Politics and poetics of a sacred route in Gagan Gill's travelogue
Avāk: Kailāś-Mānsarovar ek antaryātrā*

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This paper addresses Indian Hindi poet Gagan Gill's account of her journey to Kailasa-Mansarovar. This is a text expressing the writer's desire to visit Kailasa-Mansarovar, but it actually becomes a reflection on myth, faith, identity, geopolitical issues of the Himalayan areas, and her own sense of finally letting go her husband after his death, happened more than one year before the journey. The journey to the mountains presents a cultural encounter with a different culture, but it is also a profound and spiritual journey.

1. Introduction

The *trimūrti* of Hinduism –Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva– live in Brahmalok, Vaikuṇṭh and Kailāś. While it is not possible to visit Brahmalok and Vaikuṇṭh as living humans, Hindus can visit the abode of lord Śiva with their body and soul. Mount Kailash –a peak in the Gangdisê Mountains, located in Ngari region of Western Tibet, China– lies in a remote part of the globe, and is known as Kangrinboqê /Gang Rinpoche to Tibetans and Gangrenboqi feng in Chinese. It is revered and worshipped not only by Hindus, but also by Jains, Buddhists, and Bönpos, thus being held sacred by one fifth of the world's population.[1]

For the Tibetans who follow the Bön religion, which predates Buddhism in Tibet, Kailash is Yungdrung Gutseg, the 'pyramid of nine *svastika*s' on which the founder of Bön religious tradition Tönpa Shenrab descended from heaven to earth. The entire area is a mystical region, and the hills are the seat of all spiritual power.[2] According to the Jains, Ṛṣabhdev or Ādināth –the first of the 24 *tīrthāṃkara*– attained *samādhi*, liberation from rebirth, on Mount Aṣṭapād, identified as one of the hills close to Mount Kailash. Mahāyāna Buddhism gained its foothold in Tibet through the Indian Buddhist saint of Nālandā, Padmasambhava –The Lotus Born, also known as Guru Rinpoche– who established the Nyingmapa school in the 8th century CE. The sage-guru born in the kingdom of Oḍḍiyāna[3] said to have transmitted Vajrayāna Buddhism to Bhutan, Tibet, and neighboring countries, is associated to numerous sites in the region, such as Ciū *gompā*, a building covering a cave once occupied by Padmasambhava when he meditated on Yama, Lord of Death. The most sacred part of the *gompā*, situated on a steep cliff overlooking Mansarovar lake with commanding views over the plain to

[1] For general reference: John Snelling, The sacred mountain. The complete Guide to Tibet's Mount Kailas, London 1990; Katia Buffetrille, Pèlerins, lamas et visionnaires. Sources orales et écrites sur les pèlerinages tibétains, Wien 2000, pp. 15-105; Amilcare Barbero, and Stefano Piano, eds., Religioni e sacri monti. Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Torino, Moncalvo, Casale Monferrato 12-16 ottobre 2004, Ponzano Monferrato 2006.

[2] Per Kvaerne, Tibet Bon religion: a death ritual of the Tibetan Bonpos, Leiden 1985; Susanne Knodel, and Ulla Johansen, Symbolik der tibetischen Religionen und des Schamanismus mit einem Beitrag zur Bon-Religion von Per Kvaerne, Stuttgart 2000.

[3] Traditionally identified with the Swat Valley in present-day Pakistan, but possibly embracing a larger region, spreading on parts of present-day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Western Tibet (Zhang-zhung/Xangxung).

Mount Kailash, is a small cave that is said to have been later used by Milarepa. Flourishing in 11th-12th century, Milarepa challenged and defeated Naro Bön-chung, champion of the Bön religion of Tibet, reaching the summit of Kailash.[4] He did, however, fling a handful of snow on to the top of a nearby mountain, since known as Bönri, bequeathing it to the Bönpo and thereby ensuring continued Bönpo connections with the region. Even Guru Nānak –the founder of Sikhism and the first of the ten Sikh gurus– made his way to the holy places in the Himalayan mountain-range. In 1513 he set out to the north, up to Tibet and China, on his third *udāsī*, a five year long preaching journey as a renouncer.[5] During his travels in the Himalayan belt of Northern India, Guru Nānak also left a deep impact also on local people of Tibetan origin: amongst them was the then head of the Nyingmapa school, who invited Guru Nānak to Lhasa. At Mount Kailash, Guru Nānak had debates with the learned saints and fakirs. The most famous discussions are recorded in the *Siddh goṣṭ* in the form of a dialogue in verse, reporting on his meeting with *siddha*s, the descendants of the great Tantric Gorakhnāth who lived and meditated in mountain caves.[6]

Over the centuries the Kailash region has always evoked deep emotions in human beings, igniting the imagination of sages, poets and writers. The profound experience of this non-human muteness has equally attracted a large number of religious and secular people. In a recent example, in 2011 the renowned British writer Colin Thubron published the travelogue *To a mountain in Tibet*, that incidentally has interesting parallels with the text I'm analyzing in this paper, being a reflection on loss and grief, and about whether a journey can ever be a cure.

