



The Gulmohar: Becoming Native

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The *Delonix regia*—or the Gulmohar, as it is called in India—is a flowering tree native to Madagascar.¹ It blossoms every summer across villages and cities in India, and its vivid red flowers are associated strongly with the ideas of home, nostalgia, and summertime. A popular name for housing societies, residential areas, parks, restaurants, resorts, boutiques, companies, songs, a literary magazine, and an award-winning Disney+ Hotstar movie, the Gulmohar takes on many faces in India, each serving as a testament to its cultural significance.



⋮ The red flowers of the Gulmohar.... []

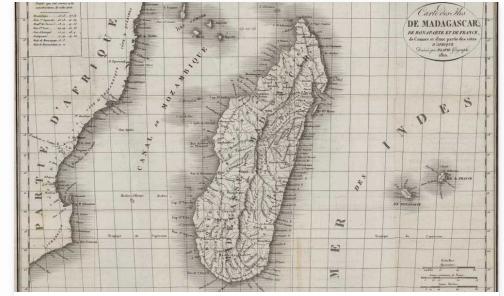
This sense that the Gulmohar tree is entrenched in Indian culture, however, belies the fact that the plant only appeared in the subcontinent in the nineteenth century. First 'discovered' in 1828 in Madagascar, within a few decades, the tree made its way across the tropics through the botanical networks of the British Empire, blossoming in India and reaching as far as Jamaica and Singapore.² The Gulmohar's journey, from its introduction to India by the East India Company to its eventual cultural integration, tells a fascinating story of how botany, colonization, revolution, art, and memory aligned to root a plant in the Indian subcontinent.



⋮ Foliage and Flowers of a Madagasc... []

Colonial Discover

The discovery of the Gulmohar in Madagascar reveals the intimate, transnational network of botanists who operated out of the colonies, partaking in the trade of botanical material and knowledge with their contemporaries in Europe. The tree was discovered by Wenceslas Bojer (1795–1856), a French-speaking botanist from Prague. Francis I, the Emperor of Austria, sponsored Bojer's education and marked him "destined at a future period for missions of scientific discovery."³ In 1820, Bojer traveled to Mauritius, a British colony, where he lived for the rest of his life and from there undertook botanical expeditions spanning the east coast of Africa and the islands of the Indian Ocean, with a focus on Madagascar.



⋮ A French map of Madagascar, date... [2]

Mauritius was a budding center of imperial botanical learning. Its past as a French colony—from 1715 until it was seized by the British in 1810—resulted in it being a site of collaboration between English and French speakers. In addition to Bojer was part of a group of botanists that included Irish botanist Charles Telfair and his wife, Anna; Mauritian botanist Louis Bouton; and Julien Desjardins, all of whom were in close contact with Sir William Jackson Hooker, the first director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. Centers of knowledge in the metropole acted as authorities that legitimized the findings of overseas botanists, while depending on them to discover rare plant species that would expand the Empire's knowledge, resources, and trade.⁴ The botanists at Mauritius thus sent Hooker regular reports of their discoveries along with seeds and specimens. In exchange, they relied on Hooker to send news of scientific and botanical progress in Europe, as they felt they were "exiled from the world of knowledge."⁵



⋮ The taking of the Isle of France.... [2]



⋮ The pods of the Gulmohar are green wh... [2]



⋮ Each pod contains 20-45 seeds, each... [2]

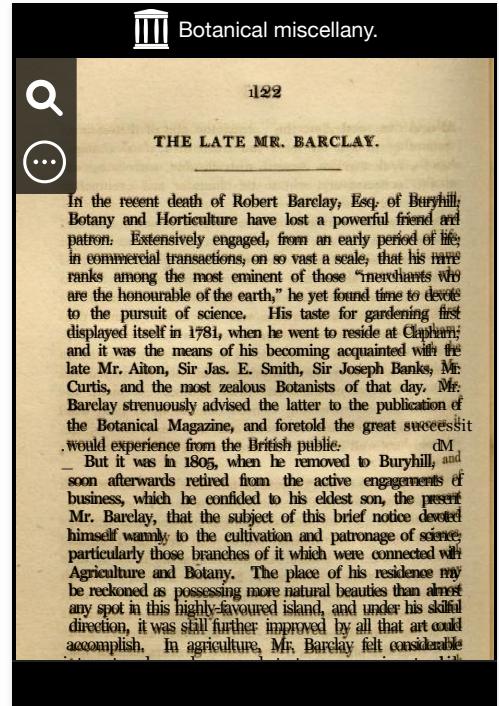
In 1828, Charles Telfair wrote to Hooker about a plant specimen discovered by Bojer that was "worthy of a place" in his works: the *Poinciana regia* (it would later be renamed *Delonix regia*).⁶ Bojer likely discovered the plant during his second expedition to Madagascar. Following his initial letter, Telfair sent Hooker seeds of the plant and a drawing by Bojer, hoping to get it published in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, for which Hooker was its main editor.⁷ At the time, the magazine was the largest and most renowned serial publication of its kind.

