

## **TWINED TENDRILS OF WOMANHOOD AND ECOLOGY IN LITERATURE: TELLING OF TWO TALES**

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### **Abstract**

As the human race spirals towards an increasingly fragmented imagination about our world, literature becomes a beacon that returns human beings to a holistic assimilation with our environs. Literature celebrates the connection between ecology and the well-being of humanity. An added dimension is that of gender, demonstrating how preservation of nature is linked to the treatment meted out by society to its women. Indian thought and literature, particularly, has been infused with an appreciation of the organic and dynamic link between nature and humanity. This paper proposes to explore this through a reading of a Tamil folk tale, 'A Flowering Tree' and a short Urdu story 'Lajwanti' by Rajinder Singh Bedi, examples spanning the length of the Indian subcontinent, that strongly suggest how bodily violence upon a woman contravenes the ethical principle of Nature. As we traverse from an old folk tale – and the audience for it – to a modern story written by a Progressive writer at the time of independence and partition of India, we see the stamping of patriarchy on the female psyche through the metaphor of a mutilated or wilted plant, indicative of the silencing of the woman and the stifling of her agency. Interestingly, it is the folk tale that holds out a promise of breaking the cycle and showing how an environmentally responsible society would be a socially responsive and gender sensitive one as well.

**Keywords:** Ecology, gender, patriarchy, conservation, literature

As human population has exploded in the last couple of centuries and made rapid advances in industrialization and technology, it is the physical environment that has been sacrificed as collateral damage. After an initial period of intense awe, and even dread, that human beings had felt for the forces of nature, they had developed a better understanding of, and accorded considerable veneration to, nature. A healthy respect for nature was knitted into the fabric of their culture because one's survival depended upon it; and this was transmitted to coming generations through fable and myth. Preservation and conservation of physical

resources became an inherent part of one's culture. Religious and cultural taboos were woven around it to ensure no exploitation of nature took place. However, during the Enlightenment period in Europe this relationship underwent a fundamental change, leading to a dissipation of reverence associated with nature. A utilitarian philosophy and an exalted perception of the powers of 'man'kind combined to make people view forces of nature simply as resources bestowed by the heavens to be harnessed and regulated by man. Nature was no longer viewed as an equal participant in the miracle of life, and the loss of veneration gave way to a presumption of rightful domination over it. Natural resources were grossly overused and depleted, along with the disappearance of a massive number of species at an astonishing rate.<sup>1</sup> Only in the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, have human beings woken up to the adverse consequences of their recklessness; the danger of the hole in the ozone layer, for example, and what it portends for the fabric of human existence. The realization that there is only one planet that we have to live on has brought issues of ecology and environment to the forefront, with a frantic search for means of sustainable development.

As the human race spirals towards an increasingly fragmented imagination about our world, literature becomes a beacon that returns human beings to a holistic assimilation with our environs. Ecology is an ever-present concern in literature, implying a deep connection between the well-being of humanity and the preservation of environment. Indian thought and literature, particularly, has been infused with an appreciation of the organic and dynamic link between nature and humanity. An added dimension is that of gender, demonstrating how preservation of nature is linked to the treatment meted out by society to its women. This article explores the twined tendrils of womanhood and ecology in literature through a reading of a Tamil folk tale, 'A Flowering Tree' and the essay 'Towards a Counter-system: Women's Tales' by its translator, A. K. Ramanujan, and a short Urdu story 'Lajwanti' by Rajinder Singh Bedi. Although these stories are far apart in geographical location as well as in time, both strongly suggest how bodily violence upon a woman contravenes the ethical principle of Nature. As we traverse from an old folk tale – and the audience for it – to a modern story written at the time of independence and partition of India, we see the stamping of patriarchy on the female psyche through the metaphor of a mutilated or wilted plant, indicative of the silencing of the woman and the stifling of her agency. Further, the folk tales also holds the promise of restoring voice and agency to the woman.

Indian thought, and especially, literature has been infused with an appreciation of the organic and dynamic link between nature and humanity. One example is of the Bishnoi tribe that is known to treat natural resources as sacred and to give up their lives willingly to save it. In the eighteenth century, Amrita Devi Bishnoi refused to let the Maharaja Abhay Singh's men cut the khejri (*Prosopis Cineraria*)<sup>2</sup> trees to burn lime for the construction of his new palace. Her

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<sup>1</sup> In the last hall of the Museum of Natural History in Delhi, after trooping past the vast array of flora and fauna, including the extinct dinosaurs, a placard announces 'the most dangerous animal on the planet and one's curious and eager glance reveals one's own reflection staring back from a mirror. The placard goes on to list the number of species that have become extinct in the relatively short span that homo sapiens had spent on Earth; incontrovertible proof that ecological destruction and degradation has proceeded at an alarming rate on this planet ever since human beings took up residence here. Current extinction rates are believed to be up to a thousand times higher than they would be if people weren't in the picture.

