

Representation of Forests in *Pragya Nepali Aadhunik Katha*: A Critical Inquiry

Anupama Poudel

Abstract

The portrayal of forests in literature has long captivated readers, evoking a spectrum of emotions including fear, mystery, and freedom, among others. This paper delves into the portrayal of forests in literature, particularly focusing on the narratives collected by the three volumes of Nepal Academy in *Pragya Nepali Aadhunik Katha*. Considering the adverse impact of climate change on forests, this paper argues that literature plays a crucial role in shaping societal perspectives and behaviors to combat climate crises. It argues for the inclusion of environmental themes, particularly forests, in literary works, advocating for their potential to inspire action and cultivate a sense of community engagement. The representation of forests in literature published by organizations such as Nepal Academy, a government body, could prove crucial in instigating behavioral changes among people and promoting sustainable choices that aid in combating the climate crisis. By analyzing the selected stories from the three volumes of *Pragya Aadhunik Nepali Katha*, this research explores the extent of agency given to forests as integral components of stories. The analysis will be contextualized within Michaels' idea of "monoculture," and other relevant discussions surrounding the climate crisis. The findings aim to highlight the importance of incorporating forests into literary narratives, encouraging an understanding of their significance among readers and policymakers alike.

Keywords

Forest, stories, climate crisis, environmentalism, anthropocene, *Pragya Aadhunik Nepali Katha*

Stories or narratives are a crucial part of human history. Before the advent of written language, stories in the form of myths were passed down from one generation to the next as songs and folklore. The notion that stories have the power to alter behavior is well-established (Grant and Forrest 283). The history of dominating ideas has largely shaped how we think and behave (Michaels 6). The stories shaping our lives aren't solitary; they're influenced by broader cultural tales covering politics, religion, money, art, thoughts, and relationships. Often unnoticed, these stories quietly shape our beliefs, and when one becomes dominant, it becomes monoculture and reshapes the other cultural stories, altering our entire perspective (11). These beliefs aren't inherently right or wrong; they're just one perspective. But in a society focused solely on this perspective, it becomes our only reality. We forget our other stories and don't question this dominant view. We accept it because it's familiar and live within it daily. It often shapes our lives without us even realizing it (11). In the early 21st century, the dominant story is economics. Economic beliefs shape our thoughts, feelings, and actions. The singular focus on economic narrative is so powerful that it dominates our understanding of the world. This economic narrative favors the interest of the wealthy and large corporations over narratives centered on environmental health and sustainability (Grant and Forrest 284). This has led to an inability to tackle pressing issues like the climate crisis, causing various negative consequences.

Literary work is a reflection of a reality that can represent things that exist or occur around them, including describing the ecological crisis (Rahmayati et al. 2). Literature can be a potent tool for depicting and exploring the complexities of environmental issues. By weaving ecological themes into the narratives, stories shed light on the

states of the planet, addressing issues like deforestation, climate change, and loss of biodiversity. The forest is one of the major elements affected by climate change. Forest has, for centuries, been viewed as a source of fear and mystery in literature because of its representation in popular folklore and fairy tales as a place of imagination, danger, wildness, and freedom, among others. I argue that stories play a crucial role in bringing people together to combat the devastating impacts of climate change by fostering behavioral change in individuals and cultivating a sense of shared responsibility. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the portrayal of forests in the tales collected by the Nepal Academy in *Pragya Nepali Aadhunik Katha*.¹ I will scrutinize a selected few stories that depict forests, analyze their representation, and compare them to those with the potential for forest inclusion but with poor execution, as well as those that entirely exclude forests or trees.

Research has shown that climate change, which leads to changes in temperature and precipitation patterns as well as increased occurrences of natural disasters, has a significant impact on global biodiversity (JC et al. 182; Corlett and Lafrankie, Jr. 299). Moreover, such changes have altered the geographical distribution of species in many parts of the world, along with affecting the structure and function of the forest ecosystem. Climate change can lead to changes in the distribution of species, the makeup of forests, and the timing of flowering and fruiting (JC et al. 182). Additionally, alteration in plant distribution can have cascading effects on ecological relationships such as competition for resources and predator-prey relationships, in addition to its implications on human societies, as human culture and tradition are closely related to the biological species that form their local ecosystem.