European Fascination

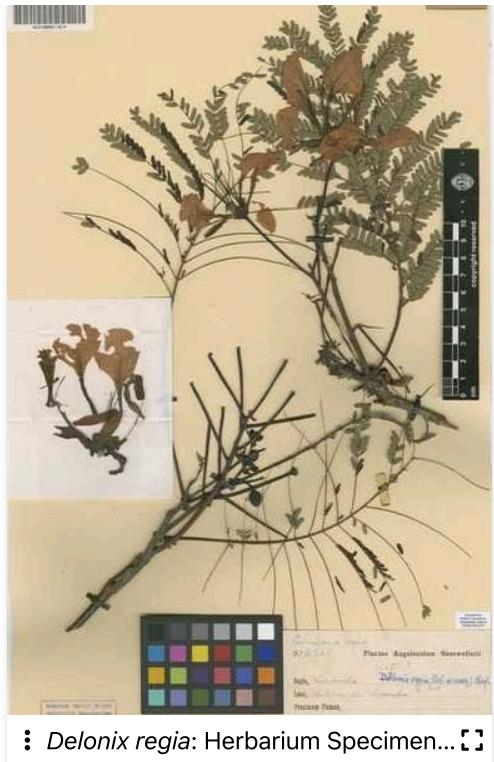
In 1829, Hooker included an entry on the *Poinciana regia* in the magazine. The entry was accompanied by Joseph Swan's stunning engraving of *Poinciana regia* flowers based on a "magnificent drawing" by Bojer.⁸ In his descriptions, Hooker mentioned that they sometimes published entries on beautiful and rare plants that the English had no hope of cultivating successfully in the country; but this, he claimed, was not the case with the *Poinciana regia*. He would have waited for the plant to blossom before publishing an entry on it, if it "were not the subject of such great interest."⁹ He expressed hope "of its blossoming in this country" very soon, thanks to the attempt of Robert Barclay (a wealthy businessman and amateur botanist) to raise saplings of the seeds sent by Telfair. Barclay's vast garden Bury Hill had been the site of many exotic plants taking root in Britain.¹⁰



The hope for the tree's naturalization on British shores, however, did not bear fruit, as Barclay passed away in 1831, and with his death the monetary support for the tree's growth in the British Isles ended.¹¹ In 1833, Telfair and his wife Anna died in Madagascar, both by sudden and strange illness.¹²



European fascination with the plant continued to grow. In the French herbal *Histoire naturelle des végétaux* (1834), French botanist Édouard Spach wrote of the "magnifique" *Poinciana regia* and noted that English horticultural establishments possessed its saplings.¹³ In 1837, the tree was included in *Paxton's Magazine of Botany*'s register of flowering plants, which praised it as a splendid plant that "ought to be in every collection."¹⁴ Bojer's French manuscript about the flora of Mauritius and the surrounding islands, *Hortus Mauritianus*, was published in 1837, with an entry on the *Poinciana regia*, fittingly called the Flamboyant in French.¹⁵ By then, however, the tree was already well known across Europe.



