

**Spectacles of the Anthropocene and Visions of Alternative
Possibilities in Select Works of Amitav Ghosh**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled ‘**Spectacles of the Anthropocene and Visions of Alternative Possibilities in Select Works of Amitav Ghosh**’ submitted by me towards the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy (Arts) in English** of Jadavpur University, Kolkata is based upon my own original work carried out under the supervision of Dr. Rafat Ali, Associate Professor, Department of English, Jadavpur University and that there is no plagiarism. This is also to certify that the work has not been submitted by me in part or in whole for the award of any other degree/diploma of the same Institution where the work is being carried out, or to any other Institution. A paper out of this dissertation has also been presented by me at a seminar at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, thereby fulfilling the criteria for submission, as per the M.Phil. Regulations (2017) of Jadavpur University.

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On the basis of academic merit and satisfying all the criteria as declared above, the dissertation work of **Tanmoy Ghosh** entitled ‘**Spectacles of the Anthropocene and Visions of Alternative Possibilities in Select Works of Amitav Ghosh**’ is now ready for submission towards the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy (Arts) in English** of Jadavpur University.

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Acknowledgement

At the beginning of my course, I was not quite sure about my area of research. But I wanted to work on something which concerns our lived reality. This is when I reread Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, a work which had affected me hugely for its explorations of the matters which illumine our existence. There, I decided to do my research on the complex dynamics of the human and the non-human factors which collectively make the survival of human beings possible. And it has been an enriching experience to study things which affect the very here and now of my being. It wouldn't have been possible without the help of some humans. Dr Nilanjana Deb, Associate Professor at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, had set the tone for us in the first semester of the course by teaching us theories and exploring ideas which are very much related to my area. Professor Nandini Saha, Professor and the current Head of the Department of English, Jadavpur University, has also been generous with her cooperation and with her lessons of citations and narrative theory which taught us to handle narratives and research work. My guide, Dr Rafat Ali, Associate Professor at the Department of English, Jadavpur University, has been an inspiration with his amicable temperament and boundless patience, which will remain with me as life-lessons. I would like to thank Professor Amites Mukhopadhyay, Professor of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University who was member of my Research Advisory Committee, and who gave his valuable feedback on my work. My classmates at the department were a crazy bunch, cheers to them as well. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents who let me do my work even in our humble circumstances which asked for more of me in directions completely alien to an academic researcher.

Abstract

‘Anthropocene’ is a relatively new term, especially in the literary field. In the sciences, it denotes a new geological epoch when humanity has impacted and profoundly changed the earth systems. It popularly refers to the present geological time period, beginning roughly from the late eighteenth century and accelerating in the post Second World War time period, which is overwhelmed by human interventions in all spheres of planetary life. This ‘age of humans’ puts extraordinary emphasis on human beings as the supreme inhabitants of the earth rather than a species equal to other living beings. This kind of awareness gained currency from ideas of progress for the individual who could think for his well-being, or be the ‘avant-garde’ and show way to the rest.

Amitav Ghosh as an author has shown his concerns and consciousness about the changing climate events that gave way to new political and social orders around the globe. In some of his works, the factors which induced the Anthropocene affect livelihoods and change economies. The present thesis explores the instances of such factors in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and *Sea of Poppies* (2008) by examining the ways in which human-initiated violence causes disruption in the lives of other human beings and non-human species and on nature in general. Following this, the thesis also seeks to find out expressions of counter-thoughts and actions which oppose the all-engulfing ideas of being, propagated by power-centres. Under the shadow of the empire, and in the aggression of capitalistic impulses, natural boundaries are violated in various ways. In the first chapter written on *The Glass Palace*, it is the internalisation of new modes of exploitation which is introduced to the natives through the coming of the empire. The chapter explains how the culture of imperialism brought forth a mindset of exploitation, and how this mindset was planted in the colonised people of Asia so as to make them carry these ideas into future. In the chapter on *The Hungry Tide*, it is the encounter between self-centric, materialistic,

rational modes of knowing and a more intuitive, comprehensive view of life which makes space for the unknown, the mysterious. The chapter explores the tide country in *The Hungry Tide* as a locale where the ideas of modernity, history, and individualism come loose. The tide country, as explored in the chapter, deters the compartmentalisation of the bountiful nature and the living species. The flow of life happens through the amalgamation of natural forces and human culture. The landscape checks watertight separation between different elements of nature, and makes human beings humble by incessantly exposing their frailty in front of natural occurrences. In *Sea of Poppies*, the violation happens through the capitalistic hunger to gain by establishing structures of exploitation on human and non-human systems. This chapter analyses the effects of colonial desires on conventional farmers, their eventual decline with the transformation of agricultural practices and the native biota, and the rise of opium trade along with the increase of exploitation and migration of poor people. On the backdrop of all these issues, there are the examples of saner voices and humble ways of being in these novels which stand in contrast to the delusion. The thesis presents these complex interactions to give the readers an idea about the assumptions of our existence and explore new possibilities of being.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Amitav Ghosh, Climate, Earth, Human, Modernity, Nature, Vision.

Introduction

In the beginning of his book *The Natural Contract*, Michel Serres uses Goya's painting of two duellists fighting in knee-deep mud as a wonderful metaphor for the actions of human beings on the earth; the significance being that both the fighters and their bettors are gradually sinking without regard to who wins the battle.¹ The loss is collective, no matter who is on which side. Looking at the present state of the earth's environmental degradation, according to Serres, the image can be quite symptomatic. With the gradual worsening of the climate, increasing temperatures, rising water levels, extinction of precious species, and other unpredictable natural occurrences, we seem to be in a hell hole of a mud. But, instead of being aware of these issues, the human race is too busy fighting other wars: national, political, military and economical. Like the duellists, we have forgotten that the fight is not worth it, because all of us are going down collectively.