<sup>2</sup> It has mythological significance as well. While going into exile for thirteen years, the Pandavas are believed to have hidden their divine weapons in this tree for safe keeping. Upon their return after thirteen years, they retrieve their weapons and worship the tree to thank it.

head was severed. Before dying she uttered the now famous couplet of the Bishnois, “*sir santhe rooke rahe to bhi sasto jaan*” that translates as ‘A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree’. Seeing their mother lay down her life for the trees, her three daughters also clung to the trees. Their heads were severed too. People from eighty-three surrounding villages are believed to have rushed to prevent the men from felling the trees and by the end of the day more than three hundred and fifty had lost their lives. When the king learnt about this tragedy, he was smitten with remorse. He apologized to the Bishnoi community, gave orders to stop the felling the trees and the hunting of wild animals in Bishnoi areas, and punished those who transgressed his orders.

Later, in independent India in the 1970s, this sacrifice inspired the “Chipko Andolan,”<sup>3</sup> an agitation to preserve the forests in Chamoli district in what is now Uttarakhand, spearheaded by Gaura Devi, Suraksha Devi, Sudesha Devi, Bachni Devi and Chandi Prasad Bhatt. Upon hearing that 2,500 trees were to be hacked near Reni village, the women gathered to keep vigil and prevented the contractor’s men from cutting the trees. Impervious to both taunts and threats, the women finally resorted to hugging the trees to stop them from being felled. Eventually, after a four-day stand-off, the contractors left. The news of the success of this operation spread and, in several areas, women vowed to guard the trees by tying a sacred thread around the trees and began to set up cooperatives to guard their local forests.<sup>4</sup>

Though deep ecology seeks to explore the relationship between humans and nature and end the domination of the former over the latter, ecofeminism locates the problem not to all humans, but specifically to andocentrism. It employs ancient, pre-modern wisdom to examine the connection between women and nature. The oppression of women and nature is regarded as being interconnected, and control over natural resources is often equated with control over a woman; a patriarchal mindset perceives Nature as feminine territory, and both become passive victims of exploitation. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, Vandana Shiva demonstrates how women have traditionally viewed themselves as partners with nature, and not conquerors. Nature for them is Prakriti, a living force. Indian women naturally practice production and renewal of life while they take from Nature for their needs. She feels that notions of western patriarchy, with an eye to maximize profit, suppressed nurturing modes of sustenance in the use of natural resources. Scientific revolution has not only subjugated nature, but marginalized women by excluding their contribution towards modes of knowledge. It automatically follows that the denigration or marginalization of women, who are biologically and metaphorically conditioned to nurture and conserve, leads to a rupture in the organic wholeness of life on earth.

The organic connection between human beings and nature is simultaneously sacralized in superstition and substantiated by science. Primitive wisdom has exhorted human beings to venerate the forces of nature and created taboos against its exploitation and degeneration; and science has established the imperative to do so. Folklore as a repository of cultural memory and knowledge teems with tales to encourage the preservation of Mother Nature and has compared the feminine procreative quality with nature’s ability to replenish herself. In cultures all over the

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<sup>3</sup> Literally ‘Cling Agitation’ – it meant to hug the trees to prevent them from being cut. The term originally used by one of the pioneers of the movement, Chandi Prasad Bhatt was “angalwaltha” (embrace)

<sup>4</sup> Chandi Prasad Bhatt was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1982, and Sundarlal Bahuguna was awarded the Padma Vibhushan by the Government of India in 2009. Typically, the women at the forefront were unsung heroes of the narrative.

world, women and nature have been equated; and the mistreatment of one is commensurate to the mistreatment of the other. The Tamil folk tale, 'A Flowering Tree' deals with the theme of the importance of treating women with consideration and makes us sensitive to the vulnerability of a young girl as she essays the role of a bride in the house of her in-laws. This is done by endowing the young girl with a special gift of turning into a flowering tree that needs a caring touch. In the other story, 'Lajwanti' by Rajinder Singh Bedi, the author uses the metaphor of a touch-me-not plant to metaphorize the shrivelling of a woman's soul through insensitive handling.