South Asia is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change because of factors such as rapid population growth, environmental degradation, widespread poverty, and food insecurity (Sivakumar and Stefanski 13). As mentioned by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) in 2019, increased flooding (46), water scarcity (46, 58), and food insecurity (43) are some of the major concerns for South Asia.

Despite the interconnectedness of climatic change to the ecosystem as well as the livelihood of the people, the discussions related to its impact are confined to some academic studies and non-fiction and are vastly absent from literary texts, particularly stories. Amitav Ghosh, in his book *The Great Derangement*, calls this paucity of voices concerning climate change in certain literary forms “an aspect of broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis” (10). As human activities have altered the earth’s geophysical processes, the Anthropocene has raised challenges to arts, humanities, our practical knowledge, and contemporary culture. Thus, according to Ghosh, “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (12), because the way we think about and represent the climate crisis in literature, art, and media is inadequate, as they too often fail to capture the true scope of the problem and the urgency of the situation. Nonetheless, stories have a vital role in helping people understand the complex and abstract concept of climate change, inspiring them to take action, and fostering a sense of community and connection around the issue.

¹ *Pragya Nepali Aadhunik Katha* is a three-volume book published by Pragya Pratisthan that collects the representative stories of Nepali literature.

Our perceptions and experiences are shaped by stories, which in turn affect how we see environmental issues. Narratives that include scientific data and social constructions impact how we interpret environmental concerns, notably climate change. The narrative used to explain climate change is crucial, and how well or poorly it aligns with governmental action can affect how the public views the issue and how policy is implemented (McGuire and Lynch 219). The narratives describing climate change are salient in modeling the behaviors of people toward climate issues. According to Lejano et al., climate change may not be as prominent as it ought to be because it is not a part of people's narratives (64). Thus, to aware people of its grandiosity and its marked impact on the lives of people, we must bring the issues of climate change into personal narratives and stories.

In contemporary times, when the issue of climate change is increasingly prominent, the representation of forests in literature assumes a new significance. Through their depictions of forests and the relationship between humans and nature, authors can raise awareness of environmental issues, promote sustainable practices, and encourage readers to think critically about the impacts of human activities on the environment. By completing the integration process and including the climatic factor in their longer autobiographical narratives, the public becomes more aware of climate change and may be more likely to take action to combat it.

Emphasizing the significance of portraying forests in literature, *Pragya Nepali Aadhunik Katha* published by Nepal Pragya-Pratisthan has the potential to include more stories that represent and address forests. In today's world where the master narrative is economic, human relationships are transactional (Michaels 99), including our relationship with the environment. Michaels claims that "The economic story tells us we ought to save nature because it pays to save it" (38). However, disregarding the intrinsic value of nature beyond its economic benefits leads to the degradation of ecosystems. Moreover, continued exploitation without considering the broader implications can lead to irreversible damage, affecting not only the environment but also human societies that rely on these ecosystems for survival. As language structures our thoughts and our thoughts structure our behavior, the monoculture begins to change the decisions we make and how we live (84). By providing an alternative viewpoint, stories can help shift the perspective from this dominant view of economic monoculture to that of environmental sustainability. The stories presented in publications from government bodies like the Nepal Academy can serve as a credible source to emphasize narratives centered around the environment. These publications often carry significant weight and authority, making them influential platforms to promote stories that highlight the importance of environmental conservation, sustainability, and our relationship with nature. Government-backed publications possess a level of credibility and legitimacy that can help underscore the significance of environmental issues within society. By featuring narratives that prioritize the environment, these publications can effectively contribute to raising awareness, educating the public, and shaping cultural attitudes toward valuing and preserving the natural world. In the next section, I analyze some of the stories presented in the three volumes of *Pragya Aadhunik Nepali Katha*.