An Imperial Experiment in Botany

Towards the end of the decade, in 1838, the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India decided to take on an imperial "experiment" to be conducted "on a magnificent scale": the gradual introduction and eventual "naturalising" of the world's "indigenous" plants within India.¹⁶ As the Society's leading members wrote in their correspondence, the successful introduction of valuable plants into the "countries they rule... can scarcely be questioned, particularly in the Indian case due to the vegetarian diet of the population, and the fact that more plant species would act as safeguards during "severe visitations of Providence," like drought and famine. They claimed that due to the "productive power" of the soil, and the vast varieties of landscape, plants "of every climate, except the Arctic, may be so completely naturalised" in the country. This plan would also involve the "interchange of plants between Bombay and Calcutta," two centers of British power. The Calcutta Botanic Garden, established in 1787, was a major site of plant exchange, "a center of experimentation with living plants from all over the subcontinent and the world",¹⁷ and Bombay was home to gardens scattered across the localities of Parel, Mazgaon, and Colaba, in addition to a botanical garden at the nearby Dapuri, which lay within the Bombay Presidency.¹⁸



The Gulmohar snuck into the list of ornamental plants to be introduced to Bombay, during the first wave of the Society's botanical experiment in 1838.¹⁹ Within three years, William Griffith, an East India Company botanist, was growing the tree in the Calcutta Botanic Garden.²⁰ Just two years later, Griffith sent a letter to his peer Robert Wight, the secretary of the botanical gardens in Madras, sharing "plenty of seed" of the "beautiful tree" that was *Poinciana regia*.²¹ In the late 1840s, Scottish surgeon Alexander Gibson, superintendent of the botanic garden at Dapuri, commissioned an Indo-Portuguese artist to document the Gulmohar, among other plants, in a distinct example of a company painting, with close-up views that evince an intimate engagement with the plant.²² Like their counterparts in Mauritius, the work of the botanists in India was driven by colonial policy and their personal desire to study the "treasure" of India's flora; they often researched local plant species that were not of much interest to the colonial powers for transplantation or trade.²³ At the same time, their individual botanical ambitions and ideologies often clashed with those of other botanists practicing in India, producing a rich tapestry of personal motivations in the exchange of botanical material.²⁴ Botanical passion and colonial directives thus coincided to see the Gulmohar blossom across gardens in the subcontinent.



: Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras... []

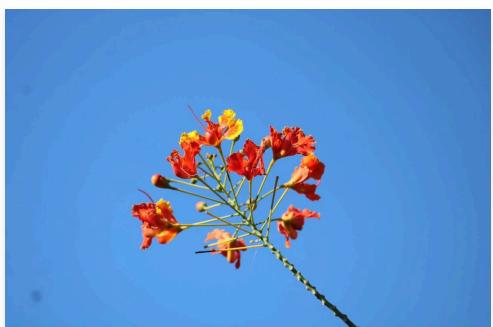
Becoming "Gulmohar": A Tale of Two Flowers

After its introduction to India, the Gulmohar spread rapidly. What is more surprising than its swift geographical spread, however, is the ease with which it integrated into the subcontinent's cultures. In Malayalam, the language of present-day Kerala along the Malabar coast, it adopts a fascinating vernacular name, Kaalvarippoo. This translates to "Flowers of Calvary" and refers to the belief among Saint Thomas Christians that the flower gained its blood-red color from growing near the cross at Calvary hill where Jesus was crucified.²⁵ Different languages and cultures adapted the tree to their beliefs, translating it into the language of pre-existing flora or into the regional significance of the flower's striking color.



: A Portuguese illustration from the... []

One possible reason for the ease with which the Gulmohar fit into the Indian context is its visual and aesthetic similarity to existing flora. Its vibrant red color matches several flowers, including the Peacock Flower (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*, known as the *Poinciana pulcherrima* in the nineteenth century) and the Flame of the Forest (*Butea monosperma*). Native to South America, the Peacock Flower had been transplanted to India by the seventeenth century.²⁶ In 1839, just as the *Poinciana regia* was being introduced to the subcontinent, Bombay Government Press published a catalogue of the plants growing in Bombay and its vicinity. It is here that the Peacock Flower, the *Poinciana pulcherrima*, was listed as "Gool Mohur," and the catalog noted that the plant was "common in every garden."²⁷ By the time the Gulmohar came to India, then, there was already a plant referred to as Gulmohar.