The metaphor of a tree or a plant as a woman or vice versa, i.e. a woman as a tree is a recurrent one in literature. The motif of such transformations has resonances in several cultures, demonstrating how closely women have been linked to women. A tree provides generous and selfless care, shade and fruit. Similarly, a woman's reproductive capacity to bear and nurture children is unique. And just as the tender shoots of a tree can be harmed if not treated properly, mistreatment of a woman results in a loss for the entire humanity.<sup>5</sup> A.K. Ramanujan, well known poet and translator, cites a poem in classical Tamil of an example of sisterhood between a tree and a woman in the Indian ethos. He quotes from a Virasaiva poem by Dasareswara that connects the gentle treatment of plants with other kinds of love; a saint who wouldn't even pluck flowers for his god but only picked up the ones that had dropped to the ground by themselves:

and when holding a plant  
or joining it to another  
or in the letting it go  
to be all mercy  
...  
such moving, such awareness  
is love that makes us one  
with the Lord Dasareswara.  
Dasareswara (Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, p. 54-55).

Stories and tales are woven and shared with all members of the community to convey the importance of treating our natural resources with respect, equating that with the respect accorded to women. 'A Flowering Tree' is an old folk tale that is available both in Tamil and Kannada at least, if not in half a dozen other Indian languages. It has been widely used all over the world as a parable for ecological sensitivity through the depiction of a woman as a flowering tree. "Indeed, we were told by our mothers when we were children not to point to growing plants in the garden with our sharp fingernails, but only with our knuckles; our fingernails might

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<sup>5</sup> In a Greek myth, Daphne, the daughter of the river god, Peneus, is chased by Apollo. Growing weary of running away, she calls out to her father for help. As all gods of water possess the ability of transformation, Peneus transforms his daughter into a laurel tree to help her evade her unwelcome attentions of Apollo. Her legs take root, and her arms grow into long and slender branches. The besotted Apollo claims the tree as his special tree and adorns himself with some of its leaves. Another Greek myth is that of the myth of Myrrha. She, who has incestuous lust for her father, is according to one interpretation, transformed into a Myrrh tree, as a silencing punishment. An African story, 'The Woman Who Was Turned Into a Tree' that shows how the penetrating eyes of an evil man makes women turn into a thorn tree, indicating her rape. To return to womanhood, she has to grasp a bull by the horns, indicating her realisation of how to retrieve her agency. (The reference to the full story is given in the bibliography)

scratch the growing ends” (Ramanujan, Kumar, 133). This tale, he says, is “a tale that speaks of a woman’s creativity, her agency, and of the way it is bound up with her capacity for speech” (ibid. 123).

‘A Flowering Tree’ is a story about two young girls who live with their mother, a poor woman who finds it hard to make ends meet. One day the younger daughter confides to her older sister that she has the gift of turning into a flowering tree which they could pluck and earn some more money to ease their mother’s burden, but that she needed her sister’s help to do so. Accordingly, when there is no one else around, the older sister performs the rituals required to be carried out for her sister to become a tree. Some water is poured over her while she chants a prayer, and lo and behold! The girl turns into a tree, blossoming with fragrant flowers. As instructed, the older sister carefully plucks all the flowers and then carefully pours water from the other pitcher over the tree’s limbs and leaves to turn it back into her sister again. The entire exercise requires tender care and gentle handling.

This entire sequence is performed repeatedly and the ethereal flowers fetch a good price in the market. A young prince who is enchanted with the flowers follows the sister one day to discover their source. There he snoops on the ritual of the girl turning into a tree and then back into a girl. After that he begins to mope around till his parents discover his desire to marry that particular girl. The girl’s mother is summoned and told that her daughter had been chosen to marry the prince. The mother, flummoxed by this, immediately takes a stick to her daughter, suspecting her of lewd behaviour that enabled her to come on the prince’s radar. When the daughters share their startling secret with her, she flatly refuses to believe them till they demonstrate the gift. So far, the young girl had turned into a tree of her own volition purely for selfless motives, but now she has to do so to prove that she is not lying. This is the first time that she is compelled to become a tree for someone else’s sake other than her own; and, in a way, sets off the chain of her loss of agency. Despite her reservations about squandering or even displaying her gift, she is compelled to do so repeatedly hereafter.