In the article 'Defining the Anthropocene', Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin suggest that humans are the major cause of recent massive environmental changes. They state that the productivity from earth's resources has gone up drastically over time, but the major chunk of this is consumed by human beings. According to them, human activities like intensive agriculture, domestication and consumption of livestock, exploration of fuel, and appropriation of various natural produces have been the reason for the banishment of numbers of other species which could be done previously only by geological forces. The study also says that this heightened activities led to the reduction of species from land and water on one hand and loss of biodiversity with the transportation of organisms to faraway places by human movements on the other. The scale of remodelling of the earth's biota is clearly stated in the work:

¹Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson (The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 1.

Furthermore, human actions may well constitute Earth's most important evolutionary pressure. The development of diverse products, including antibiotics, pesticides, and novel genetically engineered organisms, alongside the movement of species to new habitats, intense harvesting and the selective pressure of higher air temperatures resulting from greenhouse gas emissions, are all likely to alter evolutionary outcomes. Considered collectively, there is no geological analogue.²

These alarming proceedings which have 're-ordered life on earth'³ ask for a distinctive phraseology to hint at the gravity of the situation. 'Anthropocene' as a term with its present meaning was formally introduced by Paul J. Crutzen who used it to refer to the ever increasing human footprint and their bearing on earth's resources⁴. In 'Geology of Mankind', he notes that since human induced emissions of various kinds are responsible for the escalation of environmental degradation during the last three centuries and will be so for ages to come, the term 'Anthropocene' becomes appropriate. The concept specifically points to a state shift in geological time when human beings have impacted every spheres of planetary life. Crutzen states:

The Anthropocene could be said to have started in the latter part of the eighteenth century, when analyses of air trapped in polar ice showed the beginning of growing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and methane. This date also happens to coincide with James Watt's design of the steam engine in 1784.⁵

In the article, Crutzen notes that massive increase in human population, high usage of land surface area, reduction of tropical rainforests, utilisation of water sources, extensive energy use, excessive use of nitrogen fertilizer in agriculture, exploration and use of fossil fuel and biomass have contributed to species extinction and the steep rise in the accumulations of greenhouse gasses like carbon dioxide and methane.⁶ These revealing facts certainly expose the expanse of human footprint on earth.

²Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene", *Nature* 519 (March 2015): 172, doi:10.1038/nature14258.

³Ibid.

⁴Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of mankind", *Nature* 415 (January 2002): 211, doi:10.1038/415023a.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

These colossal changes in the environment we live in have seldom found reflections in the art and literature of the age. Amitav Ghosh is one such novelist whose works have recurrently featured natural phenomena as important catalysts in the contexts of those stories. Natural calamities, water bodies, the animal kingdom, the knowledge of the inert- all these play major role in some of his key works. In trying to voice the difficulties of such representations, Ghosh discusses in his book *The Great Derangement* how he has always had instances of coming across the non-human, the uncanny in his life; but surprisingly, according to him, he has not been able to translate these experiences to serious fiction. He questions whether climate change poses great resistance to modern forms of narrative which result in terming the literature dealing with climate change as science fiction. In the book, he asks if there is something in climate change which the modern writers are not comfortable with.⁷ Ghosh argues that people from all around the world always had their natural way of remaining in contact with nature; but the modern literary forms, the novel in particular, was developed at the same time when the great colonial powers expanded their use of fossil fuels which resulted in increased carbon emissions.⁸ Thus, Ghosh points out that the world of the novel happens to be glorifying, in most cases, the avant-garde: the progress of an individual in a world where the idea of the collective is surely fading.⁹

When talking about the anthropocentric perspective, the discussion must also address how capitalism and imperialism played their parts in accelerating the coming of this catastrophic epoch. Since capitalism thrives on the demand for consumption, our excessive consumption of products has put an immense strain on natural resources and the subsequent waste coming out of these production and consumption activities has led to massive scale of pollutions. Imperialism on the other hand, introduced new systems of development across the

⁷Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Haryana: Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 11.

⁸Ibid., 10.

⁹Ibid., 55.

colonies which were detrimental to the ways of sustainable living, to say the least. However, as Ghosh sees it, although imperialism was the greater evil when it came to spreading the footprints of the carbon economy, it may have actually restricted its access in places like Asia for a long time by monopolising the control of the tools¹⁰. In any case, Ghosh argues that while capitalism was one of the main factors behind climate change, it was precisely the onslaught of the empire(s) in Asia that set the stage for a carbon intensive world order.¹¹ He states that ‘Asia’s centrality to global warming rests, in the first instance, upon numbers.’¹² He points out that it was Asia’s thrust on the European notions of modernity and progress which made it follow the same path that would eventually lead to ‘the rapid and expanding industrialization of Asia’s most populous nations, beginning in the 1980s, that brought the climate crisis to a head.’¹³ In trying to explain Asia’s central role in setting the climate catastrophe in motion, Ghosh also elaborates on the dilemma of the continent in being both the perpetrator and sufferer of the ‘derangement’. He argues that even if Asia didn’t tread the path of modernity enshrined by its colonial masters, the climate crisis would still have amplified; but ‘that rise would not have been so steep if mainland Asia had not launched upon a period of sustained economic expansion in the late 1980s’.¹⁴ In trying to suggest the seriousness of Asia’s hesitant embracement of the Eurocentric modernity which was characterised by imperialistic and capitalistic instincts, Ghosh writes how the Asian arena has been privy to the repercussions of following a way of life which can be enjoyed by a small number of people, not by the most populous continent on earth:

What we have learned from this experiment is that the patterns of life that modernity engenders can only be practised by a small minority of the world’s population. Asia’s historical experience demonstrates that our planet will not allow these patterns of living to be adopted by every human being. Every family in the world cannot have

¹⁰Ibid., 76.