2. The writer, her poetry, and a travelogue

Gagan Gill, born in 1959, is an acclaimed Hindi writer who has published four collections of poetry. *Ek din lauṭegī laṛkī* (One day the girl will return) contains poems focusing on women's experience and on female identity, but also epigrams and verses about political events. Readers who had expected this to be the starting point for a career in feminist or polemical poetry were bound to be frustrated by the subsequent production. Gagan Gill's other poetry collections are musings in a world that is almost completely internalized, where the poet lives in absolute solitude. There she meditates on transience and on faith. There is no adherence to any institutionalized religion, but much of her writing seems to reflect the Buddha's four noble truths. The theme of sorrow in human existence, Buddha's first noble truth, is inflected in refined variations in the poems in *Aṁdhere meṃ Buddh* (Buddhas in the dark). Her third volume, *Yah ākāṃkṣā samay nahīṃ: 1997-98 kī kavitāeṁ* (Inopportune desire: poems 1997-1998), is dedicated to the enigma of desire, craving and emotions being the origin of sorrow according to the second noble truth. In her poetic world Gagan Gill does express the notion that the end of suffering is possible when a peaceful mind is realized, as per the third noble truth. The program for ending suffering is religious practice, which according to the fourth noble truth is Buddhist practice. Gagan Gill's faith remains fuzzy, even if praying does make sense to her. The most relevant theme in her poetry, the one and only constant in the impermanence of human existence,

[4] Retchung Pa, Le poète tibétain Milarépa, ses crimes, ses épreuves, son Nirvāna traduit du Tibetain avec une introduction et un index par Jacques Bacot, Paris 1925.

[5] Grewal Dalvindar Singh, Guru Nanak's travel to Himalayan and East Asian region: a new light, Delhi 1995.

[6] Kamala Elizabeth Nayar and Jaswinder Singh Sandhu, The socially involved renunciate: Guru Nānak's discourse to the Nāth yogis, Albany, NY 2007.

remains suffering, which is expressed through sound and images rather than narratives in the songs of her fourth collection *Thapak thapak dil thapak thapak*, a title that is more onomatopoeic than semantic (Thump thump heart thump thump).

The image of an isolated writer, confined to her inner world of solitude and apparently aloof from the empirical world may induce some critics to accusations of conservativism and/or of a reactionary and élitist attitude. Actually, Gagan Gill's idea of literature is not at all related to the notion of changing society through one's own writing. This, though, does not mean insensitiveness towards people or society. Yet, her focus remains on individual lives, on the inner reflection of facts and events. This is evident also in her prose works. Gagan Gill's collection of prose essays *Dillī meṃ unīṃde* (Sleepless in Delhi, 2000) is a sort of night reportage in Delhi, where a population of sleepless men and women – taxi drivers, rickshawallahs, homeless people – constantly spend their life half asleep and half awake, in a perennial state of drowsiness.

Avāk: *Kailāś-Mānsarovar ek antaryātrā* (*Speechless: an inner journey to Kailash-Mansarovar*), first published in 2008, is a text accompanied by 52 sepia color digitally elaborated pictures by the author, and by drawings and literary quotations. It is the literary account of a journey to Kailash, a pilgrimage which is immediately connoted as non-standard. The person who sets out for the pilgrimage is, in fact, not trained in any formal religion, even if she desires to follow "prescribed rites" (13-14). She is a Hindu woman who has come very close to Buddhism; she lives a secular life as a well-off middle-class woman, being a poet and widow of renowned Hindi writer late Nirmal Varmā.[7] The wish to reach Kailash stems from a promise she made to her deceased husband. Actually, it had been planned even before that, as a journey to be taken with a Greek friend of hers, but it had to be postponed because of Nirmal Varmā's illness. There is a constant intertwining of the sacred and the profane aspect of the journey, and the whole text can be used as an exercise in analyzing what happens to sacredness, and religious and sacred space in the contemporary world. In the following sections I will focus on some aspects of the representation of what can be defined as the politics and poetics of sacred places.

3. The politics of a sacred route

According to Niebuhr's definition "Pilgrims are persons in motion – passing through territories not their own – seeking something we might call completion, or perhaps the word clarity will do as well, a goal to which only the spirit's compass points the way".[8] Pilgrimage can be described as a religious phenomenon in which an individual – or a group – sets forth on a journey to a particular cult location to seek the intercession of the divinity and/or the saints of that place in a wide range of concerns. But

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[7] Born in in the Himalayan district of Simla, India, in 1929, Nirmal Varmā (in English transcription Nirmal Verma) is the most internationally renowned and translated Hindi postcolonial writer. In 1959, with the publication of his first book of short stories, he was acclaimed as a leader of the 'New Story' movement of Hindi literature. He was invited by the Oriental Institute, Prague, Czechoslovakia, to initiate a program of translation of modern Czech writers into Hindi, and he spent many years in Europe, travelling extensively both in Eastern and Western countries, and writing about the socio-cultural situation he encountered as a correspondent of the Times of India. In 1956 Nirmal Varmā resigned from the membership of the Communist Party as a protest against Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary. He was one of the few Indian intellectuals overtly criticizing Indira Gandhi during the Emergency rule (1975-77), and he advocated the cause of Free Tibet. After 1972 he moved back to India and he held positions at prestigious institutions such as the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla, the Nirala Creative Writing Chair in Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, and the Yashpal Creative Writing Chair in Simla. He received one of the highest literary awards of India, Bharatiya Jnanpith Award, in 1999. Nirmal Varmā published five novels, eight collections of short stories and nine books of essays and travelogues. He died in Delhi in 2005.