: The Peacock Flower was called the... []



: The Peacock flower. Image credit:... []



: An illustration of the Peacock flow... []

The plants' similarity lies in their flowers' red color. The primary difference between them is morphological: the *Poinciana regia* is a deciduous tree that grows to a height of ten meters, while the *Poinciana pulcherrima* is a shrub that grows to about three meters.²⁸ While they were placed in the same genus when the *Poinciana regia* was discovered, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, *Poinciana pulcherrima* had become *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*, and the *Poinciana regia* had long been renamed *Delonix regia*. In the latter case, however, the old name stuck: the Gulmohar is still commonly called the *Poinciana* in Australia and the Western Hemisphere.



⋮ *Poinciana regia* and *Poinciana...* ⋮

This confusion between the two flowers was common and was a defining feature in the history of their identification—or misidentification. In *A Dictionary of English Names of Plants* (1884), William Miller listed two binomial names for the Peacock flower: the *Poinciana pulcherrima* for the common variety and the *Poinciana regia* for the royal variety.²⁹ The distinction of one being royal was repeated in the 1889 *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*, in which *Poinciana regia* referred to the royal Gulmohar and the *Poinciana pulcherrima* to the common one.³⁰ Interestingly, when Gulmohar is anglicized, it is often misspelled as “gold mohur,” which was also the name for gold coins issued in British India, as well as during the former Mughal and Maratha empires.³¹ The plant appears several times in George Orwell’s *Burmese Days* as the “Gold mohur” with “blood-red” flowers, framing the landscape of British Burma.³²

The *Delonix regia* becomes the Gulmohar through a unique encounter with the Peacock flower, whereby it slowly adopts the latter’s name. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Gulmohar was a common sight in India. The Agricultural and Horticultural Society of Western India sold its seeds, noting that it was “naturalised,”³³ with its flowers blossoming across India from the Lalbagh Botanical Garden of Bangalore to the banks of the Ganges at Munger and Jamalpur.³⁴ With their spread, the names of the two flowers became fixed: by the end of the century, Gulmohar was used only to refer to the *Delonix regia*, while Peacock Flower was called by alternative names like Guliturah in Hindi and Shanksur in Marathi.³⁵