¹¹Ibid., 64.

¹²Ibid., 62.

¹³Ibid., 64.

¹⁴ Ibid.

two cars, a washing machine and a refrigerator—not because of technical or economic limitations but because humanity would asphyxiate in the process.¹⁵

Therefore, it is of utmost importance to use the anthropocentric perspective in relation to the workings of imperialism and capitalism and the kind of modernity they propagate. Ghosh's works are rich sources for experiencing the delicate patterns in which such ideologies manifest themselves in the Asian context.

In the past years, researchers have explored the roles that nature and natural elements play in Ghosh's works. However, they have mostly been limited to eco-critical perspectives in the sense that they try to establish the different kinds of representations of Nature in Ghosh's oeuvre or present its importance as a setting in the particular context of the novel. Ecocriticism, as Cheryll Glotfelty puts it, 'is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.'¹⁶ Some of these works, like one written by Nazia Hasan, find out Ghosh's interest in the environment and its preservation. Hasan focuses on 'the march of colonization over the woods, jungles and wilderness'¹⁷ in Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* which changes the ecology through over exploitation and ultimately leads to destructive consequences for the characters involved. She shows the exploitative agriculture and migration of labourers as burning issues of ecology in *Sea of Poppies*. Hasan's study also reads *The Hungry Tide* as a 'voice against the technology driven life style of the contemporary world'¹⁸ which 'advocates for a balanced ecosystem'.¹⁹

Rajender Kaur views the diversity of the Sunderbans in *The Hungry Tide* as the representative of the geological notion of 'deep time' as well as the fluidity of nature. Kaur

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xviii.

¹⁷ Nazia Hasan, " Tracing the Strong Green Streaks in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh: An Eco-critical Reading", *Indian Literature* 57, no. 1 (January/February 2013): 182, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43856755>.

¹⁸ Ibid., 185.

¹⁹ Ibid., 186.

sees Ghosh's effort to transcend the boundaries of conventional post-colonial writing as an attempt to go beyond national and cultural boundaries to foreground the issues of the tide country, and the ways to access knowledge and see things. Kaur finds the ecological concerns in *The Hungry Tide* collaborating with social and regional issues to build toward a new future 'where global entrepreneurs and cetologists can become conscientious collaborators with local underclasses towards mutually beneficial goals'.²⁰ Kaur concludes such a determinative view with the argument that the novel presents possibilities of 'a cautiously utopian or ecotopian vision of ecological responsiveness supported by transcultural collaborative networks',²¹ which can bring a life of dignity for the poor along with policy actions which can secure the biodiversity of such unique locales as the Sunderbans.

In "The Sea is History": Opium, Colonialism, and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, Anupama Arora examines the mingling of the histories of slave trade, the business of opium, the migration of labourers and the control of the empire in *Sea of Poppies*. Arora views the novel as a narrative in which the ocean takes a central space and gets affected by the trajectories of land. The study stresses on the connections between the export of opium, the role of lascars and indentured labourers and their place in the commercial system. All the above mentioned studies seek to connect Ghosh's literatures with the locales, and show how the environment is involved in the narratives. But these works fail to widen the scope beyond the narrative frame of Ghosh's works to establish the issues of nature and human beings in the lived reality of present times which is characterised by unpredictable climate events.

²⁰ Rajender Kaur, "Home Is Where the Oracella Are": Toward a New Paradigm of Transcultural Ecocritical Engagement in Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 14, no. 1 (Winter2007): 137, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44086561>.

²¹ Ibid.

However, if literature has to reflect the issues of its age, at any rate the gravity of them, it must evolve accordingly. If we are to acknowledge the kind of crisis the planet earth is in today, and wish to find its representation in the art and literature of the day, we also need to come out of set standards of looking at literature, for the very rigidity and limitations of these. Environmental criticism, Green Criticism or other similar ways of looking at literature bring along a kind of academic orderliness that is not congenial to the understanding of the multifacetedness of the issue. To underscore the necessity of taking up the perspective of the Anthropocene vis-à-vis Ecocriticism in dealing with the highly complex climate issue, Timothy Clark, in *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, writes that Environmental criticism remains an area of specialisation accessible to a select public and follows the existing categorisation of different issues which deliberately obstructs a comprehensive view of the state of our planet:

Anthropocene disorder also inheres in the institutional predicament of environmental critics. As the degradation of the planet intensifies, the tension must increase between thinking in ecocriticism and its institutional context in an educational system still largely bound to the reproduction and legitimation of the status quo. Environmental criticism currently straddles a knife-edge between being a privileged and minority area of activism, involved in the education of students that may include future leaders, and being a force of intellectual and political containment.²²

Clark states that the twenty-first century has witnessed a kind of environmental degradation that surpassed the fathomable experience of humans.²³ He argues that to address these real yet elusive forms of global climate crisis in literature and criticism, conventional modes of representation should be modified. According to him, ‘Anthropocene evades normal categories of attention’²⁴ and therefore the much used tool of Ecocriticism isn’t worthy of

²²Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a threshold concept* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 195-96.