[8] Richard R. Niebuhr, "Pioneers and Pilgrims," in *Parabola* 1984, p. 7.

pilgrimage is also a social construction and a cultural product. The sacred, in fact, is imagined, defined and articulated within specific social, political and historical contexts. As John Eade and Michael Sallnow argue, a recurrent theme in pilgrimage is the reinforcement of social boundaries and distinctions, rather than their attenuation or dissolution.[9] According to van der Leeuw we can identify four kinds of politics in the construction of sacred space.[10] Every establishment of a sacred place is a conquest of space, implying a politics of position; a politics of property whereby a sacred place is "appropriated, possessed and owned", its sacredness maintained through claims and counterclaims on its ownership; a politics of exclusion, whereby the sanctity of sacred place is preserved by maintaining boundaries, separating the inside from the outside; and a politics of exile, which may take the form of a modern loss of or nostalgia for the sacred.

Avāk addresses these issues referring to the changes that modernity introduced in the traditional pilgrimage route. Before political boundaries between India and China were fixed, there were about a dozen traditional routes to Kailash and a free flux of people between India and Tibet had been possible for many centuries. At the end of the 18th century the Manchu supremacy completely excluded foreigners, ending any religious and/or diplomatic visits from the neighboring countries, and making Tibet a closed and forbidden land.[11] Notwithstanding this, pilgrimage to sacred places such as Kailash continued, and only after the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1959 did the mountain become inaccessible: four years before the Cultural Revolution, in 1962, the Chinese banned all pilgrimage in the area, and for two decades devotees went on circling the mountain secretly and illegally. Only in 1981 were the first Tibetans and Indians permitted to return, and twelve years later a few hikers were allowed to cross the mountain borders between Nepal and Tibet. Today only two routes remain: one through Lipu Pass located in Pithoragarh district of Uttarakhand, and the other through Nepal. Every year the Chinese Government issues five thousand visas for travelers coming from India, but no individual can enter the area from India or Nepal without being part of an organized tour. The Ministry of External Affairs in India organizes the *yātrā* (journey – in the official documents it is not defined as *tīrthayātrā*, the technical term for pilgrimage) every year between June and September, with the assistance of States and providing financial support to agencies like the Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam to offset the expenditure incurred by it for *yātrī*s (travelers/pilgrims). There is a computerized draw for selection of *yātrī*s and some State Governments also provide financial assistance to the pilgrims, thus rendering the process somehow 'democratic'. Pilgrimage has become a highly institutionalized organization, involving governments, travel agencies, and reception facilities, in a way very similar to what happens in the tourist system.

The 26-day round trip from Delhi implies a weeklong trekking in the Indian territory. This has the advantage that one gets acclimatized to the high mountain and does not get altitude sickness, which invariably tends to happen on the Nepal route; moreover, the so called Om Parbat, whose snow deposition draws the Hindu sacred syllable ॐ (auṁ) on the mountain, is seen only from Nabidhang,

[9] John Eade, and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the sacred: The anthropology of Christian pilgrimage*, London and New York 1991.

[10] Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in essence and manifestation*, Princeton, NJ 1986 [1933].

[11] Luciano Petech, China and Tibet in the early 18th century : history of the establishment of Chinese protectorate in Tibet, Leiden 1950; Goldstein, Melvyn C., and Gelek Rimpoche. A history of modern Tibet, 1913-1951 : the demise of the Lamaist state, Berkeley 1989.

the last camp site on the Indian border, at the tri-junction of India, Nepal, and China. The return trek is across Uttarakhand. The Nepal route – the one covered by Gagan Gill and described in *Avāk* – is not controlled by the Indian Government and tours are organized by Nepali travel agents recognized by the Chinese Government. This, though, is no guarantee of quality: the route is generally accomplished in 25 days, but some tour operators complete the entire *yātrā* in just 12-14 days and, in the process, people generally fall sick. In fact, this route is considered less arduous because of the Landcruisers drive from Kathmandu to the base of Kailash, but it can be dangerous for your health as it leaves very little time for acclimatization, and sometimes tourists and/or pilgrims have died of high mountain sickness. Moreover, the decisions of the Chinese Government are unpredictable; in Gagan Gill's words, "Weather can change all of a sudden on Mt. Kailash, as well as in Tibetan politics" (218).

The fact that the control of the area is in the hands of the Chinese government raises issues regarding ownership of the territory, the necessity of fixing and controlling boundaries and access to the routes, and the repression of the local population, as well as the containment of the claims of the community in exile.[12] Gagan Gill 's point of view is clearly anti-Chinese. This is principally due to the fact that the writer is a supporter of the Free Tibet movement, but it also reflects a more general attitude common to many Indian people, who tend to mistrust their intrusive neighbour. China's invasion of Tibet is not only responsible for the Dalai Lama's exile, but it is disrespectful of the very identity of Tibetan people. As in any occupied country, soldiers and military camps bring about social disruption, with the spreading of prostitution and corruption (81). Chinese policy in Tibet is trying to cancel the local culture through a process of colonization by Han people and through the media and educational policy based on Chinese only (53). Last but not least, the Chinese government tries to hinder any possibility of contact between Tibetans and foreigners, not allowing Tibetans to learn English (97-102). These socio-political reasons combine with a sort of basic anti-Chinese bias shared by many in India. For example, Chinese are described as disgusting people, who eat any impure thing such as dogs, rats, or snakes (52-54); they are also greedy cheaters, selling fake copies of things that pilgrims and/or tourists require (154). In Gagan Gill's opinion, Chinese arrogance and greed are reflected also in the control exercised on the pilgrimage tours, as if to deliberately make travelling conditions worse for Indian pilgrims. Indians citizens travelling on the Nepali route, in fact, are allowed to cross the border only through Nepal on both ways, and this forces them to a long detour which runs parallel to the Indian border. Moreover, at the time the text was being written, the Chinese government had announced the intention to apply a 200 Yuan fee – about 25 USD – for the Kailash pilgrimage tour, with the risk of making an already difficult journey to an inaccessible area an unachievable goal, definitely unattainable for poor religious people (218). Some Tibetans, too, do cheat and profit from the tourists, but in the text this is somehow excused as a necessary reaction to poverty and to the dire conditions of the country (46-50; 68; 167). The present situation of Tibet is clearly stated as disgraceful, as well exemplified in the passage describing the meeting with a Tibetan child working as a porter at the border between Nepal and China, who claims a Hindu identity:

> - Madam, his name is Viṣṇu – he says, and off he is.
> The kid is staring at me, trying to find out whether I'm persuaded.
> - Hey, do you know who is Viṣṇu?
> - Bībījī, I am Viṣṇu.

[12] Robert Barnett, ed., *Resistance and reform in Tibet*, London 1994.

> - Viṣṇu is god.
>
> Now he is even more worried.
>
> - But I am Viṣṇu!
>
> - Didn't your mom tell you that Viṣṇu is god?
>
> He shakes his head.
>
> - I told you, you are neither Hindu nor Nepalese!
>
> Back to the point.
>
> He stands in front of me. The older boy who just told me his name passes by and he asks him something. Both are carrying their loads.
>
> - Don't worry, Viṣṇu! You are not god! And he pats his shoulders...
>
> I came forward and I can hear their conversation. The boy proceeds. Viṣṇu is still worried. Who is he?
>
> His friends wave at him while coming and going, but he doesn't even turn. He is lost. What a misfortune in his short life!
>
> - Viṣṇu, tell me, who are you?
>
> I ask him from a distance, as I'm queuing for passport control. He knows that my laughter is full of pain.
>
> One way or another we have reached the jeep. The kid is still. I give him the money we had agreed upon.
>
> - Sometimes it happens like this, Viṣṇu – I tell him caressing his hair – we do not know who we are... Why are you worried? You are god!
>
> - My foot, I am god!
>
> On saying that he bursts
>
> - If I were god, would I stay here?
>
> My, oh my! In such a short time he meditated so thoroughly on his sad condition!
>
> How does he know that maybe even the god bearing his name thought exactly this in each *avatār*! (48-50)

Young Tibetan Viṣṇu's statement sounds very grim, as it stays in strong contrast to the traditional claim that this actually *is* the abode of gods!

Notwithstanding this desolating picture, hope is not lost. The argument proposed in order to show the resistance of Tibetan people recalls a typical trope of Indian nationalists of yore: even if Chinese rule in a political, economic, and social sense, Tibetans maintain a moral and spiritual supremacy (81; 102) that will allow them to overcome the present disgraceful state (138). In brief, Tibetan culture is essentialized as religious and it is contraposed to the materialistic communist culture of China. In fact, Chinese people are depicted as totally uninterested in understanding the intellectual, spiritual, or artistic value of the Tibetan heritage, but they are willing to restore the monasteries they had destroyed at Mao's orders just because they meet the pressure of the global public opinion and of the tourism industry (94). Tibetans, on their side, resist violence because of their inner strength, due to their traditional culture and belief. Therefore Gagan Gill claims that the real rulers of the country are not the oppressors, who enjoy no popular consensus, but those who, even while in exile, have conquered the people's hearts and minds (102). With the passing of time a sort of historical revenge, or divine justice, has taken place: the Chinese government introduced the Yuen as the only accepted currency in Tibet, and nowadays in all *gompā*s thousands of Mao – the image that is printed on the one Yuen note having become the common name for the note itself – are found at the very feet of sacred images of Buddha or other saints, as if frozen in a perennial gesture of piety (115).

For Tibetans in exile the prohibition to go back to their ancestral home is painful, but even more sorrowful is the awareness that nobody will perform the *korā* for them: this is the most important pilgrimage route for Tibetans, who leave an item of clothing – or hair, teeth or blood – to entrust to Tārā's grace the loved one/s who owned such objects. Yet, Tibetans in exile find it very hard to have somebody perform this rite for them. Gagan Gill acts as a broker between exiled and resident Tibetans: even if she does not speak the language, she succeeds in communicating in broken English and through bodily gestures. She is performing the *korā* for her friend Sāmdoṃg Rinpoche, prime minister of the exiled leadership: she will leave a fragment of his nail at Ḍolmā-lā, the mountain pass with altitude of 5,630 m. termed after goddess Tārā (Tibetan: Dolma), the 'mother of liberation' (30). Moreover, she once had a close encounter with the Dalai Lama, who even gave her a *khatā*, the votive scarf used by Tibetans. These facts, that she reveals to her driver, make her reliable to Tibetans who start talking overtly to her about the difficult relations with Chinese oppressors, and about their dream of independence. They envy Tibetans who migrated to India, as they feel like prisoners at home, especially since the Nepali government has started a policy of collaboration with the Chinese (97-102).