The girl is given no choice in whether she wishes to marry the Prince or not; her class and gender do not permit such a choice. There is no criticism for the prince who invades the girl’s privacy and watches her in her intimate moments. Her marriage to the prince takes place and in the bridal chamber the newly married couple sit in silence waiting for the other to reach out. The groom is aggressive and threatens an admission out of the bride about her secret and relents only when the bride, who is insecure in her new environment, is coerced into displaying her special gift. This becomes a practice to charm her husband every night, and the flowers are offerings she makes on the marital bed to buy conjugal peace. Ramanujan says, “It becomes almost a sexual ritual, a display of her spectacular talent to turn him on, so that they could sleep together on the flowers from her body.” (ibid. 124). This is the second time that she is compelled to turn into a tree for someone else’s sake.

The relative powerlessness of a woman in her marital home extends further. Her teenage sister-in-law becomes curious when she sees a pile of flowers outside her brother’s window every morning and discovers the secret by spying on the couple. Once when her brother is away, she asks the flowering girl to accompany a group of her friends to a garden. “She uses her clout as an in-law (and her mother’s) to coerce her to go with her alone to the orchard; she and her pubescent teenage girls tease her (‘Will you do it only for your lovers?’), play on the sexual nature of her talent, and force her to become a tree” (ibid). Despite her reservations and her vulnerability, the girl does so; only to have the girls pluck her flowers callously. Increasingly, the environment has become more hostile – from becoming a tree for her mother,

to her husband and now for display in front of an unknown group of unthinking, heedless girls. Predictably, she is increasingly unsafe. Her entreaties to be gentle fall on deaf ears, her branches get mutilated, and leaves torn. The girls don't care for the bride and are only interested in satisfying their puerile curiosity and greed. It begins to rain, and, hastily sprinkling water over the tree, they run away. The tree, dampened unevenly, is not able to return to the full human form again and the girl is reduced to being just a limbless torso – unable to walk and unable to speak. “It is a progressive series of violations till she finally ends up being a Thing” (ibid).<sup>6</sup>

It takes the kindness of an unknown good Samaritan to rescue her and leave her at the gate of the city palace of another city, where coincidentally, her older sister-in-law is the queen, to be tended to by palace servants. She still lives in relative indignity – forced to keep those around her happy and surviving on their mercy. Her husband who had in the meantime repented his earlier arrogance and grieved the loss of his bride, turns into an ascetic in his agonized search for her. He arrives in the same city as the girl and ultimately the girl is able to make him recognize her despite her maimed appearance. Then it is he, her husband who according to her instructions, pours water over her mutilated limbs, straightens the crumpled leaves and turns her into a whole woman again.<sup>7</sup> As a fairy tale must set things to rights, so must a folk tale ensure that justice is done. The errant younger sister-in-law is (rather drastically) thrown into a pot of boiling oil and the prince and his bride are restored to happiness.

The story demonstrates that women, like plants, should be respected, not exploited. The special gift of a woman – to bear children – is equated with the bounty of nature. Flowering is seen as a symbol of sexual maturation; of menstruation. Ramanujan says that the words for ‘flowering’ and for ‘menstruation’ are the same in languages like Sanskrit and in Tamil. In Sanskrit, a menstruating woman is called a *pushpavati* (a woman in flower), and in Tamil *puttal* means ‘menstruation’. This also “symbolises a young woman’s desire to flower sexually and otherwise, as well as the dread of being ravaged that the very gift brings with it” (ibid. p. 133). This special gift comes with a vulnerability as she places herself in the hands of another person each time she becomes a tree. “A tree that has come to flower or fruit will not be cut down; it is treated as a mother, a woman who has given birth” (ibid).

Her vulnerability is what endangers the girl. “She is most open to injury when she is most attractive, when she is exercising her gift of flowering. Each time she becomes a tree, she begs the person who is pouring the water to be careful not to hurt her” (ibid). As a tree, she loses her ability to control her own destiny and is at the mercy of the onlooker. Both her voluntary will and her life are at risk. She seeks care but cannot ensure that this is bestowed upon her. The danger lies in the woman being devalued because she shares her gift with those who don't appreciate it, as we see both the husband and the sister-in-law taunt the flowering girl

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<sup>6</sup> This is brought out beautifully in a Kannada film, *Cheluvi*, based on the folktale made in 1992 by Girish Karnad. A young woman, Cheluvi, played by Sonali Kulkarni, living in abject poverty with her mother and sister, has the gift to transform herself into a flowering tree. She can yield an endless supply of blossoms as long as they are picked very carefully. Kumar, the son of the village headman, seduced by the scent of the flowers, marries Cheluvi and they enjoy her flowering in strict privacy. During Kumar's absence, the headman's younger daughter Shyama forces Cheluvi to disclose her secret. Unable to comprehend the delicacy and beauty of the event, the children destroy the tree, leaving Cheluvi's body a mutilated tree-stump.

