

Chettiarthodi Rajendran. *Eco-Aesthetic Studies in Kālidāsa*. pp. 48. Beau Bassin: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, International Book Market Service Ltd. 2018.– Reviewed by Lidia Wojtczak (SOAS, University of London)

In this book Chettiarthodi Rajendran brings together a series of previously published papers which tie to a central theme of the non-human or non-urban space in the works of the great Sanskrit poet, Kālidāsa. In his Preface (p. 4), he notes the exceptional attention that Kālidāsa pays to describing the world in which he has placed his protagonists and C. Rajendran’s deep, emotional appreciation of Kālidāsa’s poetry leads him to claim that, “a perusal of Kālidāsa’s works generates a real experience in the reader which cannot be gained from any other source” (p. 4) Rajendran further offers the bold suggestion that by creating a unified cultural landscape, Kālidāsa shows us, “glimpses of the embryonic idea of a nation...” (p. 4) and, in fact, perhaps even the “essence” of real India (p. 5). Unfortunately, the author does not dwell long on Kālidāsa’s political agenda and instead decides to focus on the unifying nature of *digvijaya* conquests.

Rajendran is interested in the most famous *digvijaya*, that of Raghu in the fourth chapter of the *Raghuvamśa* (henceforth RV), and makes some interesting observations on Kālidāsa’s narratological choices, among them an important note on how the Himālaya descriptions from RV and the *Kumārasambhava* (henceforth KS) complement each other (p. 7). The bulk of the Preface is dedicated to Kālidāsa’s descriptions of the flora and fauna of the Himalayas

and to the numerous mythical beings, cities, rivers and oceans which find their way into the poet's imaginaire. Rajendran ends his Preface with some comments on the aerial depictions of India (p. 10) as found in Kālidāsa's RV (the southern route) and in the *Meghadūta*, a messenger poem which presents its audience with a bird's-eye-view of "northern India" (p. 11).

"The Snow Did Not Destroy his Glory": Kālidāsa's Perceptions of the Himālaya

This chapter was originally published as an article of the same title in *Pandanus '09. Nature in Literature, Art, Myth and Ritual*, Volume 3, No. 2 (2009). In it, Rajendran focusses on Kālidāsa's descriptions of the Himalayan mountain range as found most famously in the already mentioned RV and KS, as well as in certain passages in the plays. The paper is an, "attempt to investigate the mythological and geographical features of the Himālaya in Kālidāsa's poetry and to unravel the cultural context in which the great mountain is located in the imagination of the poet" (p. 13). He notices the stark differences in the role played by the mountain in the works—in the KS it is both personified as the father of Parvatī, as well as being the graceful backdrop to the development of the narrative while in the RV, it is a "place to be conquered" (p. 13). One wonders, however, whether matters of narrative have not been overplayed in this case, since we find the same mountain lions lounging in KS 1.6 and in RV 4.72 and the same bamboo "flutes" filling the air with music in KS 1.8 and in RV 4.73. Of course, Raghu's military march through the Himālayas must result in more aggressive descriptions, however this seems to be achieved through the use of poetic figures rather than in different imagery. In Rajendran's opinion, the Himālaya mountain is a "hostile terrain" (p. 13). Yet, rather than there being a "rivalry" between Raghu the conqueror and the Himālaya, the mountain seems to help the king and his soldiers along by providing shaded resting-places for the army (RV 4.74) and lighting up their way with bioluminescent herbs (RV 4.75).

Rajendran then moves on to a detailed analysis of the most famous Himālaya description, the opening verses of the KS and pays special attention to the plants and their roles in creating the perfect setting for Kālidāsa's protagonists. After presenting his readers with a plethora of Himalayan flora, fauna and mythical beasts, Rajendran ends his paper by discussing the effect the changing of seasons has on the mountain environment in Sanskrit poetry (p. 17).