While there is a tendency to think of sacred spaces in terms of sites and locations, it is important to focus also on religious routes. For the pilgrim the experiences obtained along the way are at least as important as the destinations themselves. In *Avāk* only a very limited number of pilgrims –one third of the original group – succeed in completing the circumambulation of Kailash and, indeed, the route can be experienced without necessarily ever arriving at its objective. For some people this is due to a specific religious affiliation, prescribing only a partial and incomplete circuit: for example, *vaiṣṇava*s go back after getting the *darśan* of one face of Kailash and of Mansarovar, without performing the full journey (106). Other people succumb to physical stress or must take care of others who get sick; this is the case exemplified by one character, the *svāmī mahārāj* from Cennaī, who has too much faith in his spiritual strength and neglects to take medicines for his diabetes, thus falling seriously sick and eventually forcing the whole group of his followers to go back with him without completing the *parikramā* (103-106). Other people suddenly realize they cannot make it to the end, and decide to return after completing sixty percent of the route. This happens to some characters from Bangalore, belonging to the glamorous world of cinema. They are Mr. Rājendra Siṃh Bābū, a movie director who is supposedly interested in shooting a family movie about the journey to Kailash-Mansarovar; Mohan, a film producer, and Komal, an actor. They had spent more than 30,000 Rs. for the technical equipment, and had trained along the way wearing thick trousers, waterproof jackets, oxygen masks, dark glasses, etcetera. "They looked like being bound for a space flight, rather than for a journey to Kailash", is the sarcastic comment of the writer (84). They are supposedly the best equipped and fit persons in the whole group; nevertheless, they leave unexpectedly, claiming that this is due to a prior work commitment, which in any case had never been mentioned, not even to their female travel mate, the actress Rūpā (84), a pivotal character to which I will return in the next section. This emphasizes that mere physical training is not enough in order to successfully complete the journey to Kailash. In Gagan Gill's words: "This journey is not only a challenge to come out alive at an altitude ranging from 15,000 to 18,500 feet, but it also forces to survive the encounter with the dreadful inner world that is within human beings. The psychological effort required by this journey is

not less than the extreme physical exertion. Before overcoming this journey one has to be fully ready to bear pressure from any side” (217).

Graham and Murray have shown that official and nonofficial appropriations of the pilgrimage route – not merely the site – is an important aspect of the socio-political setting of the region.[13] The route to Kailash has been appropriated by governments of the regions through which it passes: they image, market, and, hence, commodify it. Nowadays the dominant religious meaning as a pilgrimage destination is modified, so that a place of prayer becomes a heritage attraction, a ritual becomes a special event of tourism, harsh pilgrim routes for penance and self-renewal become off-road adventure trails, and so forth. In the modern age, consumerist attitudes have affected not only travellers who come from richer countries, but also the residents of the regions. This, of course, can hinder the poetics of the sacred place, emphasizing a sense of a modern loss of or nostalgia for the sacred. In *Avāk* this is exemplified by the relationship between pilgrims and markets. The writer herself seems almost unaware of her own consumerist attitude, and she buys a lot of things on the route, even if eventually she finds out that most of them are useless; for example, on her way to Kailash she purchases what she thinks is a good equipment, often following a cunning shopper’s advice, only to discover later that what she bought is absolutely unusable, eventually regretting her incapacity to focus on the inner aspect of the experience rather than on trivial external needs (41-42; 68; 141-142). Yet, devotion itself implies consumerism, insofar pilgrims must put together all the necessary items to perform their rites: Buddhists collect sacred items like prayer flags, while Hindus buy wood and other things required for *pūjā* celebration on Kailash, where no trees can be found. They are shown as stressed by the eagerness to amass the required goods as the journey proceeds and items become rarer and more expensive. Goods are available both legally and illegally: for example, there is a black market for pills against high mountain sickness (43), and other items requested by foreigners, like energy drinks, are counterfeited and sold off to unaware tourists and pilgrims (154).

Another aspect that is often emphasized in the text is the gap between the purity of the region in spiritual terms, and the filthiness of the environment (79; 82; 115-116). This is, once again, partly due to the Chinese dominion fostering not only social, but also environmental degradation (115). The water of Mansarovar is filthy and this leads Gagan Gill to muse about the meaning of purity in our present time: “Frustration – shall I state that this is the frustration of my civilization? What is not worth drinking is worth worshipping” (115). She also records the process of desertification of the area, hinting at the possibility that the lake will disappear soon, due to climate change and human misuse of hydric resources. The challenges to the environment in the Himalayan area are serious, as the Himalayas are a fragile geo-ecologic system;[14] in Shalini Singh’s words, “the Himalayas represent an oxymora of sorts, viz. massive and fragile, beautiful and unsightly, dangerous and endangered, scarred and sacrileged, challenging yet inspiring, threatening and threatened”.[15] In *Avāk* we get a glimpse of what could be considered a theological manifestation of contemporary tourism through

[13] B. Graham and M. Murray, “The spiritual and the profane: the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela”, in *Ecumene* 1997.