²³Ibid., preface to *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a threshold concept* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), x.

²⁴Ibid.

questioning the present state of crisis and its literary representation. To stress on the broad purview of the Anthropocene concept, Clark notes in his preface:

The Anthropocene is both frightening and intellectually liberating: the uncertainty and incalculable complexity of the issues, especially in forecasting likely future climates or the effects of human action or inaction, impel the resulting discussions in opposing directions. The first is the sense of being overwhelmed, of paralysis, even despair – how can you engage issues that are implicated in multiple events and behaviours and natural processes across the whole planet? To deny this is to evade the nature and urgency of the situation. Secondly, however, the very uncertainties can be intellectually liberating. The breakdowns of inherited demarcations of thought can still become a means of disclosure and revision, tempering the sense of alarm with a host of new insights.²⁵

The anthropocentric perspective thus becomes an important tool for reading literature in the era of climate change not only because it tries to give a holistic view of things but also because it replaces the modes of thought of conventional Green criticism which has been involved in the continuance of the dispassion toward climate issues.

Against the backdrop of these limited strains of criticism on Ghosh's works and the debate on the appropriate mode of criticism, I shall investigate the instances of Anthropocene in Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and *Sea of Poppies* (2008). The thesis seeks to enquire how the phenomenon of Anthropocene becomes manifested in Ghosh's works and dictates the fates of peoples and places. I also explore instances where the possibilities of a more sustainable existence emerge through thoughts and actions in these novels. This study will help in understanding how the concept actually plays out in humanity's present state of 'derangement' since these works of Ghosh concern the same historical time period and locale which are also crucial to the notion of Anthropocene. Analysing the possible reasons for the kind of planetary chaos the humanity suffers today can help us to understand how we should act to avert the impending doom.

²⁵Ibid., xi.

Chapter I

The Internalisation of the Spirit of Exploitation in *The Glass Palace*

Once I crept in an oakwood – I was looking for a stag.
 I met an old woman there – all knobbly stick and rag.
 She said; 'I have your secret here inside my little bag.'
 Then she began to cackle and I began to quake.
 She opened up her little bag and I came twice awake –
 Surrounded by a staring tribe and me tied to a stake.
 They said: 'We are the oak-trees and your own true family.
 We are chopped down, we are torn up, you do not blink an eye.
 Unless you make a promise now – now you are going to die.
 'Whenever you see an oak-tree felled, swear now you will plant two.
 Unless you swear the black oak bark will wrinkle over you
 And root you among the oaks where you were born but never grew.'
 This was my dream beneath the boughs, the dream that altered me.
 When I came out of the oakwood, back to human company,
 My walk was the walk of a human child, but my heart was a tree.²⁶

Many of Amitav Ghosh's novels thrive in the art of bringing Nature and its elements from the background to the fore as active participants. *The Glass Palace* is a work where the appropriation of nature by human beings precedes their ultimate disillusionment and downfall. The novel is a story of certain people who can never settle down in a place for a substantial amount of time, their movement being controlled by forces beyond their understanding. King Thebaw and Queen Supalayay, the royal family of Burma, are transported to India after being defeated by the British forces. Rajkumar Raha, who is one of the main characters of the novel in the sense that he is present almost throughout the novel

²⁶Ted Hughes, "My own true family".
<http://honeybuzzardcollective.blogspot.com/2010/01/my-own-true-family-by-ted-hughes.html>.

across events, float from Chittagong to Mandalay and subsequently to other places in order to create something worthwhile for himself. His beloved Dolly goes to India with the royal couple, only to return later to Burma with him. Both their sons move between Burma, Malaya, and Kolkata throughout their life. Uma Dey, the wife of Ratnagiri's collector Beni Prasad Dey, similarly, has to be displaced again and again, first to Ratnagiri, then to Kolkata-Burma-England-USA. And it so continues with other major characters as well. The motif of movement is a key characteristic of the people who occupy the story. Yet, it is not the change in people but in their surroundings and circumstances that materialises as the more crucial phenomenon. From the perspective of Anthropocene, the novel is a tale of the fall of nature in its primitive, unperturbed form and its transformation into a human surrogate, something brooding, catastrophic which only finds its reflections in the fall of the characters through a series of tragedies. Perhaps it is the natural response of inert things which take the forms of nightmares for the characters. The complement of this argument can be found in the following statement made by Matthew, the son of Saya John, where he speaks about the Morningside Rubber Estate:

This is my little empire, Uma. I made it. I took it from the jungle and molded it into what I wanted it to be. Now that it's mine, I take good care of it. There's law, there's order, everything is well run. Looking at it, you would think everything here is tame, domesticated, that all the parts have been fitted carefully together. But it's when you try to make the whole machine work that you discover that every bit of it is fighting back. It has nothing to do with me or with rights and wrongs: I could make this the best-run little kingdom in the world and it would still fight back.' 'And what's the reason for that?' 'It's nature: the nature that made these trees and the nature that made us.'²⁷

The novel begins with the protagonist, Rajkumar Raha singularly realising the sounds of the Gunshots from 'English Cannons'²⁸ that were coming along the curve of the Irrawaddy, the river which also carried him to Mandalay. The unsuspecting town of Mandalay had its own venues of surprises for Rajkumar, one of the principle characters in the novel: its 'road

