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## REFERENCES

Suhasini Vincent. *Earth Polyphonies: Law, Ecocriticism, Eco-activism in Postcolonial India*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, Lexington Books, 2024. 320 p. ISBN: 9 7816 6695 1561. Hb. £96.00. 9 7816 6695 1578. eBook. £35.00.

- 1 This ambitious inquiry into literature, ecology and the law was written by a scholar initially trained in postcolonial literary studies, and it is, strictly speaking, neither literary, nor scientific, nor legal. Rather, Suhasini Vincent has gathered epistemological tools from each of those disciplines, with the key notion of the title, polyphony, running throughout the project, which purports to listen to and translate the variety of voices and stories that compose humanity. If polyphony first describes the musical intertwining and juxtaposition of melodies, the term has been widely used in literary theory metaphorically, thanks to the work of Bakhtin, and Vincent uses it in a way that enlarges its scope even further: she applies it to any kind of interaction and dialogue, formal and informal, and highlights the actual power of words when writers embrace climate change as their subject, in a way so potent it can transform legal language itself. The main achievement of the book is thus to establish never-heard-of bridges between the works of poets, writers, activists, lawyers, magistrates, and victims, thanks to the common thread of stories and storytelling.
- 2 Ecocriticism has of late spread in departments of literature, languages, and social sciences, either as a full-fledged field, or as a way of deciphering current issues. Just as gender studies radically renewed criticism and scholarship, ecocriticism allows linguists and literary critics to shed new light on J. J. Rousseau, H. D. Thoreau and D.H.

Lawrence. “Ecocriticism has become a diverse and vast field, a mix of literary, cultural, political, scientific, and activist strands [...] Its mantra is that the environmental crisis demands a reconsideration of society’s basic values, constitution, and purposes, and that art and literature can be vital in that work” (33): embracing this statement by Timothy Clark, a leading figure in today’s ecocriticism, Vincent’s study comes at a time when the need to consolidate the relatively new field is particularly crucial, especially in the Indian context.

- 3 From the outset, *Earth Polyphonies* announces itself as a hybrid in more ways than one: it is both an academic book and a free-wheeling personal rendering of climate-change anxiety that will appeal to many a reader. The introduction (Chapter 1, “Earth rise, a voice for our blue planet”) comprises personal musings on time passing. Vincent laments disasters linked to climate change, which led to the sheer destruction of a way of life as we used to know it, back in the 1970s and the 1980s, when the author was a child and teenager in southern India. Nostalgia looms over the book without ever contaminating it, thanks to a fact-based, rational approach motivated by hope. Such an impossible task elicits innovative thinking and keeps the reader alert and aware of possible new paths, made practical with the invention of a whole new language, “free from the directionalities of humanism, a language that incorporates a decentered, postmodern, post humanist perspective” (Amitav Ghosh, quoted p. 129). As a case in point, the glossaries at the end of the book demonstrate that it takes a new language to start describing climate change.
- 4 The outline of the book makes for an easy, predictable reading, enhanced by dense footnotes and memo sections. Each chapter begins with a presentation of one environmental issue, followed by literary analyses based on a specific genre epitomized by one or two Indian authors, and then by legal cases, which prove the urgent need to act. If the geographical focus is India, many examples and case studies are taken from all over the world and will thus constitute an invaluable source of arguments and references to anyone looking for a panoptic overview on the subject.
- 5 Chapter 2 (“Anthropocene, the clocks ticks”) presents state-of-the-art scholarship about the future of the earth, read along the doomsday narratives of Vandana Singh’s collection of sci-fi short stories, *The Woman Who Thought She Was a Planet*. Chapter 3 (“Animals in the forum”) perhaps best exemplifies the postmodernist approach of Vincent, as she navigates between high and low culture (“Lion King” and Jacques Derrida, “Jurassic Parc” and Bruno Latour), without ever sounding inappropriate. Suniti Namjoshi’s polyphonic *Animal Fables* serves the purpose of stimulating social action, as shown in the number of legal cases involving defense of animals (endangered or subject to cruelty) from all over the world. Chapter 4 (“Water in peril, day zero”) deals with water wars, disputes over rivers, including Arundhati Roy’s activist work on Indian dams. The literary focus is on the haiku poetry of Sudeep Sen, with an engaging poetic analysis on rhythm, stress, punctuation. Chapter 5 (“The flame of the forest”) addresses the issue of deforestation and wildfires. The literary reference this time is to Mahashweta Devi’s stories, in defense of the Avidasi, tribal peoples who have no legal means to defend themselves. Again, story-telling and writing are key: the powerless tribes cannot produce legal deeds when their cases come to court. One needs to invent them from scratch, and in doing so invent new ways to make them legally visible. Chapter 6 (“Solastalgic earth emotions”) echoes the all-encompassing damage done to nature by mining and fossil fuel, and reads *Animal’s People* by Indra Sinha through the

lens of the anecdote. This novel is about the catastrophic Bhopal gas leak in the 1980s, which the author reads contextually, covering its legal marathon up to now. Chapter 7 (“The seeds of the future”) groups together the hope symbolized by child activism across the world and social media activism. It also deals with the future of science and the imperative to produce new ethical laws. The literary genre under scrutiny is the parable, as mastered by Amitav Ghosh in his eco-centered novels. Chapter 8 (“Children of the stars”) is a conclusion that calls for symbiosis with nature, as a possible key to a better future.

- 6 At times the reader is overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information, which prevents the author from going into the details and stakes involved in each environmental issue under scrutiny: for example, the causal link between Mike Pandey’s films and the enactment of wildlife-protection laws is a fascinating process that involves linguistic, but also sociological and journalistic processes that are worth book-length studies in themselves. Taking her cue from Amitav Ghosh’s assertion that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of the imagination” (192), Vincent has embarked on a journey that is only a beginning: she demonstrates that we are on the threshold of an epistemic revolution and that voices need to find new venues and languages in order to be heard and form a coherent chorus, not unlike the symphonic orchestra as we know it today, which proceeded from considerable changes in the number, quality, sounds of its instruments, in order to accommodate the polyphonies required by the renewed needs of composers.

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Cécile Girardin is a Senior lecturer at University Sorbonne Paris Nord and has published articles about Salman Rushdie and South Asian writers. She has edited *Continuité, conservatisme, classicisme dans les littératures postcoloniales* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013) and the issue “Exception” of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* (43:1, 2020). She is currently working on Rushdie’s late style, as well as developing various projects in creative writing in English and in French.