Pragya Aadhunik Nepali Katha is a series of story collections published by Nepal Academy. For this paper, I have analyzed three volumes of the book, which contain 94 stories in total. The first two volumes were published in 2013 and were edited by Sanat Regmi and Bhaupanthi, whereas the third volume, published in 2015,

was edited by Ishmali and Laxman Prasad Gautam. “Durbhagyako Ruwai,²” written by Banmali Nirakaar illustrates a *Sami*³ tree as a character in the story. Initially, the tree invokes a sense of fear and suspicion in Suntali, the protagonist of the story who had left the village to take part in the Maoist “revolution”. Then she fondly recalls her childhood, when she used to climb the giant tree and play. The tree was cherished by everyone in the village, providing shade in summer and shelter during the monsoon. It served as a sanctuary for rest after a long day of labor and was a favored spot for children to play hide and seek among its thick branches. Later Suntali has a conversation with the tree where they discuss an event related to Maoist insurgency and the consequences of the “revolution.” The old tree is personified in the story, exhibiting empathy towards Suntali. This represents the embeddedness of human beings with trees. In a time when women were expected to remain silent and without opinions, they found solace in expressing themselves in the presence of nature and the wilderness. Trees and the surrounding wilderness were their companions, as their daily lives were intertwined with their interactions with the natural world. The connection women had with nature was special, as it allowed them to break free from the restrictions imposed on them and freely express themselves. This representation challenges the dominant narrative by portraying nature, specifically trees, as integral parts of human existence. It elevates the importance of nature as not just a resource but as a companion and ally, capable of providing emotional support and empowerment. In doing so, the story contributes to reshaping the narrative by underscoring the need to value and respect nature beyond its economic or utilitarian aspects.

The story “Pipako Hawaldar” by Matrikaprasad Koirala mentions the different *Sal* forests in Nepal: *Barandabhar* in Chitwan, *Aatharanale Nayamulukko Laalhira* jungle of Morang, *Ratanpur nigari* of Bara and Parsa, and *Rambhauri Bhataa*. The relationship between wild animals such as elephants, rhinos, bears, etc. with humans is depicted in the story, along with the dependence of humans on forests for firewood and other forest products like fruits. In addition, Hawaldar talks about the hunting of different animals and birds like rhinos, tigers, spotted deer, *Luiche*, *Kalij*, etc. executed by the king. Moreover, the trees of different spices, *Bilayati sallo*, and *Peepal* are represented as the pride of Nepal. The writer’s understanding of the relationship between wildlife and human beings can be inferred from the story. It shows that the outlook towards animals and trees is based on ‘instrumental rationality⁴’ and is viewed as separate entities with ‘exchange value⁵’ in material gain rather than

² Original titles of the stories are mentioned in Romanized English transcript.

³ Nepali words from the stories are Romanized in English transcript and are italicized.

⁴ Heidegger critiques the “instrumental reasoning” approach, where things are viewed only as tools for serving specific interests, rather than being appreciated for their own inherent qualities.

human sojourners. The fact that animals share the planet on equal footing with humans, and both are subject to the same fate seems to be missing from the story. Furthermore, treating trees as symbols of national pride is merely a form of ‘instrumental reasoning’, where they are viewed as serving human needs, even when serving abstract concepts like national identity. Such texts also shed light on the more nuanced aspects of historical times, particularly the later stages of the Rana regime, where hunting animals was considered a royal pastime and a form of entertainment, with certain trees used to glorify the idea of national identity rather than a scientific inquiry into nature or a poetic appreciation of its aesthetic qualities.

While the story “Durbhagyako Ruwai” focuses on the deep connection between the individual and nature, “Pipako Hawaldar” highlights the utilitarian and instrumental perspective. Viewing nature solely through the utilitarian lens can lead to the exploitation of nature for immediate gains without considering long-term consequences, disconnection between humans and the environment, and often places human needs and desires above those of other species. This kind of story strengthens the economic narration.

In the story “Dhunga,” Dhurbachandra Gautam has shown the interrelationship between humans and nature. The story highlights the devastating impact of floods and landslides on a village and its residents. After a catastrophic flood wipes out her family and home, the main female character is forced to seek shelter under a large stone in the forest. To survive, she relies on foraging for roots, leaves, and fruits, as well as scavenging for dead fish and frogs along the river. The huge stone serves as both a physical and emotional refuge for the protagonist, protecting her from the outside world and her thoughts. During natural disasters, the threat to human life is real and intense. In such moments of peril, even inanimate objects like rocks can offer solace and become a source of safety. This is exemplified by the tale of "Dhunga," where the rock provides refuge and hope in the face of destruction. Although forests and trees are not a big part of the story, the story portrays the delicate relationship between humans and nature and the dependence of people on their environment. By emphasizing the connection between climate change and natural disasters, it aims to raise awareness about the importance of working together to reduce the impact of climate change.