²⁷ Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New York: Random House, 2001), 202.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

that followed a straight, unvarying course, bringing the horizon right into the middle of habitation'²⁹, the fort which 'was a miracle to behold, with its mile-long walls and its immense moat'³⁰, its king who never left the fort 'in the last seven years'³¹, a Chinese looking man dressed in European clothes, speaking Hindustani³², or the picture of a motor wagon showed by Matthew which has 'no shafts for a horse or an ox'³³. It is perhaps in the same feat of nonchalance that Rajkumar expresses his bewilderment when Matthew speaks about an impending war between the English and the Burmese king over teak:

Rajkumar gave a shout of laughter. 'A war over wood? Who's ever heard of such a thing?' He gave Matthew's head a disbelieving pat: the boy was a child, after all, despite his grown-up ways and his knowledge of unlikely things; he'd probably had a bad dream the night before.³⁴

Teakwood was a precious resource historically; but it was to become a key material for the progress of the empire: it would help in building ships, carriages, gunstocks, constructions of various kinds; moreover, in the novel, it gives the British the impetus to win over Burma with the show of a might which is readily expressed in the voice of the boatman:

Although they were using their own dialect, the nakhoda lowered his voice. 'The English are going to be here in a day or two,' he answered. 'They've been seen by boatmen. They are bringing the biggest fleet that's ever sailed on a river. They have cannon that can blow away the stone walls of a fort; they have boats so fast that they can outrun a tidal bore; their guns can shoot quicker than you can talk. They are coming like the tide: nothing can stand in their way.'³⁵

Eerily enough, the boat owner unconsciously describes the English army in comparison with geological forces: they are a force who can outdo the impacts of natural hazards. His surprise which leads to such an abnormal description finds match in the amazement of the uniformed guards of the palace when they realise the approaching offensive of the British forces:

²⁹Ibid., 4.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 6.

³²Ibid., 8.

³³Ibid., 10.

³⁴Ibid., 13.

³⁵Ibid., 15.

At first they'd refused to believe that the roar could be of human making. Guns of such power had never before been heard in this part of Burma, nor was it easy to conceive of an order of fire so rapid as to produce an indistinguishable merging of sound.³⁶

But this abrupt invasion advanced rather smoothly with the help of modern tools of power: 'the latest breech-loading rifles', the 'rapid-firing machine guns'³⁷ and sorts. But the most efficient tool probably was the Indian sepoy, working like well-oiled machinery in the cause of the empire's progress:

Among the units deployed at Minhla there were three battalions of sepoy. They were from the Hazara Regiment and the 1st Madras Pioneers. The Indians were seasoned, battle-hardened troops. The Hazaras, recruited from the Afghan border, had proved their worth to the British over decades of warfare, in India and abroad. The 1st Madras Pioneers were among the most loyal of Britain's foot soldiers. They had stood steadfastly by their masters even through the uprising of 1857, when most of northern India had risen against the British. The Burmese defenders of Minhla stood little chance against these sepoy, with their newly manufactured British equipment and their vastly superior numbers.³⁸

Again, with the thumping march of the British army towards the royal palace, the imagery of a natural occurrence of serious gravity becomes apparent as Rajkumar 'became aware of a ripple in the ground beneath him, a kind of drumbeat in the earth, a rhythmic tremor that travelled up his spine through the soles of his feet', which comes from the soldiers who are 'advancing like a tidal wave.'³⁹This tremendousness of power which can shake the earth, and move its inhabitants is experienced even by king Thebaw on Rangoon's waterfront when he is on his way to his new habitation in India: 'What vast, what incomprehensible power, to move people in such huge numbers from one place to another—emperors, kings, farmers, dockworkers, soldiers, coolies, policemen.'⁴⁰

The changes with the coming of the empire sweeps across Mandalay, as 'courtly Mandalay was now a bustling commercial hub; resources were being exploited with an

³⁶Ibid., 19.

³⁷Ibid., 23.

³⁸Ibid., 23.

³⁹Ibid., 24.

⁴⁰Ibid., 43.

energy and efficiency hitherto undreamt of.’⁴¹ In the article ‘The Anthropocene: A New Epoch of Geological Time?’ the authors argue that Urbanisation happened to contain the burst of population which, in turn, was a consequence of industrialisation(s) across places. They think that in order to serve these ever expanding populace, there were even more pressure on the industrial system which only led to further exploitation of natural wealth. According to them, these concentrated urban locales had the most impact on nature: ‘Cities, and especially megacities like Jakarta, Rio de Janeiro or Shanghai, are now the most visible expression of human influence on the planet. The growth of cities is therefore a characteristic feature of the Anthropocene.’⁴² The massive developmental remodelling of the cities has ‘wrought a roughly order of magnitude change in the long-term rate of erosion and sedimentation’⁴³, and the prevention of natural water flow in the rivers. Zalasiewicz et al. also suggest that while the constructions may be absorbed by nature in time, ‘the biological and chemical signals left by humans—invisible, intangible in our day-to-day lives—may leave a signal more profound than the physical structures of the world’s megacities.’⁴⁴ In the novel, Rangoon’s growth and prosperity and later, the transformation of Mandalay are therefore very crucial. These changes also turn the fortunes of the likes of Saya John and Rajkumar, who begin ‘earning rich profits’⁴⁵ on the back of an accelerated timber business. In describing the intricate process of the teak business, Ghosh puts forward a glimpse of the mechanised use of nature; how in the dry season, the trees were killed with precision: ‘The killing was achieved with a girdle of incisions, thin slits carved deep into the wood at a height of four feet and six inches off the ground (teak being ruled, despite the wildness of its terrain, by

⁴¹Ibid., 58.

⁴²Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Alan Haywood, and Michael Ellis, “The Anthropocene: a new epoch of geological time?”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* 369 (2011): 836, doi:10.1098/rsta.2010.0339.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 837.