Untimely Spring: Forbidden Emotions in *Kumārasambhava*

Originally published in *Pandanus '13. Nature in Literature, Art, Myth and Ritual*, Volume 7, No. 1 (2013), this paper carries on from the previous and serves as a multi-layered investigation into the importance of the changing seasons in Kālidāsa's poetry and *kāvya* in general. The author states that an important feature of Kālidāsa's descriptions is, "that they never appear to be artificial additions unwarranted by the context, an unfortunate trait which we find in much of the later classical poetry of Sanskrit" (p. 19). In this matter, we must defer to his immense personal experience with Sanskrit poetry. After noting the role played by the seasons in Kālidāsa's works in general, Rajendran hones in on *vasanta*, Spring (p. 20ff.). Particularly interesting is his interpretation of Kāma's march (KS *sarga* 3), during which Kāma is accompanied by his beloved Rati and his best friend, the personified Spring, Madhu/Vasanta. This well-known passage plays on the classical *kāvya* trope of the marching army by overlaying it with the portrayal of the coming of Spring. The *kāvya* motifs connected with Spring are all present; we hear about the blossoming of the *aśoka* (KS 3.26), mango (KS 3.27), and *palāśa* (KS 3.29) and the intoxication brought about by the abundant pollen, especially among bees (KS 3.36) and elephants (KS 3.37). Importantly, as Rajendran alludes to in his title, this is an untimely Spring which baffles the ascetics living in the forest (KS 3.34b, *tām ākālīkīm vīkṣya madhupravṛttim*) and, thanks to a comparison with the more orderly progression of the same season in RV 9.24ff., (p. 22–23), Rajendran locates the devices through which Kālidāsa underlines the unusualness of this unexpected season.

Rajendran sees the chaotic nature of ‘untimely’ Spring in the KS as Kālidāsa’s caution against “any attempt to tamper with the natural order of the cosmos” and decides that the passage shows Kālidāsa’s “apprehension in the transgression of the sanctity of the sacred domain of [Śiva’s, LW] penance.” (p. 24) Yet, taking into consideration the militant nature of Kāma’s expedition against the meditating Śiva in these *sargas*, it could also perhaps be conjectured that the frenetic explosion of Spring is not that much a cautionary tale of cosmic implications but rather Kālidāsa’s subtle wink at the classic *mahākāvya* trope of violent conquests.

The Angry Ascetic and the Pacifying King: A Socio-Cultural Study in Kālidāsa’s Poetry

This paper was originally published in the proceedings, *Kings and Ascetics in Indian Classical Literature*, P. Rossi and C. Pieruccini (eds), Quaderni di Acme: 2009. It marks a shift in the volume from analyses of the role that the non-human world plays in Kālidāsa’s work to an investigation of the relationships between human protagonists—the author’s choice in this paper falls on kings and ascetics. The rationale in examining these two types of characters lies in the power both groups have over their environments but also on the stark differences in the spaces they occupy and the lives they lead (p. 25). These contrasts most interest Rajendran and he begins by looking at the characters of Kaṇva and Duṣyanta in Kālidāsa’s play, *Abhijñānaśākuntala* (henceforth AŚ). The author notes the impact of scenes where these protagonists venture into each other’s worlds—Duṣyanta into Kaṇva’s hermitage in Act 3 and Kaṇva’s troupe of ascetics into Duṣyanta’s court in Act 5—and by doing so, refers us back to the classic, and perhaps slightly simplistic, dichotomy of *grāma* vs. *vana*,¹ that is the contrast between the urban and ‘wild.’

¹ See: Thapar 2001. On a more holistic approach to what constitutes the ‘urban’ in early Indian literature, see: Kaul 2010.

Another facet of the king-ascetic relationship is the tension between “Brāhmaṇahood” and “Kṣātrahood” (p. 25) and, accordingly, the tension between spiritual and military power. Rajendran notices that in Kālidāsa’s poetry, it is always the ascetics who “call the shots” while the royalty remains submissive. He takes this as an indication of the great respect that Kālidāsa had for the ascetic order, even while most likely writing under the patronage of kings. Most significant for Rajendran’s analysis is the clash of worlds found in Act 5 of the AŚ, on which he closes the paper (pp. 29–31).

Encountering the Forest: Kālidāsa’s Perceptions on Hunting

Rajendran begins this article, originally published in *Pandanus* '06. *Nature in Literature and Ritual* (2006), by once again emphasizing the “otherness” of the forest in relation to the city in “ancient Indian mythological and folklorist discourse” as proven in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* (p. 33). The premise of the paper is to examine how the poet detangles the conflict of the aggressive intrusion of the urban into the wilderness that is inherent to the princely activity of hunting. An important note is made on the distinction between a wild forest and the “penance grove” (*āśrama*), but no note is made on the existence of curated, royal ‘forests’ which seem to have been a space separate from the truly wild *araṇya* or on the fact that the hermitage was an extension of the urban.

The core of the paper are understandably Daśaratha’s hunting scene from *sarga* 9 of the RV and Duṣyanta’s chase at the beginning of the AŚ. Rajendran sees these episodes as expressing Kālidāsa’s disapproval of hunting, whether conscious or not, and a comparison of Duṣyanta’s hunt from the *Mahābhārata* with Kālidāsa’s reinterpretation of the scene serves to bolster his argument. As does the transformation which occurs in king Duṣyanta and Mādhavya, the *vidūṣaka*, who become disgusted with hunting over the course of the AŚ (p. 40). Rajendran ends the paper claiming that such disdain for hunting in the poetry of Kālidāsa, “the lover of nature” (p. 41), is to be expected.