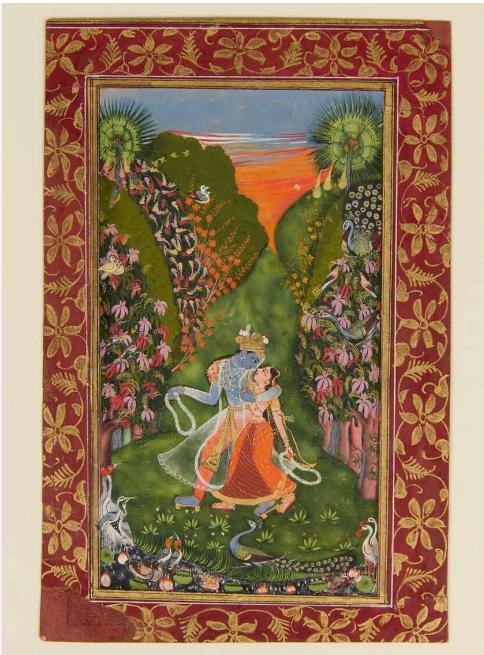


⋮ The Gold mohur coin that was issu... ⋮



⋮ The Gulmohar Gate in the [Lalbagh](#)... ⋮

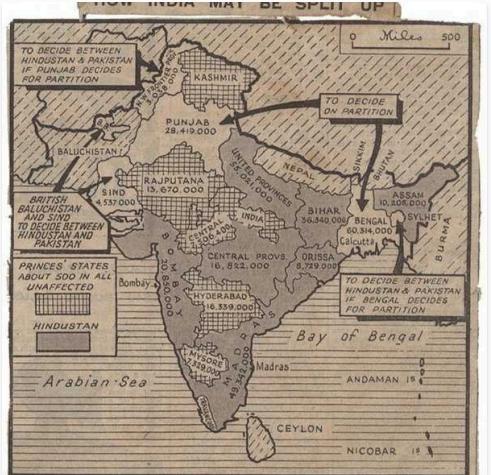
This dynamic plays out similarly in the Bengali language: the Gulmohar takes on the name of the Peacock Flower. By the early nineteenth century, the Peacock Flower was called the Krishnachura in Bengali.³⁶ Krishnachura is a compound of two words: Krishna referring to the Hindu deity, who is often symbolized through peacock feathers, and chura possibly referring to bangles, particularly a bride's wedding bangles. As the nineteenth century came to a close, however, Krishnachura became the Bengali name for the Gulmohar, and the Peacock Flower took on a different name: Radhachura.³⁷ Interestingly, Radha is the name of the divine consort of Krishna—the childhood lover whom he does not marry. The couple is commonly represented as the union of two souls that are one: they cannot be separated, just like the lack of possible differentiation between deer-musk and its perfume, and just as "the moon can never be shorn of its very own moonbeam."³⁸ The longing for the lover who is the self represents the dyad of these divine lovers, who are often referred to by the conjoined name Radhakrishna.³⁹ In Bengali, the names of the Peacock Flower and the Gulmohar thus come to embody Radha and Krishna, representing a fascinating union of the divine lovers and the unique possibility of desire and identification between the two red flowers.



⋮ The divine lovers Radha and Krishn... [•]

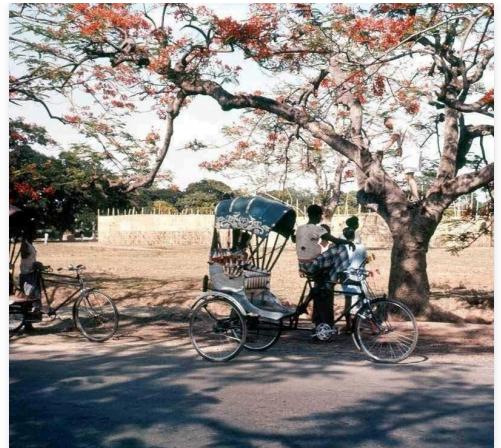
The Gulmohar as Political Symbol

Though the British left the subcontinent in 1947, they left behind countries drained of natural resources, shattered by colonization, and separated by religious borders. The massive transformations wrought by the colonizing powers—a radical change in traditional agriculture by the forceful adoption of commercial crops, the destruction of the traditional crafts and artisan class, the fracturing (and sometimes formation) of caste barriers, the creation of an educated class of English speakers through an overhaul of the education system, and the partition of the subcontinent into two nations on religious lines—were accompanied by seemingly more subtle changes in culture and landscape. The sprawl of the Gulmohar across both urban sidewalks and rural farms was one of those changes.



⋮ An illustration in the *Daily Herald* of... [•]

Seemingly apolitical subjects sometimes become symbols for political transformation. After Independence, East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh) was grappling with its dual identities of religion and language. Pakistan had declared Urdu and English to be its only official languages—Urdu was spoken widely in Pakistan, but not in East Pakistan, which was Bengali-speaking. Spurred to action, student protests broke out across Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan, on February 21, 1952, with the police responding with violence. Mahbub ul Alam Chowdhury, one of the students at the protest, wrote the poem, "Kandte ashini – phanshir dari niye eshechhi" (I have not come to weep, but to demand they be hanged), where the Gulmohar, called the Krishnachura in Bengali, takes on a deeply symbolic role: "I have not come, where they laid down their lives / Under the Krishnachura trees, / to shed tears. / I have not come, where endless patches of blood / Glow like so many fiery flowers, to weep."⁴⁰



⋮ A Gulmohar in Dhaka in the 1960s.... [•]

Comparing the spilled blood of the martyrs to red flowers, instead of aestheticizing the brutal violence, feeds into the poem's deferral of anger, which eventually reaches its fever pitch with the demand to hang the perpetrators. The poem was banned, and copies of it were seized by the newly created Pakistani government. There was an arrest warrant for Chowdhury, but he managed to escape. The poem gave birth to a new genre of poetry that spoke of the mother tongue and the rage of those denied their language: Ekushey literature.⁴¹ This sentiment would feed into the war that led to the liberation of Bangladesh as a separate nation in 1971. The International Mother Language Day was set up by UNESCO in 1982, commemorating the Bengali Language protests that began on February 21, 1952.⁴²