⁴⁵Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New York: Random House, 2001), 58.

imperial stricture in every tiny detail)'.⁴⁶ Then the lifeless trees would await felling for years until they became dry enough to float. Sending the logs to their destination needed a massive process which involved humans, animals, and natural elements alike:

Then teams of elephants would go to work, guided by their handlers, their oo-sis and pe-sis, butting, prodding, levering with their trunks. Belts of wooden rollers would be laid on the ground, and quick-fingered pakyekis, specialized in the tying of chains, would dart between the elephants' legs, fastening steel harnesses. When finally the logs began to move, such was the friction of their passage that water-carriers would have to run beside them, dousing the smoking rollers with tilted buckets. Dragged to the banks of chaungs, the logs were piled into stacks and left to await the day when the chaungs would awaken from the hibernation of the hot season. With the first rains, the puddles along the streams' beds would stir and stretch and join hands, rising slowly to the task of clearing away the debris accumulated over the long months of desiccation. Then, in a matter of days, with the rains pouring down, they would rear up in their beds, growing hundreds-fold in height: where a week before they had wilted under the weight of twigs and leaves, they would now throw two-ton logs downstream like feathered darts.⁴⁷

The coming of the British blesses the local people with such knowledge of using nature to personal ends. In the novel, Saya John comments that the Burmese people were too naive to know how to make a profit out of nature, of elephants, of river streams. As the perpetrators of the carbon economy, the responsibility of the colonisers is quite ironically commented upon by the character of Saya:

It was the Europeans who saw that tame elephants could be made to work for human profit. It was they who invented everything we see around us in this logging camp. This entire way of life is their creation. It was they who thought of these methods of girdling trees, these ways of moving logs with elephants, this system of floating them downriver.⁴⁸

The blossoming entrepreneur that Saya John is, he sees something blissful in this art of appropriating nature and thinks this as a way forward if someone has to progress and live a good life. Hence his advice to Rajkumar: 'That is someone you can learn from. To bend the work of nature to your will; to make the trees of the earth useful to human beings—what could be more admirable, more exciting than this? That is what I would say to any boy who

⁴⁶Ibid., 60.

⁴⁷Ibid., 60-61.

⁴⁸Ibid., 65.

has his life before him.’⁴⁹ Although folks like Saya and Rajkumar see this ‘way of life’ as profitable and ride its wave, more prudent voices like the Queen’s manifest the wise picture of reality:

In our golden Burma, where no one ever went hungry and no one was too poor to write and read, all that will remain is destitution and ignorance, famine and despair. We were the first to be imprisoned in the name of their progress; millions more will follow. This is what awaits us all; this is how we will all end—as prisoners, in shantytowns born of the plague. A hundred years hence you will read the indictment of Europe’s greed in the difference between the kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm.⁵⁰

This new reality even changes the values that animals or nature itself bore previously. The tuskers of Burma’s jungles acquire the power of effecting London Stock Exchange.⁵¹ On the other hand, humans are flocked in batches as ‘cheap’ labour in the interests of few: ‘There was no quicker money to be made anywhere. Many foreign companies were busy digging for oil, and they were desperate for labor. They needed workers and were willing to pay handsomely.’⁵² Having possessed the natural assets that lay on the earth, the novel depicts how the ‘white men’ turn their gazes toward resources which lay underground.⁵³ Although this oil from beneath the ground had been in use as ‘an ointment for the treatment of certain skin conditions’⁵⁴, these new owners of the well soon began to make other usage of them, as ‘Wooden obelisks began to rise on the hillocks, cage- like pyramids inside which huge mechanical beaks hammered ceaselessly on the earth.’⁵⁵ In ‘The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives’, Steffen et al. state that till the Industrial Revolution, energy use was largely channelised due to the limitations of natural energy cycle such as the forces of wind, water, vegetation, and the animal kingdom. But the unearthing of fossil fuels removed

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., 76.

⁵¹Ibid., 80.

⁵²Ibid., 106.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., 105.

⁵⁵Ibid., 106.

these constraints and set the world on the way of unprecedented energy consumption. The study states that since fossil fuels gathered solar energy for ages, they were very rich source of fuel and were also easily accessible and transportable. For these reasons, once fossil fuel was excavated for industrial purpose, its use rose steeply in industrial societies: ‘In general, those industrial societies used four or five times as much energy as their agrarian predecessors, who in turn used three or four times as much as our hunting and gathering forebears.’⁵⁶ The outcome of the energy-intensive practices was ‘a significant increase in the human enterprise and its imprint on the environment.’⁵⁷ This is visible in the increased enterprise in Burma in the aftermath of the coming of these oil companies.