The narrative of “Dhunga” aims to raise awareness about the urgent need for collective action against climate change. There’s an implicit call for a shift in behavior through this story. It evokes empathy towards nature and emphasizes the reliance of humans on nature. It calls to recognize the delicate balance between humans and the environment. The presence of such stories in government-curated books can act as a call for action toward environmentally sustainable behavior.

⁵ Marx believed that the capitalist mode of production involved the use of things not based on their inherent value, but rather as a means to exchange for other goods. He called this concept "exchange value."

However, the presence of forest in the stories given in these three books is somewhat limited to these stories. Though forests, trees, and bushes are occasionally mentioned, their function is limited to providing context for the setting, their significance is not emphasized, and they are mainly used to describe the background. In the story, “Paraalko Aago,” the lives of the characters are intertwined with nature and their rural environment. Despite this close relationship, the forest plays a minimal role in the narrative, only appearing twice. In one instance, “as Chame reached a *Chautara* just below his in-laws’ house and was about to wipe his sweat, Gauthali lay down the heap of forage for the animals and started singing... Chame exasperated- ‘At home, the buffalo is growling with hunger, here she is engaged in resonant singing across the forest’”⁶ (Regmi and Bhaupanthi 23). Later, “after a while, Gauthali completed her household chores, carried *dokonamlo* and was about to head towards the forest, Chame held her arm and said, ‘Where are you going with that *dokonamlo*? Come, let’s go home’” (Regmi and Bhaupanthi 24). The daily relationship of rural residents with the environment is depicted in this story. It could have further highlighted the deep connection between people and nature by showing how forests play a vital role in their livelihood. However, the writer misses the opportunity by merely using the forest as a backdrop, rather than exploring its significance. As mentioned by Bruno Latour, this is the result of the wider imaginary gap between nature and culture, with nature being seen as only belonging to the sciences and not being part of culture (Ghosh 92).

In the same manner, the forest is scantily present in the story “Swadhinatako Nimitta” by Krishnabam Malla. While nationalism takes center stage, the concerns surrounding the forest and environment are pushed to the sidelines. Even the limited references to the forest serve only to showcase Balbhadra's bravery concerning Nepal's nationalism. A few lines including trees and forests are: “As we were watching, Balbhadra brought woods from the forest and rocks from the hills to turn that section of the forest into a small fort” (Regmi and Bhaupanthi 14) “But their constable shouted, ‘Long live Giriraj Shree 5 Maharajdheeraj!’ That phrase not only reverberated across the forest and hills but also turned Matanghi’s heart very cheerful” (Regmi and Bhaupanthi 15) and “‘Look father, there is an enemy beside the huge tree over there.’ Then he heard the sound of a bullet, and shouted, ‘Fallen, he has fallen! But next... next! Another enemy’s head can be seen in the hole in front of the tree’” (Regmi and Bhaupanthi 17). This story shows the “Brave to Development” (222) narrative exercised by the Panchayat era to consolidate the idea of nationalism in the heart of Nepalese people as stressed by Pratyush Onta in his article *Ambivalence Denied*. As the popular slogan “*Hariyo Ban Nepal ko Dhan*” (“Green forests are Nepal's wealth”) champions the concept of forest nationalism in Nepal, celebrating the invaluable importance of forests, the selection of representative stories by the government could be enhanced by giving greater attention to narratives that advocate for and highlight the significance of forests.

Another subject matter dealt with by the stories collected in these three volumes is the socioeconomic conditions of contemporary Nepali society. The story “Paralko Aago” examines the dynamics between husband and wife in a rural setting. “Narmada ko Kukur” by Tirani Prasad Koirala sheds light on the exploitation of marginalized classes by the dominant, upper-class population, through the killing of a pet dog. Similarly, many such stories like

⁶ All quoted texts from the stories are translated by the author of this paper.