<sup>7</sup> The tale has been fashioned as an opera by John Adams for the Chicago Opera Theater. A review for the opera says that the tale looks at the male/ female relationship as depicting traditional class and gender inequality – a rich prince dominating a poor peasant girl – but what follows is a story of self-discovery and humility that resolves in an image of wholeness and love.

when she is reluctant to turn into a flowering tree in front of an audience. Later, when she is no longer in a position to offer anything, no one cares what happens to her.

A.K. Ramanujan says that the difference between a tree and a woman is that a woman can speak, move, and be an agent in her own behalf, in ways a tree cannot. 'A Flowering Tree' may be read as a metaphor for the objectification and commodification of the woman. When she displays her special gift, she is transformed from a person to an object by the gaze. Initially she confides her gift to her sister, but later when others get to know of her gift, she has to do their bidding. The girl shifts from being a woman to a 'thing' and gets used both within her house and outside. As she loses her agency, she loses her voice and become mute, unable to communicate, and therefore, remains unheard and unheeded. This stifling of her personality and the resultant maiming of her self is metaphorized in the limbless torso that she is reduced to.

The other story, 'Lajwanti', is among one of the most significant stories written about the partition that reveals the dark side of independence of India in 1947 and the hitherto unarticulated violence against women that it unleashed. Using the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947 as the context in which women faced the brunt of the civil unrest that partition unleashed, Rajinder Singh Bedi, a leading Urdu writer of the Progressive Writers' Movement of India<sup>8</sup> sensitively depicts the plight of one such woman, Lajwanti (the shy one), who is abducted during the partition riots. The author uses the metaphor of a lajwanti plant (*Mimosa Pudica*), the leaves of which curl upon mere touch. The lines from a Punjabi song, "Touch the leaves of the lajwanti,/ they curl and wither away" reverberate throughout the text, drawing the reader's attention to the vulnerable position of women in society.

Lajwanti's husband, Sunderlal, one of the more progressive men among the community, is an articulate local leader who advocates the rehabilitation of abducted women by their families and society. Deeply anguished at the pain and suffering of such women, he goes around Mulla Shakur village, advocating sensitivity and compassion for such women and restoring them to their families without any questioning of their sufferings on the other side "... because their hearts were already wounded, already fragile, like the leaves of the touch-me-not plant, ready to curl up at the merest touch" (Bedi, Kumar, 58). Sunderlal pleads with the people to accord to them the same status as "any woman, any mother, daughter, sister or wife" (ibid). He argues with spokesmen of orthodox religion and even refutes the example of Lord Rama, who abandoned his wife, Sita, despite her undergoing an ordeal by fire to prove her chastity.<sup>9</sup>

The gap in theory and practice comes to the fore when Sunderlal is told that his wife, too, had been 'recovered'. For all his public posturing, he is not unreservedly enthusiastic about espousing her again. However, once Lajwanti has been 'recovered', Sunderlal feels morally bound to 'rehabilitate' her in his house. He treats her with exaggerated respect; refraining from probing about her life in the captivity of another man. However, it transpires that this excessive sensitivity is not so much on her account but his own, as it is he who is incapable of swallowing

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<sup>8</sup> *Anjuman Tarraqi Pasand Mussanafin-e-Hind* were anti-imperialist and left-oriented and sought to inspire people through their writings advocating equality among all humans and attacking social injustice and backwardness in the society.

<sup>9</sup> It is pertinent to mention that the debates raging in those times in the Indian Parliament used the same metaphor of Sita to emphasise the purity of Sita and why they must be brought back from Pakistan. The women were denied any choice of whether they wished to stay in India or Pakistan, but were compelled to be brought to the country of their 'religion'.

the reality. Her existence and rehabilitation has to be justified in mythological terms by equating her with Sita, a devi, to be idolized from afar.