The City Man in the Forest and the Forester in the City: A Reading in *Abhijñānaśākuntala*

The author closes his volume with a paper originally published in *The City and the Forest in Indian Literature and Art* (Stasik and Trynkowska 2010). It brings together earlier thoughts on the transgression of the wild into the urban and vice versa. Aś remains the obvious canvas and, as earlier mentioned, the clash is between the court of king Duṣyanta and that of Kaṇva's hermitage. Although Rajendran notes that sage Kaṇva calls himself *vanaukas*, i.e. "forest dweller", it is a pity he did not decide to comment more on the context of this statement in Aś Act 4—*vanaukaso 'pi santo laukikajñā vayam*—which suggests that Kaṇva and the ascetics, unsurprisingly, saw themselves as not only detached from the urban but rather from society as a whole. A more in-depth discussion of this point may have served to add some nuance to the simple forest-city dichotomy.

Chettarthiodi Rajendran is a renowned scholar of Sanskrit literature but in this volume, he is also a great connoisseur of Sanskrit poetry and his profound observations on the works of Kālidāsa give us a glimpse of how Sanskrit poetry should be appreciated. He is a master of finding subtle connections between protagonists, scenes and entire poems and this is made abundantly clear in the papers collected in the book. However, there are a few concepts, introduced especially in the Preface, which I found problematic and would perhaps warrant more consideration. The first of these is the term 'eco-aesthetics' from the title. It is not defined by the author although it already exists in modern scholarship. Rather than being the aesthetic enjoyment of beautiful flora and fauna, these already being traditionally the objects of admiration in the arts, eco-aesthetics is a philosophical stance which grapples with finding beauty in the modern world torn by climate change and has political, societal and ecological implications.² It would have been helpful if C. Rajendran were to explain his understanding of the term in the context of Kālidāsa's works.

² See: Miles 2014.

More questions are raised by the author's statements that Kālidāsa was working with the socio-political agenda of creating an image of a culturally cohesive "India." While there can be no question that Kālidāsa was a master of geographical descriptions and reached for the trope often, one has to wonder whether ascribing these to a broader political programme is perhaps ahistorical or even at all productive. As Rajendran himself notes, there are many parts of Raghu's *digvijaya*, a core passage for his argument, that do not make much sense in terms of sketching out an integrated 'India' and the lack of historical certainty as to Kālidāsa's times, to my mind, precludes serious discussion on the political and geographical realities that informed Kālidāsa's choices on topics such as nation building. The latter also raises questions that would have benefitted from some consideration through a post-colonial lens.

Another concept which warrants deeper reflection is 'nature', especially in the context of the dichotomy of the 'natural' vs. the 'civilised'.³ On the term itself, it is necessary to note that it carries with it many connotations and when it appears in literary studies, it tends to be used in the sense inspired by the poetry of European Romanticism. Accordingly, what does it actually mean to write that Śakuntalā is a "child of nature"? It has been convincingly argued that the hermitage, like the grove and forest, are in reality "intimately connected to the urban" (Ali 2013: 365) in Sanskrit *kāvya* and it is this interconnectedness which allows royalty and hermits to interact with such ease in Sanskrit poetry. Furthermore, this very interconnectedness allows for the success of the most prevalent figures of Sanskrit *kāvya* which play on the poetic overlap of the human and non-human.⁴ In fact, in Kālidāsa's work, the world outside the city seems to be just

³ For an insightful analysis of this term in the *longue durée*, see: Lewis 1990 (1960): ch. 2: Nature (with *Physis*, *Kind*, *Physical* etc.). There is also an interesting point made on this topic in Kālidāsa's *Meghadūta* in: Ruiz-Falqués 2015.

⁴ Tiziana Pontillo has some interesting points on this in Pontillo 2010.

as sophisticated and refined as any royal court, which, in itself, would have to be a prerequisite for the works to be intelligible to the courtly audience they were intended for.

Of course, these topics and others raised by Chettarthiodi Rajendran in his volume have been the subject of many studies and conferences⁵ and there is much scope for future work, especially from the perspectives of environmental history, colonial and post-colonial studies. It is thanks to publications like *Eco-Aesthetic Studies in Kālidāsa* that questions like these come to light.

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⁵ Besides Stasik and Trynkowska 2010, see also: Rossi and Pieruccini 2009.

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