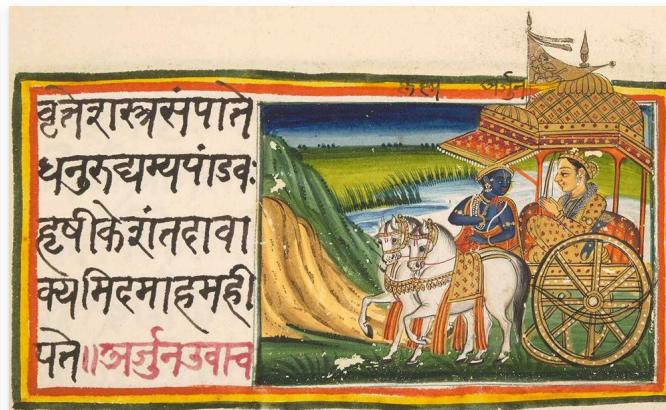


⋮ A Gathering in Khulna, Bangladesh,... [•]

Across the border in India, the Gulmohar took on a fascinating role in the caste politics of West Bengal. *The Story of the Arjun and the Krishnachura Tree* (2014), by poet Mandakranta Sen, places two trees in opposition: the Arjun tree and the Krishnachura.⁴³ The Arjun tree is "An Aryan male—a pillar of aristocracy" that all other trees bow down to. The term "Aryan" has a complicated history in India, used by upper-caste communities to uphold racial purity and trace their origin to a common "Indo-European" homeland, and on the other hand employed by progressive anti-caste movements to relegate the upper castes to being ancient invaders of the subcontinent.⁴⁴ Unlike the Arjun Tree, however, the Krishnachura is decidedly new to the land: its seed comes "from somewhere"—the poem does not bother to dwell on its origins—and eventually blossoms into a beautiful "Santhal girl," from a tribal community that lies outside of the system of caste. The Arjun tree desires this tree that has "crimson in her hair," but his desire is rooted in superiority and domination: "Only he could claim beauty so fair," he thinks, being an Aryan male. The Krishnachura does not relent: "She wasn't drawn to the Aryan male / She was busy making the buds bloom." The Arjun tree is forced only to gaze, shed his bark, and "accept he cannot win," for the Krishnachura sheds blood—seemingly referring to menstruation, which cuts against caste-based ideas of purity where menstruation is seen as polluting.⁴⁵ What emerges is a tale of the introduced species, the Gulmohar, representing a space of beauty and subversion that exists outside of a culture rooted in caste domination.



: The Arjun tree...



: Arjuna is guided by Lord Krishna, his charioteer and...

The Gulmohar and Longing

Desire, temporality, memory, and longing come together in the symbolic power of the Gulmohar in modern India. Turning to film, music, and literature can give a clearer understanding of its influence and associations. "If your name were Gulmohar," sings the Bollywood hero of the 1978 movie *Devata* as he presents his lover with a Gulmohar flower, "then making the spring laugh would be my task."⁴⁶ Throughout the song, the lovers frolic around the Gulmohar. The camera pans across the tree, taking wide shots of its blossoming canopy, cutting shots of the sighing lovers under its bouncing branches, and focusing on the falling flowers. By the 1970s, the Gulmohar was a common sight in India, and the song uses the tree not only as a lyrical symbol but as a physical, living character that is very much a part of the action and movement on screen. "When the spring comes next time, ask it one small thing," sings the hero, "without my flower, how could its name be spring?" The heroine sings back with his own words, "If your name were Gulmohar, then making the spring laugh would be my task!"

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In another movie from the 1970s, the devotional *Narad Leela*, the Gulmohar is evoked to represent the unrequited desire of an Apsara—a divine nymph of heaven—for the celibate Narad, the messenger of the Gods. They meet when Narad is deep in ascetic meditation. Indra, the King of Heaven, fearing that Narad is gaining too much divine power, instructs Kaamdev, the god of desire, to end Narad's meditation. Kaamdev thus sends the Apsara to tempt Narad out of his asceticism. The plan of the gods, however, backfires: the Apsara falls in love with Narad instead. "I came to color your body in my shade/ But mine paled; I have become your shade," she sings in the song *Gulmohar Ke Lal Lal Phulwa Khil Gaye*, dancing around the meditating Narad.⁴⁷ Though the visuals do not feature the Gulmohar, the tree is immediately conjured in the lyrics: "The red buds of the Gulmohar have blossomed, my love/ With red on its cheeks, the pink season has come/ Leaving me this gift, childhood has gone away."