Her living with another man (or men) is clearly indicated and the text subverts the chastity myth further by suggesting that her treatment at the hands of her captor was better than her treatment at the hands of her own husband (this itself accentuates the victimisation and exploitation of women). This is even more unpalatable to her husband than the fact that she was raped by another man. He suffers a shock when he finds her in better health than she had been earlier; and upon being told that she had been treated quite well in response to his delicately framed question, his deep-seated uneasiness about his own casual and regular physical abuse of his wife is further heightened. Had she been visibly and physically scarred by her experience, he would have perhaps found it easier to pity her and talk to her, but the bloom in her cheeks gnaws at his own inadequacy as her husband. Trapped by the progressive philosophy he himself had propounded, he is, however unable to relate emotionally to his wife and keeps her at a distance. Lajwanti's existence and rehabilitation has to be justified in mythological terms by equating an abducted woman with Sita, who was abducted by Ravana but remained chaste and true to the memory of her husband.

Much work has been done on the violence against women during partition, even the violence perpetrated on the women of one's own religion and family, but this added dimension of marital exploitation is usually invisible. Though the implicit violence that forms the backdrop of the story is wreaked by men of the so-called 'enemy' community, it is set against domestic violence faced by women in their own homes which seems to be the norm. The beatings that a husband dishes out to a wife are taken as a matter of course. The women too have internalised this patriarchal violence and consider it a natural cross for them to bear; even they would not accord much respect to a man who cannot keep his woman in check. So routine is this that there are women's folk songs about it:

Marry a city boy? – No sir, not me.

Look at his boots, and my waist is so narrow. (p. 58)

Sunderlal himself had hardly been a model husband and had frequently beaten his wife. But now he is full of remorse for his behaviour and swears that he would make amends if he even got a chance to do so. This remorse, too, is more of a defence strategy that allows him to hide his sense of being aggrieved at his wife having lived with another man.

But Lajo needs a cathartic release from the hellish, nightmarish experience she had undergone by speaking about it. She tries repeatedly to talk to this newer, gentler version of her former husband, but whenever she tries to say anything, he silences her. It has been remarked that Bedi's choice of narrational mode serves utterly to silence the main female character Lājwantī herself. Losing her capacity to speak foregrounds the loss of Lajwanti's agency. In the absence of a release of her pent-up emotions, she begins to wither like a touch-me-not plant even though she is now treated like a goddess – a mute idol. Thus, Sunderlal's penitent vow never to hurt her if she were restored to him may be laudable, but the sterility of this action is revealed in her aching for his former beatings as that is the sign of restoration of normalcy for her. She is as stifled in the mould of a 'devi' as the flowering girl is in the tree stump. In an article, Veena Das comments on how the 'loss of normality [catalyzed by the events of partition] is rendered with consummate skill as in the figure of Lajwanti whose very elevation as the icon of a near goddess subsequent to her abduction and return, constitutes her sorrow' (Review' 58).

In his essay on ‘A Flowering Tree’, Ramanujan quotes Ruth Bottingheimer, who points out how speech is an indication of power. Discourse is a form of domination, and speech use is “an index of social values and the distribution of power within a society” (Bottingheimer 1987: 51) in the Grimms’ tales, especially in their “Cinderella” (Bottingheimer 1987: ch. 6). The question who speaks for whom is crucial. Society frowns on women who speak loudly, or laugh loudly, or express opinions or demonstrate their capability in various fields. Garrulous women are laughable if not actively evil or unchaste, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, for example. Judith C. Brown says, “Since the early days of the Church, women had been barred from speaking in the house of god, as well as preaching, teaching, or speaking in public,” (Brown 59-60). The fact that women have either been silent or written only cathartically and not for publication, or if for the latter, then written under male disguises and pseudonyms is related to this taboo on women’s speech.

In both the stories discussed in this article, the treatment meted out to women is equated with one’s relationship to nature. In both stories, the loss of speech symbolises the loss of agency. About ‘A Flowering Tale’ Ramanujan suggests that agency in these women’s tales is connected with their being able to tell their own story and its being heard.... Except for the first few times, she loses her agency and is forced to perform at someone else’s behest. Ramanujan says that of the five times she becomes a tree, she does it voluntarily only the first and the last time. After the first time, every time she protests that she doesn’t wish to become a tree she is not heard; she is forced to do so against her will.... When she turns back into a woman from a tree imperfectly, she is incapable of voicing her wish, and she has been turned into a pitiable object. In ‘Lajwanti’, too, the woman is like a delicate plant that can wilt at a mere touch. This tenderness and fragility is severely violated in the unstated violation of Lajo’s body. She loses her agency over her own body – owned first by her husband and later by her abductor, or abductors, and is reduced to being an object.