With time, new sources of money-making are invented; Rubber, ‘the material of the coming age’⁵⁸ becomes the commodity to invest in. If the business of teak meant the destruction of whatever was given by nature, Rubber guaranteed that human beings got control of the entire process- from planting to raising and milking it: the plantation of the product of coming times also becomes symptomatic of the kind of influence that humans could have in controlling something which was to be the prerogative of nature. All this makes ‘sense’ when one gets to realise the ‘value’ of this new age material:

This was the material of the coming age; the next generation of machines could not be made to work without this indispensable absorber of friction. The newest motorcars had dozens of rubber parts; the markets were potentially bottomless, the profits beyond imagining.⁵⁹

Interestingly, depending on the business interests, natural habitats are given currency and discriminated against based on their current market value: ‘Timber is a thing of the past, Rajkumar: you have to look to the future—and if there’s any tree on which money could be

⁵⁶ Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, And John McNeill, “The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* 369 (2011): 848, doi:10.1098/rsta.2010.0327.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New York: Random House, 2001), 158.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

said to grow, then this is it—rubber.’⁶⁰ The huge value of this material is emphasised by Elsa when she comments: ‘Not a drop of this stuff can be wasted’.⁶¹ Bruno Latour, in *We Have Never Been Modern*, defines ‘modernity’ as essentially a departure in time, something which distinguishes the present from the past. According to him,

The adjective ‘modern’ designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word ‘modern’, ‘modernization’, or ‘modernity’ appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past. Furthermore, the word is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns. ‘Modern’ is thus doubly asymmetrical: it designates a break in the regular passage of time, and it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished.⁶²

In the story, one can experience the repeated arrivals of ‘modern’ elements, the new always challenging the currency of the old. First, we have the teak-marketers who seem to be modern in comparison with the laymen who used teaks previously. Later, the rubber planters become the modern, as timber is sided as ‘a thing of the past’⁶³, hence regressive. Yet later, another plant displaces rubber from its crown of prosperity: towards the end of the novel Palm tree becomes the new sought-after material.

The rubber plantations, which are in a way, the result of human enterprise, discard the unpredictable trajectories of nature and become closer to human attributes. This is apparent from the description of Morningside Rubber Estate: ‘...stretching away as far as the eye could see, there were orderly rows of saplings, all of them exactly alike, all of them spaced with precise, geometrical regularity.’⁶⁴ The transformation that has taken place is so massive that the imposition of this systemic regulation on nature creates a feeling of unease in Dolly:

Dolly had visited Huay Zedi several times and had come to love the electric stillness of the jungle. But this was like neither city nor farm nor forest: there was something eerie about its uniformity; about the fact that such sameness could be imposed upon a

⁶⁰Ibid., 159.

⁶¹Ibid., 171.

⁶²Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10.

⁶³Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New York: Random House, 2001), 159.

⁶⁴Ibid., 171.

landscape of such natural exuberance. She remembered how startled she'd been when the car crossed from the heady profusion of the jungle into the ordered geometry of the plantation. 'It's like stepping into a labyrinth,' she said to Elsa.⁶⁵

The workforces that work in these plantations are tamed like the very setting. In the business of profit-making, it is not only nature but also human beings who have to fall in line, quite literally. This is apparent from the instance of the morning assembly in Matthew's rubber estate:

The ceremony that followed was part military parade and part school assembly. It was presided over by the estate's manager, Mr. Trimble, a portly Eurasian. The tappers fell into straight lines, facing a tall flagpole that stood at the far corner of the assembly ground. Mr. Trimble hoisted the Union Jack and then stood at attention beneath the flagpole, saluting stiffly, with two rows of Indian overseers lining up behind him—these were the 'conductors.'⁶⁶

The empire must regulate its subjects. But in their subjugation, the wretched cherish the desire to break free, to face the oppressor and ask for their due. The human surrogate, the rubber plantations, though budged by human-imposed symmetry, express their tendency to fight back, to undo the great ambitions of their masters. This kind of perception is evident in Matthew when he comments about the plantation to Uma:

To look at, it's all very green and beautiful—sort of like a forest. But actually it's a vast machine, made of wood and flesh. And at every turn, every little piece of this machine is resisting you, fighting you, waiting for you to give in.⁶⁷

The plantations' regularity is in a way, symptomatic of the advance of the empire; its growth and nourishment being driven by the invisible hand of the empire. Interestingly enough, it's not just the planters who face the difficulties of resistance from these rubber trees; The British army ends up on the receiving end at a crucial time of the conflict with Japanese forces:

The first job was to dig trenches, but here again the terrain proved deceptive. The soft loamy soil was easy to dig into but hard to shore up. Ground water leaked in at unpredictable depths. The wireless sets began to malfunction and the problem was

⁶⁵Ibid., 172.

⁶⁶Ibid., 200.

⁶⁷Ibid., 201.

traced to the environment: the placement of the trees was found to interfere with the reception of radio waves. Even runners could not be relied upon. Disoriented by the geometrical maze of the plantation, they kept losing their way.⁶⁸

The masters' regulations also meant the suppression of all kinds of rebellion that threatens the empire's dominance. The instance of the ghastly execution of sixteen Burmese rebels makes Uma question if this is the kind of modernity that the empire claimed to be a harbinger of, if this is the kind of progress that one would prefer to the archaic old world, a world where people did not know how to make profit out of nature, how to be connected to each other so that the harvests of exploitation could be transported in no time. Such is the strain of thought in Uma when she looks at the ticket of the KLM aeroplane- a marvel of modern civilisation and a symbol of this new 'shrunken world':

Looking at it now, she thought of the city she had flown out of in the silver Fokker; she thought of the businessmen—the timber merchants and oilmen—who were her fellow passengers; she thought of how they had all congratulated themselves on being present at the dawn of a new era, an age when aviation would make the world so small that the divisions of the past would disappear. She too had joined in: looking down from above on the foaming waves of the Bay of Bengal, it seemed impossible not to believe that the shrunken world that had built this aircraft was a better one than those that had preceded it.