⋮ Old Classic Song - Gulmohar Ke Lal L... [•]

Though the Gulmohar is linked with the beginning of desire and the end of childhood in *Narad Leela*, it is most often associated with nostalgia and childhood memories. In his 1965 poem *The Krishnachura Tree*, Syed Ali Hasan recalls the sensations of his childhood in a staccato of end-stopped lines, "Green night in the leaves of trees./ The blue of inexhaustible rest in rivers./ Many trees supported by shining vines." The poem ends ponderously recalling the eponymous tree: "The history of my memory/ the krishnachura as seen/ by the eyes of youth."⁴⁸ Notably, the Odia poet Pravasani Mahakud's poem *Forget, forget* begins with the Gulmohar tree: "Forget the sight of the first blossoming/ of the Gulmohar plant:/ may be some heart's blood remains on it, may be/ some forehead's pain and may be even some greenness/ of the whole body."⁴⁹ There is a magic, it seems, at first sight of the blossoming Gulmohar tree. The tree is always marred by the "heart's blood" from the encounter in childhood.



⋮ The transience of the Gulmohar... [•]

Longing is a recurring motif associated with the Gulmohar tree. The Disney+ Hostar movie *Gulmohar* revolves around themes of nostalgia, memory, and inheritance.⁵⁰ The family reels from the loss of its patriarch, while his widow Kusum Batra tries to hold three generations together in their house named Gulmohar, which they will soon vacate. Much of the film is about Arun Batra, Kusum's and her husband's adopted son, and his struggle to reconcile his "roots" with his upbringing—he discovers that he is the biological son of a poor man who runs a chai stall rather than being the trueborn family heir. The idea of roots allows us to read the title *Gulmohar* as a metaphor for the Batra family itself, threatened to be uprooted like a tree by the impending loss of their family home. Interestingly, for a film named after a tree, the only time the Gulmohar appears in the movie is in a flashback sequence: Kusum recounts her college years in Pune, where a blossoming queer romance is set against the backdrop of suspended Gulmohar petals and bicycle trails covered with red. There is a clear link between the Gulmohar and nostalgia: for what is both beloved and lost. Fittingly, Tamil poet Kanimozhi's poem *Never-ending Kiss* (2002) makes an unfinished kiss a fixed, tangible part of the Gulmohar: "Carved in cold stone/below the flaming/gulmohar tree/is an unfinished/ never-ending kiss."⁵¹



⋮ The Gulmohar's only appearance in the eponymous movi... []



⋮ The Gulmohar's only appearance in the eponymous movi... []



⋮ The Gulmohar's only appearance in the eponymous movi... []



⋮ The Gulmohar's only appearance in the eponymous movie... []



⋮ The Gulmohar's only appearance in the... []

In 1986, Panna Naik wrote the poem *Sub-tropics* in Pennsylvania: "Uprooting a tropical plant/ I replanted it/ in this cold alien land/ and determined it shall survive."⁵² In the next line, however, comes the "yet": "When the whole earth here erupts hot summer roses/ my eyes cry red for gulmohar." The Indian subject moves to the west and the Gulmohar tree—which the colonial powers introduced in the subcontinent only a century-and-a-half ago—now becomes a marker of her own culture. She attempts to make the plant take root in this foreign land, to bring with her a part of her own cultural roots, but the attempt fails, just as the colonial attempt of its naturalization in Britain never fully fruits. The plants' trajectory—from its origin in Madagascar, botanical identification in Mauritius, arrival in the Indian subcontinent as part of a colonial experiment, and its cultural adoption to becoming a symbol that represents multitudes of social reform, nostalgia, desire, longing and even the idea of "Indian-ness"—seems both like a journey of leaving and arriving home. In the last stanza of *Sub-tropics*, Naik considers returning to the subcontinent, but the closing, separately indented line ponders, "But where is home?" The Gulmohar, a tree from Madagascar that makes a home for itself in the Indian subcontinent, would perhaps have the most fitting answer.



• The Gulmohar finds an unlikely ho... []

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