“Roopbazar” by Sanat Regmi, “Anamnagarko Basinda” by Bishwombhar Chanchal, “Sambandha” by Bijay Chalise, “Bachnu Pareko Chha” by Sankhar Lamichhane, “Jhola” by Krishna Dharabasi, etc. characterizes the social context of Nepalese society.

Many stories in the three volumes of *Pragya Nepali Adhunik Katha* are based on the political circumstances of the country. Khagendra Sangraula's “Ek Aagyat Majhdurko Diary” depicts a failed political movement led by the working class seeking change in socioeconomic and political conditions (Regmi and Bhaupanthi 39-43). “Khatira ra Katha” by Jainendra Jiwan portrays the political exploitation of citizens through the flattery of the powerful. The story shows a bureaucrat being forced to ingratiate himself with a member of the Rana family, even after the establishment of democracy. Likewise, the story “Sparsa” by Dr. Rishiram Baral speaks of the danger and threat looming in the villages during the Maoist revolution. Similarly, the stories “Chunab” by Gobindabahadur Malla ‘Gothale,’ “Sitaram Oli” by Narayan Dhakal, “Dharahara ko Sahar” by Pradip Nepal, “Tancha” by Bhaupanthi, “Aatmajwala” by Bhawani Ghimire, “Aabamulyan” by Madhuwan Poudel, and so on are based on the political subject matter. The stories emphasize people-state relationships and downplay people-nature relationships.

The stories included in these books are analogous to Fernand Braudel's⁷ concept of revelation of history as "different aspects of past societies, tiered like a wedding cake, each evolving within a different time frame." The base of the cake is geo-history evolving slowly, the middle layer is social and economic activity changing over decades, and at the top lies the rapidly changing political and other events (Maza 169-70). Moreover, Braudel suggests that “least important were events in the top layer,” “which he described as surface disturbances, crests of foam which the tides of history carry on their strong backs” (170). However, these representational stories show that Nepalese academia is dominated by political consciousness rather than environmental consciousness and even the stories collected by the government body prioritize the political themes over environmental narratives.

Thus, the issues related to climate change can be dealt with by the implementation of the concept of "longue duree," a form of "total history" that covers a wide range of time and data using interdisciplinary methods. In 2014, Guldi and Armitage wrote *The History Manifesto*, calling for historians to embrace the longue duree to better understand planetary history and the climate crisis (37). Studying long-term climate trends helps understand causes, context, and underlying forces contributing to the crisis for better decision-making. However, novels and

⁷ Fernand Braudel (24 August 1902 – 27 November 1985) was a prominent French historian of the Annales School of history active during 1950s-60s. The Annales school is a group of French historians from the 20th century who are known for their emphasis on long-term social history in their historiography.

stories often have discontinuities of both space and time. Settings are typically set in a specific period, usually limited to a few generations (Ghosh 79), making them insufficient to provide the historical context necessary to fully understand and address the issue of climate change.

One reason pointed out by Amitav Ghosh that makes the “interconnectedness of Gaia unthinkable” in modern times is the diminished “sublime” awe and terror once associated with nature's power. The practicality of running colonies and founding cities has resulted in disregarding nature's destructive forces. This approach to problem-solving involves dividing problems into smaller pieces, ignoring external factors, and seeking a solution. This method of thinking results in a lack of consideration for the interconnectedness of things (75). The absence of awe-inspiring elements in the narratives collected by Pragya Pratishan is evident, with a shortage of surprising twists, magical elements, and imaginative characters and settings in these stories. Most of the narratives collected by Pragya Pratishan are centered around a political setting. It can be related to monoculture in the sense that it represents a dominant theme that has the potential to alter people’s behavior. Human history has seen a “recognition that cultural stories, master narratives, and myths operate to influence human behavior. To build a sustainable society, an important first step is to make the existing overarching master narratives visible and apparent so that they can be deliberately compared to sustainable alternatives” (Grant and Forrest 296). Selecting nature-related stories can serve as a potent alternative narrative, facilitating the shift toward environmental sustainability. Stories that celebrate nature, emphasize its intrinsic value and depict the delicate balance between humans and the environment offer a counterpoint to the prevailing economic and political-centric narratives. As a credible government body, Pragya Pratishan holds significant influence and authority in shaping public discourse. By actively curating and promoting narratives that champion environmental consciousness and sustainability, Pragya Pratishan can play a pivotal role in reshaping the narrative landscape. Its influence can extend to raising awareness, inspiring policy changes, and fostering a societal shift toward prioritizing environmental values in literature and beyond.