Ramanujan also shows how the story equates speech not just with agency but with sexuality. A woman’s ability to speak is also an expression of her sexuality. If she loses her voice, she loses her agency. He says that in many Kannada tales, the phrase for sexual intimacy between a woman and a man is “they talked to each other.” As the young bride finds herself powerless to resist her husband and then her sister-in-law, she silently acquiesces to their demands upon her body. Similarly, Lajwanti’s body is a trope to imprint the victory of one community over another. Recovery, too, is fraught with uncertainty as the original claimant to her body is not able to overcome the temporary loss of his ‘property’ that he had suffered. He is unable to maintain a normal relation with her, notwithstanding the desire of his wife to have the same normalcy in their relationship.

Both tales also demonstrate how women are vulnerable and at risk not only in the public but the private sphere. Ramanujan looks at the spaces in the folktale as being marked by alternations of Interior and Exterior (the *akam* self/ interior and *puram* outside/ external of classical Tamil poetics). There are alternations of domestic and public space in which the action takes place. In this story, the five instances of the transformations move from her own yard to the princess’s bedchamber, then to the orchard where it is most dangerous, and back to a second bedchamber. Indeed, one of the oppositions between a woman and a tree is that the former is an interior (*akam*) being, living both indoors and having an interior space, a heart (all of which are meant by the South Dravidian term *akam*), and the latter lives outdoors, in a public space (*puram*). It is one of the ironies of this story that she is forced to become a tree in the wrong space, in the bedchamber. And it is when she becomes a tree in the orchard that the greatest

harm comes to her. Thus, she is exploited both in the public and the private space. The folktale “voices the concern about a woman’s vulnerability in the private sphere of the home, which is commonly regarded as a refuge from the public sphere” (129). Similarly, Bedi juxtaposes domestic violence with communal violence and shows women at the receiving end every time. Lajwanti does not fare better in either – she is a victim of domestic violence as well as in the public sphere. The example given by orthodoxy of the ‘rightness’ of Lord Rama’s action in sending his wife into exile is used as a justification of the silencing of the agency of the woman, where she has to do the bidding of her man.

Both stories throw light on the patriarchal notion of marriage leading to a tacit but total surrender of agency on the part of the wife. It is the flowering girl who ultimately initiates a conversation with her groom when he refuses to speak to her. It is she who has to acquiesce when he imposes conditions on her to turn into a flowering tree. “If you don’t become a tree for me, for whom will you do that?” (127) he taunts her, thus reminding her of his expectation of a wife’s unquestioning fealty to her husband. The question is then, where is she really safe? Similarly, the latter story shows the vulnerability of a woman even in a supposedly secure environment.

According to Ramanujan, Indian tales are different from European tales in so far that in the former, there is a union, followed by a separation, usually a prolonged one, which ends in a reunion that is a stronger bonding than the earlier one. “Women are part of the prize for a prince on his quest, but for a woman it is not enough to be married; she has to earn her husband through a *rite de passage*, a period of unmerited suffering.” (ibid., 564). Women’s tales begin usually after marriage and entail a period of separation, which can end only with a better understanding between the spouses. In other words, a more equitable relationship is sought, and a stifling marriage is resolved ideally when the husband is brought to a better understanding and respect for his wife. The prince who controls his wife’s agency at the beginning of the marriage is brought to an appreciation of the need to maintain her dignity only through losing her. The metaphor is obvious. A woman can be restored to her true self only in a caring and protective environment. In ‘A Flowering Tree’ the girl with the gift of flowering has to find a way to recover her loss of agency and volition in turning into a tree. She has to finally convince her husband who has now repented his earlier petulance of who she is and take his help in restoring that right to her. A. K. Ramanujan, placing it in its rightful context says, “Yet, paradoxically, when she is mutilated, she cannot be healed directly. The fifth and last time she becomes a tree, she has to wait for the right person and the safe occasion, another bedchamber, in an older married sister-in-law’s household, with a husband who has missed her and searched for her and thereby has been changed. She can be made whole only by becoming the tree again, becoming vulnerable again, and trusting her husband to graft and heal her broken branches” (135). It is this closure that is missing in Bedi’s ‘Lajwanti’. She aches for her husband to heal her by listening to her, but he averts all attempts at doing so.

