and I am amazed at how my mother accepts everything with a kind heart. Maybe because humans do so much for her.

My mother should be happy, but she isn't, although humans love her. I have heard her sobbing in the night. I want to know her pain, understand what is eating her up inside, what is making her withdrawn from my love, humans' love. I want to talk to her, but would she talk to me?

“Maybe the next return will be easier...” – Mark Goldthorpe

They call us Glass Eel. We slide like liquid crystal through their waters, moving up river with the tide and our own ocean-given strengths.

Our birthing grounds are the warm waters – Sargasso, the great belly of the world, whose currents give us life and energy and knowledge of the planet. Then they carry us out into the world – when we know we are ready to go. We find our way to the far corner of the seas, which our parents' parents' parents chose so long ago we've forgotten why, remembering only where. It is a long journey, worthy of the long flow of images we hold in our sleek heads.

Past floating, churning islands made from the sharp, alien things that pile up in our waters year on year and get trapped in the eddies, we swim up the world and into these shallow seas. To the lands where They live, the Humans – shadowy land beings silhouetted in the cold sunlight above us. First, we gather and wait in the tides, waiting, waiting – for the turn in the water that will take us inland, up river from salt sea into the saltless flow that always moves against us.

This is Their place now, more than ever: always more Humans – and more of their things are washed and thrown into the flow. Brushing and bumping past us along the river bed, over our bodies under rippling moonlight. We remember through our parents who live on in us, remember when the river was fresh and cool and swift; and sometimes it was harder to hide in the clear light that the world above poured down on us then.

Now, we hide ourselves in this darkened flow, which is safer from the warm-blooded Otters that delight in crushing our flavours into their jaws. But the water does not taste right to us. The bad taste flows down from the lands – we can feel it near the edges of the river, seeping in, clouding our senses.

The Humans say we are under threat. But they do not care why – when caring would mean using less of what they think they need. And they do not understand the dangers they make for themselves, when the earth they grow their food in pours chemicals into their water too.

We move across the world as we have always done, fewer of us now and a different world to the one we knew before. But over generations, we swim our long circuits again and again. We make our homes here – wherever we can still find the good places along the plastic riverbed in the chemical waters. And we grow and we remember, while above us they seem only to forget.

And when our time is right, we flow back with the river, back to the salt and the open waters, and return to where we started. Maybe the next return will be easier, will taste freer and bring our children back here to a place where the ones who live above have finally started to remember.

Notes

1. Khyati is a Doctoral Researcher in the Department of Psychology, University of Delhi, India and a Commonwealth Split-site PhD Scholar 2016-17 in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck, University of London.
2. Mark has recently completed his MFA Creative Writing, Kingston University London, gaining a Distinction for his collection of short stories on a loose theme of 'rewildings'. He has an MA Climate Change (Exeter University) and Postgraduate Diploma Advanced Environmental Practice (Farnborough College of Technology), and established www.climatecultures.net as a platform for artists, curators and researchers to explore creative responses to environment and climate change.
3. Association of Commonwealth Universities
4. Chunar is a small city in Uttar Pradesh state of North India.
5. A saree is a traditional wear for women in India.
6. A dhoti is a traditional loin cloth for men in India which is tied from waist down.