One possible way to bridge the gap between the public and climate science is to facilitate peer-to-peer discussions and informal gatherings where individuals can share climate knowledge and experiences. By incorporating narrative practices and storytelling, people can find new ways to talk about climate and educate others in the public domain. It is important to create opportunities for these sharing forums within local institutions and civic groups. Dialogic learning, which allows for discussions and processing of climate knowledge in diverse ways, should be encouraged. There should be more opportunities for people to translate and share their knowledge of climate issues with other people in public. When people incorporate climate into their own stories, they may discover novel metaphors and conceptual frameworks that help them communicate crucial climate knowledge and novel approaches to teach those not part of the scientific community (Lejano et al. 68). Testimonials and personal narratives about climate change can help people see its connection to their everyday lives and inspire action. Direct linkages between the public and the narrations delving into the repercussions of climate change can help make climate change a tangible reality. These efforts should be supported by government institutions. Including stories related to climate change in government-selected works can further enhance public understanding and engagement.

Works Cited

- Corlett, Richard T., and James V. Lafrankie, Jr. "Potential Impacts of Climate Change on Tropical Asian Forests Through an Influence on Phenology." *Climatic Change*, vol. 39, no. 2/3, 1998, pp. 439–53, <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1005328124567>.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd, 2016.
- Grant, Lyle, and Melanie Forrest. "Can Stories Influence Sustainable Behavior?" *Behavior Science Perspectives on Culture and Community*, edited by Traci M. Cihon and Mark M. Mattaini, Springer, 2020, pp. 283–306.
- Guldi, Jo, and David Armitage. *The History Manifesto*. Cambridge UP, 2014.
- Ishmaili, and Laxman Prasad Gautam, editors. *Pragya Nepali Aadhunik Katha*. Vol. 3, Nepal Pragya Pratisthan, 2015.
- JC, Deb, et al. "Climate Change Impacts on Tropical Forests: Identifying Risks for Tropical Asia." *Journal of Tropical Forest Science*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2018, pp. 182–94, <https://doi.org/10.26525/jtfs2018.30.2.182194>.
- Lejano, Raul P., et al. "Climate and Narrative: Environmental Knowledge in Everyday Life." *Environmental Science & Policy*, vol. 31, 2013, pp. 61–70.
- Maza, Sarah. *Thinking About History*. Chicago, The U of Chicago P, 2017.
- McGuire, Chad J., and Devon Lynch. "Competing Narratives of Climate Change." *Environmental Practice*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2017, pp. 218–21.
- Michaels, Flora S. *Monoculture: How One Story Is Changing Everything*. Red Clover P, 2011.
- Onta, Pratyoush. "Ambivalence Denied: The Making of Rastriya Itihas in Panchayat Era Textbooks." *Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS)*, vol. 23, no. 1, Jan. 1996, pp. 231–54, <https://lib.icimod.org/record/9972>.
- Rahmayati, R. et al. "Portrayal of Ecological Crisis in Indonesian Prose: Fiction and Reality." *2nd Workshop on Language, Literature, and Society for Education, Wol2SED 2018, December 21-22 2018, Solo, Indonesia*, 2019.
- Regmi, Sanat, and Bhaupanthi, editors. *Pragya Nepali Aadhunik Katha*. Vol. 1, Nepal Pragya Pratisthan, 2013. ---. *Pragya Nepali Aadhunik Katha Volume*. Vol. 2, Nepal Pragya Pratisthan, 2013.
- Singh, Surender P., et al. *Climate Change in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas: The State of Current Knowledge*. International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, 2019.
- Sivakumar, Mannava V., and Robert Stefanski. "Climate Change in South Asia." *Climate Change and Food Security in South Asia*, 2010, pp. 13–30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9516-9_2.