“... many of these tales”, says Ramanujan in the essay, “end with the heroine telling her story to ‘the significant other’ (often through a device, such as a talking doll or lamp), resolving the crisis, enduring her separation, reuniting her with her husband and her kin. The tale has now become her story. Till then she had no story to tell. The whole tale is the tale of her acquiring her story, making a person of her, making a silent woman a speaking person” (Ramanujan, ed. Vinay Dharwadker, 437). She waits to tell her story in its entirety and give him instructions on how to heal her: pour water on her, and when she becomes a tree to lovingly put back the broken leaves and branches in their place, and pour the water on it – and she will be whole

again. This is also the time when she voluntarily and for her own good undergoes the transformation. She has recovered her agency, taken the initiative and become an instrument of change. It is her ability to be able to tell her own story that restores her. She waits for recognition by her husband. “It is only when she speaks to a ‘significant other’, her husband in this tale, and tells him her story, that she is able to return to her original female body and become whole again. Thus, her recovery of speech is the recovery of her personhood. From a commodity – here merely to satisfy the desire of her husband, she becomes an equal partner, as her husband has lost her and learnt to value her more.

‘A Flowering Tree’ ends on a positive note, however, suggesting the imperative of retaining volition of speech and action on the part of the woman to avoid being commodified. But, interestingly, this very notion is subverted in Lajwanti. Sunderlal does learn to appreciate his wife and swears never to hurt her again, yet this very realisation reveals his own insecurities more than any real respect for his wife that her experience has engendered in him. The mythologizing of her suffering and her subsequent glorification is a refusal to recognise her as a person and a woman. She is silenced forever and may never find closure or a resolution to her anguish.

For Ramanujan, ‘women’s tales’ are especially significant as they share certain special characteristics; these are tales told by women and tales that are centred around women. If men relate the same tales, they are usually those that they have heard from women. In telling such a tale, older women could be reliving these early, complex, and ambivalent feelings towards their own bodies – and projecting them for younger female listeners. If boys are part of the audience, as they often are, the male could imaginatively participate in them, which might change their sensitiveness towards women. Women position themselves in positive roles in such tales which are often disseminated to the audience, both male and female. They share the travails that they have to face daily both in the private and public space, hoping to engineer a change in the patriarchal ideology. Education through such stories serves to sensitize people to these issues. As A.K. Ramanujan says in his critical commentary of ‘A Flowering Tree’, it is hoped that young boys would be a part of the storytelling session and would absorb notions of the equality of the sexes. Both boys and girls are the audience of such stories, which may help to sensitize them to the plight of women. Both these tales are seen as representative expressions of the norms of patriarchy that afforded no space for them in the company of men. These tales also suggest the need of a sisterhood of women that provides a support network and a web of nurturance for each other. This sisterhood is what is lacking in ‘Lajwanti’, but makes a happy resolution possible in ‘A Flowering Tree’.<sup>10</sup>

It is imperative to shake the dust off the countless myths and folk tales of ‘pre-modern’ cultures all over the world that still carry the legacy of conservation and to re-learn important lessons in ecology. It is important to reclaim the feminine principle of conservation for sustainable development, rather than the masculine one of exploitation. The Chipko Movement was an instance of women coming together to conserve their environment. The project of feminism is about restoring not just constitutional and legal parity but social equality as well. It

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<sup>10</sup> ‘A Flowering Tree’ is an abiding symbol of women’s empowerment; of their recovering their agency and volition. A Non-Governmental Organization that works for the welfare of women in South Asia uses this symbol. They acknowledge that the inspiration for their name is drawn from the Kannada tale ‘A Flowering Tree’ translated by A.K. Ramanujan.

is concerned with ensuring that women are treated as equals in society, so that they, along with men, can provide a healthy environment for the nurturance of the young. It is the creation of a conducive environment that both stories strongly recommend in order to ensure the well-being of our future generations. It is imperative to break the patriarchal mindset and ensure healthy relations between men and women – where women are treated with respect and as equals; and in which both partners are committed to providing a nurturing environment for the young. Without this transformation within the family, women's ability to participate in the public arena will not develop strong roots.

Literature here becomes a beacon that lights up the path to ecological sanity. The tale suggests that ecological balance can be restored only with restoring women to their rightful place. Interestingly, it is the folk tale that holds out a promise of breaking the cycle and showing how an environmentally responsible society would be a socially responsive and gender sensitive one as well.

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