[14] Vikās Giri, *Sumerū parvat: Kailās Mānsarovar yātrā*, Uttar Pradeś 1999; Bikash Giri, *Sumeru parvat: 12 years of Kailash Mansarover pilgrimage and transformation*, Uttar Pradesh 2000; Shalini Singh, ‘Secular pilgrimages and sacred tourism in the Indian Himalayas’ in *GeoJournal* 2005.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 221.

the notion of geopiety.[16] In fact, even if most pilgrims are motivated by a religious belief, nowadays it is not uncommon for people to visit sacred places without being part of any institutionalized religion. Gagan Gill, for example, describes herself as such, and both her travel partners – Nirmal's niece Rūbī, and her husband Paṃkul – are initially introduced as secular young people only interested in trekking and in feeling the power of the earth. In places like Kailash Mansarovar anything has a divine or a spiritual power for a religious person, but even a secular gaze can perceive the life of the earth. As Erik Cohen has shown, nowadays there is a sort of spirituality also in tourism, that relates to broader religious goals and aspirations: the objective of spirituality is fulfilled, for example, through the affirmation of the "environmental pilgrim" conviction in the science and sensibility of indigenous mores, religious practices and beliefs.[17]

4. The poetics of a sacred place

The subtle interplay between secular attitudes and religious experiences, between socio-political issues and inner research, is significantly a sign of the dedifferentiation between the secular-sacred boundary as the secular becomes "less obviously secular"[18] and some social movements have religious undertones: ecological movements, for example, take certain moral positions about what is good or bad and just or unjust and, while being explicitly secular movements, also approximate – to use the expression coined by Bartkowski and Swearingen – an "implicit religion".[19] Following Paul Heelas, differentiation and dedifferentiation can be understood as processes taking place within both modernity and postmodernity.[20] While modernity is characterized by a separation between religion and politics (the idea of secular state), between science and religious life, there is also an internal differentiation, as contrasts develop between traditional, authoritative religions and liberal teachings with a strong dose of humanism. Modernity, though, has also witnessed tendencies in favor of dedifferentiation, with a search for the unifying or the unitary, as well as for the transcendental. With modernity comes the acknowledgement that all people are the same and all cultural and other differences are somewhat unimportant, privileging the construction of 'humanity'. Gagan Gill often refers to the Dalai Lama's 'loving kindness' spirituality: his humanistic, highly egalitarian "*basic spirituality*" includes "the basic human qualities of goodness, kindness, compassion, caring"; his subjectivized rendering of the ethic of humanity is clear when he says that "as long as we are human beings, as long as we are members of the human family, *all* of us really need these basic human values. Without these, human existence remains very hard, very dry. As a result, none of us can be a happy person, our whole family will suffer, society will be more troubled. So, it becomes clear that cultivating these kinds of basic spiritual values becomes crucial"[21]. The ways in which people experience, understand and value themselves, people who live around them, and humanity in

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[16] Shalini Singh, "Tourism in the sacred Indian Himalayas: An incipient theology of tourism?", in *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research* 2006.

[17] Erik Cohen, "A phenomenology of tourist experiences" in *Sociology* 1979 .

[18] Paul Heelas, *Introduction: on differentiation and dedifferentiation*, in P. Heelas, editor, with the assistance of D. Martin, and P. Morris, *Religion, modernity and postmodernity*, Oxford and Malden, MA 1998, p. 3.

[19] J. P. Bartkowski, and W.S. Swearingen, "God meets Gaia in Austin, Texas: a case study of environmentalism as implicit religion" in *Review of Religious Research* 1997.

[20] Paul Heelas, *Introduction*, p. 5.

[21] Tenzin Gyatso, 14th Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler, *The Art of Happiness: A handbook for living*, Riverhead 1998, p. 258 (emphasis in the original).

general, has huge significance for how they act in the world; to have new experiences, to acquire new understandings, to change values during the ritual process –exemplified by *rites de passage*– has profound significance for life.

The tendency to combine symbols from (previously) disparate codes or frameworks of meaning could be interpreted as postmodern. Gagan Gill's attitude, though, both in differentiation and dedifferentiation, seems definitely modern rather than postmodern. In fact, while postmodern dedifferentiation is associated with the deregulation and disorganization of traditions, where fragments merge with a plethora of other cultural phenomena and create a series of complex and often ephemeral hybrids, modern dedifferentiation is associated with the construction of the whole, the unitary. As for differentiation, postmodern differentiation encourages micro-discourses, that by default are of equal standing; modern differentiation, on the contrary, constructs essential differences and hierarchies of value and discrimination. Of course, categories such as 'modern' and 'postmodern' are drawn by Western critique and some may frown at this, as the text is by a South Asian writer and is set in a South Asian context. But Gagan Gill's culture is definitely cosmopolitan, being composed by her South Asian ancestor's tales and scripts, or by her husband's writings, as well as by French, American or Mexican literature: the *Mahābhārata*, the *purāṇa*s, and Akkā Mahādevī's *vacana*s have gone to Kailash in the writer's mind together with verses by Charles Baudelaire, W.H. Auden, Roberto Juarrez, Philippe Jaccottet, just to mention some of the writers and works cited in the text. Gagan Gill does not hesitate to quote freely from sacred texts pertaining to the Hindu, Buddhist, Christian tradition; she refers to myths and rites belonging to different religious fields, and also cites literary references with no particular religious connection; but, instead of adhering to relativism and pragmatism, she claims that individualized, deregulated religion must bow before 'real experience', which is described as a universal experience, in a way that reminds us of the Turnerian paradigm, according to which, pilgrimage had certain similarities with the notion of the rite of passage.[22] Victor and Edith Turner's hypothesis that pilgrimage is a discrete phenomenon, which stands beyond – indeed involves an abrogation of – secular social structures, has increasingly proved insufficient to describe the often troubled, competitive relations among visitors to sacred sites. Nevertheless, their work emphasizes how pilgrimage encourages people to move (literally and metaphorically) from their normal, everyday lives and to enter, however temporarily, different social and spiritual worlds. That the journey to Kailash Mansarovar brings about a radical change in those who perform it is clearly stated in *Avāk*, as all the protagonists note that after returning home everything looks alien, as if they do not belong any longer to their common everyday world: the individual undergoing such a unique experience, as in a rite of passage, returns renewed, even transformed, even if this does not solve the problem of sorrow in human life, as stated in the closing passage of the book.

> - I don't know, since we came back everything seems alien, as if it were not ours… as if we did not belong to it…
>
> Says Rūbī
>
> This has been happening to me too for some days.
>
> I sit quietly and suddenly another woman comes out of me and sits on the chair in front of me….
>
> For some reason she cries a lot… this has been going on for quite a few days…
>
> A woman with my face… When I am alone she comes….

[22] Victor Turner, and Edith Turner, Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture : anthropological perspectives. Oxford 1978.

Who is she?
That's not me, for sure. I am here, sitting absolutely quiet, under a fleeting shade...
Who is that one, then?
Why do we sometimes ignore who we are?
Why are we in the place where we are?
Why are we in the place where we do not find ourselves?
They say that Himalaya casts a spell
Yet humans cannot stay in any other place, they go there even to die.
Could it be that I took back a spell?
Who knows whose sorrow was that! [206]

These poetics of a religious place may be shaped by political relations, and while there may exist a simultaneous politics and poetics of religious places and experience, only the latter is real and immanent for the individual religious adherent. The 'poetics', the 'substantial', the 'essential character' of religious place, assumed to be a sacred place, has long drawn attention from scholars of religion.[23] In *Avāk*, Kailash is described as a sacred place where the divinities dwell, demarcated within and limited to a particular physical and geographical area. It is also a place where the divines reveal themselves to human beings. This is why, according to Gagan Gill, all non-believers should go there, so that they can receive their spiritual initiation (140-141). On the other hand, a sacred place like Kailash-Mansarovar is also a site where the divine tries to conceal from human beings: gods built their abodes in such a remote and inhospitable place precisely to get a safe place and some privacy (175). By maintaining boundaries the sanctity of sacred place is preserved and in this case the natural unfriendliness of the environment enforces a politics of exclusion, helping in selecting the chosen ones and excluding the unworthy ones. Devotion, in fact, urges many human beings to come all the way to these dangerous places in order to find the gods, but only a very limited number can reach their goal. These are the ones who actually renounce everything, get rid of all their rational or religious armors, and enter the absolute mystic silence in perfect solitude: they are the real devotees, even if they may not fit into any institutional religion (200).

Sacredness, therefore, is intimately linked to states of consciousness: it is possible to go now and again to a sacred place without recognizing it as sacred. In *Avāk* there are many instances of the writer not immediately being aware of the sacredness of places or persons. This happens, for example, in the episode in which the character Gagan Gill, exhausted from the day trek, reaches a *gompā* where a monk silently invites her inside. Feeling that she has already prayed a lot in the morning, she does not get in: for a while she stands outside listening to the prayers, then she salutes and goes back. Later on she finds out that that was the *gompā* where *guru* Padmasaṃbhava had spent his last seven years, and that it contains a godly man's *mūrti* identified either with Padmasambhava or guru Nānak (131). When one does recognize sacredness, however, the encounter with the divine grips or stirs the human mind powerfully, it produces feeling and responses that are not ordinary ones intensified, but rather are *sui generis*. In the text this is described in terms that call to the mind the

[23] Suffice to mention Mircea Eliade's work, contending that the sacred irrupts in certain places as revelations (hierophanies), causing them to become 'powerful centers of meaningful worlds', set apart from ordinary, homogeneous space (*Le sacré et le profane*, Paris 1965); B.C. Lane, on the contrary, characterizes the sacred as that which chooses, rather than that which is chosen (*Landscapes of the sacred: geography and narrative in American spirituality*, New York 1988).

notion of 'numinous'.[24] While treading on the sacred path of the *korā* Gagan Gill experiences various feelings, expresses numinous dread and awe-fullness (the *mysterium tremendum*), a mental state of stupor, shuddering, creature-consciousness and the simultaneous experiencing of the self as nothing, sense of unworthiness and need for 'covering' (121-131), such as in the following passages:

> Then, in that instant of dreadful pain I went away in prayer, just like, in Delhi, I had gone away when the physiotherapist was twisting me… … Mahādevjī, I am your child, I came from far away, make my journey happy, Mahādevjī… (125)
>
> This is not good. This is not good. I am walking in mist. Is it mist or smoke? What fills my brain? The whole journey is destroyed… (183)
>
> I will not make it to Ḍolmā-lā. All the things I carried will come back with me. Tārā, Mother… I don't know when I invoked her. Not Mahādev, not Umā. Tārā. I have not even a prayer left, Mother. Save me, Mom! My eyes are erring in darkness. Is this the end? I stand bending on the stick, in the middle of the mountains. (139)

Another instance of the fact that the sacred is recognized through a particular state of consciousness is introduced through the character of Rūpā, a young glamorous actress from Bangalore who turns out to be a very devout and profound knower of the *śāstra*s, a downright *purohit* – the person that in the traditional Hindu religious context is authorized to carry out rituals for the family and the community (72). She is portrayed as an earthly manifestation of the divine: the writer has been guessing this all along the way, but she recognizes it, in a flash, only during a "wonderful, supernatural *pūjā*" performed by Rūpā at Mansarovar. Gagan Gill reaches the rite place after a tormented night, when she suffered from a sudden and violent abdominal pain that forced her outdoors in order to reach the toilet. If the sacred place is a ritual place, a location for "formalized, repeatable symbolic performances",[25] also the human body plays a crucial role in the ritual production of sacred place: not only ritual action "manipulates basic spatial distinctions between up and down, right and left, inside and outside, and so on, that necessarily revolve around the axis of the living body",[26] but the body itself is a micro-cosmos, an instrument for attaining awareness, as in the practice of yoga. In the narration it is a bodily need that allows the writer to get a *darśan* of stars dipping into the lake, an epiphany of gods and goddess taking an ablution in Mansarovar. Swaying in physical pain, astonishment and awe, she invokes Śiv Mahādev and surrenders to him, thus undergoing a sort of rebirth, which is symbolized by the reiterated feeling of death and by the numerous analogies to labour pains and the process of giving birth. When in the morning she finally gets to the place where Rūpā is celebrating a *pūjā*, she is still shaken and confused by the night experience, but it is indeed thanks to this very particular state of consciousness that she is finally able to recognize Rūpā's divine nature, as a manifestation of the goddess, Gāyatrī (126).

The fact that the pilgrimage is performed in a land torn by political troubles, and in a landscape that, at least in part, has been transformed from originally bucolic mountain villages into unplanned inhabited centers, somehow hinders the poetics. The text often emphasizes the gap between the inner world where a spiritual quest is in progress and an outer reality of prosaic matter-of-factness. This is stylistically carried out, for example, through the use of anticlimax, as in the passage when

[24] Rudolf Otto, Das Heilige über irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen. München 1947.

[25] David Chidester, and Edward Tabor Linenthal, eds., *American sacred space*, Bloomington, IN 1995, quoted by Lily Kong, "Mapping 'new' geographies of religion: politics and poetics in modernity", in *Progress in Human Geography* 2001, p. 220.

[26] *Ibidem*.

Gagan Gill reaches Zutul puk – 'the miracle cave', where Milarepa's footprint and handprint can still be seen – on her way back from Kailash. While performing the circumambulation of Kailash pilgrims undergo a symbolic death, and the journey is an experience of bodily and psychic suffering, even implying a risk of actual death. In *Avāk* this is experienced by the writer who faces the pilgrimage without any prior physical training and with a psychic burden represented by the necessity to celebrate the final rite for her deceased husband. In the mentioned passage she has just performed the ultimate parting from Nirmal, leaving his shirt at Ḍolmā-lā so that Tārā, the goddess, can protect him (172). As a result she feels at the same time elated ("Well, the *parikramā* is complete... the worst is over... How many people do succeed? I have seen god and I'm going back...": 182) and devastated, totally emptied ("Hey, what's going on? Am I chanting the name of death instead of the name of god? *I have come here to die... I have come here to die...* [...] What comes out of my lips is beyond my control... *I have come here to die... I have come here to die...*": 182; I don't feel like anything... god is nowhere... justice is nowhere...: 185). There is a long passage dramatically constructing a metaphysic and philosophical world, where Gagan Gill is completely lost in her musings. This is suddenly broken by an unexpected hard landing into the trivial reality of bodily life, produced by her friend's voice:

> Oh my Lord, I want to die! You did not accept me...[...]
> I want to sleep now. I want to die.
> Will I ever be able to forget what happened today? [...]
> Where shall I go? I'm escaping myself, where can I go?
> - *Will you go to the toilet?*" (185).

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have given a reading of Gagan Gill's literary account of her journey to Kailash –*Avāk*: *Kailāś-Mānsarovar ek antaryātrā*– as a text discussing what happens to sacredness, and religious and sacred space in modernity. There is a constant intertwining of the sacred and the profane aspect of the journey, which is a pilgrimage but also a reflection on identity and on some geopolitical issues of the Himalayan areas. It is also a personal account of an experience of loss and grief, and a reflection about whether a journey can ever be a cure, yet this issue awaits further investigation, as I focused here on the politics and poetics of the sacred route to Himalaya and of the sacred place of Kailash-Mansarovar. *Avāk* addresses the issue of changes that modernity introduced in the traditional pilgrimage route, emphasizing the present geopolitical situation of Tibet from the point of view of an Indian supporter of the Free Tibet movement. I have used van der Leeuw's paradigm, recognizing four politics of sacred space. In the text the politics of position and property of sacred space is dealt with discussing the international relationships between China, Nepal, India, and the issue of the Tibetan population both within Tibet and abroad. Politics of exclusion and exile are dealt with through a reflection on the composite identity of the modern individual, for whom the secular-sacred boundary is constantly redefined by a process of differentiation and dedifferentiation. For Gagan Gill the poetics of a religious place may be shaped by political relations, but while there may exist a simultaneous politics and poetics of religious places and experience, only the latter is real and immanent for the individual. The experience of the sacred is intimately linked to states of consciousness and only in the inner world an authentic experience is possible. Gagan Gill's positioning is a complex one, revealing the inadequacy of a binary categorization opposing East and

West. Her intellectual and spiritual experience reflects a rich cosmopolitanism and her treatment of Asian geopolitical issues shows that a Eurocentric point of view is inadequate to understand the present world.

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