And now, a few months later, here was this picture—of sixteen severed heads, put on display by the ruling power—as starkly medieval an image as could be imagined.⁶⁹

The empire thrived on the divisions among its subjects. When in Singapore, Hindu soldiers stand up for their Muslim brethren, the rulers can feel the ever increasing fissures. The empire also made sure to hide the true enemy, and it invented new enemies for its people, enemies whom the subjects have never known to have existed. It is perhaps with such a tone of irony that Ghosh conceives the incident at Ajmer platform where the Indian soldiers and Italian prisoners lock gazes:

At Ajmer there was a slight delay. The 1/1 Jats were shunted aside so that a trainload of Italian prisoners of war could pass by. The Italians and Indians stared at each other

⁶⁸Ibid., 336.

⁶⁹Ibid., 221.

in silence across the platform, through the barred windows of their respective carriages. This was their first glimpse of the enemy.⁷⁰

One must know the enemy to fight it, but the Indian soldiers recruited by the British find themselves in a dilemma as to who/ what it is that they are fighting. Slowly, it dawns upon some of them that they are mere cogs in a great machine which have also crushed their lives and the lives of their fellow countrymen, a machine which runs by motives of its own. Such a realisation is evident in Hardayal Singh, the army officer and Arjun's friend, struggling in the rubber plantations of Malaya under Japanese attack:

It was strange to be sitting on one side of a battle line, knowing that you had to fight and knowing at the same time that it wasn't really your fight—knowing that whether you won or lost, neither the blame nor the credit would be yours. Knowing that you're risking everything to defend a way of life that pushes you to the sidelines. It's almost as if you're fighting against yourself. It's strange to be sitting in a trench, holding a gun and asking yourself: Who is this weapon really aimed at? Am I being tricked into pointing it at myself?⁷¹

Once the tragedies occur on the scene, the full significance of the helplessness of the people, the same people who were once the part of this massive process of change, is revealed. In the course of the novel, Matthew and Elsa die in an accident, Neel die in the Japanese air raid- trampled by the Elephants, Saya John and Alison die in their encounter with Japanese troops, Manju dies from the pain of her husband's death as well as that of the long and unbearable journey to India. Arjun, Kishan Singh and many others perish hopelessly, fighting this all-encompassing machinery. The novel shows that once natural thresholds are breached for the satisfaction of human hunger, it leads to dangerous consequences. Once the trouble starts, it does not matter whether someone was a party to it or not. This can be referred back to Michel Serres's point of collective destruction; a loss which engulfs both the winners, the losers, as well as the spectators (this has been referred to at the beginning of the introduction). In the novel, characters such as Manju, Elsa, Dolly-

⁷⁰Ibid., 294.

⁷¹Ibid., 351.

apparently naive and bystanders in the scheme of things, receive such heavy blows which they can't quite comprehend. Manju, in the aftermath of her husband's death, speculates:

The planes were far up in the sky, barely visible, like the shadows of moths. She longed for them to come closer; close enough to see a face. She longed to know what kind of being this was that felt free to unleash this destruction: What was it for? What sort of creature could think of waging war upon herself, her husband, her child—a family such as hers— for what reason? Who were these people who took it upon themselves to remake the history of the world?⁷²

It is not without a sense of irony that in his final tiring and insufferable journey to India with his wife, daughter-in-law, and grand-daughter, Rajkumar is compelled to gather firewood to survive. The firewood comes from the trees as excess, almost given away by nature. This is in contrast to the violence made by teak-businessmen and rubber-planters who unleash death and destruction on the trees to lead a life of plenitude. Indeed things have run a full cycle as now it is Rajkumar and company who find themselves at the receiving end, and yet they receive something which is much more valuable than money, which can't even be given away for any amount of monetary wealth: 'The firewood was their capital, their only asset. At the end of each day it was this wood that Rajkumar bartered for food—there were always people who needed wood... Wood bought food more easily than money or valuables. Money cost nothing here.'⁷³ Thus, mockingly enough, the humans turn back to the primitive usage of nature to survive, but only after getting struck by unfortunate events.

However, even after the trouble that Rajkumar and his generation (his family, Saya John's family, Arjun and others) have to suffer, new changes and new ways of living come into being in comparatively calmer and post-conflict times. Jaya, Rajkumar's grandchild and a living synthesis of everything that has taken place, visits the Morningside estate years later to meet Ilongo. We get to know that the erstwhile rubber plantations are changing into palm tree plantations- a fruit which could extract vegetable oil- a cheap yet crucial commodity for

⁷²Ibid., 402.

⁷³Ibid., 405.

the modern lifestyle and hence a very important raw material for big business corporations.

Even Ghosh seems to comment on this very loosely so as to hint at its minute role in the plot:

The road headed uphill, snaking through alternating tracts of rubber and a crop of another kind—a short, stubby palm. These were oil palms, Ilongo explained, currently a more profitable investment than rubber: the plantation was increasing the acreage of the one at the expense of the other.⁷⁴

This ‘profitable investment’ would soon spread in other parts of south-east Asia, and would become a cause for the destruction of rainforests in Indonesia and elsewhere.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh elaborates on the centrality of Asia in the scheme of global climate crisis. He argues that for its huge population, Asia awaits the risk of getting affected in the worst way. But, according to him, the irony also lies in the fact that Asia is also the guilty participant, the arena where the seeds of catastrophe have been sown. As subjects of former empires, and as the followers of the kind of (Eurocentric) modernity that these empires once introduced, Asians, Ghosh states, will end up receiving much of the dire consequences of sticking to this lifestyle as ‘Asia’s historical experience demonstrates that our planet will not allow these patterns of living to be adopted by every human being.’⁷⁵ In *The Glass Palace*, most of the characters seem to chase these changes which symbolise ‘modernity’ like moths to a flame. The patterns of desire of the colonisers, when imitated, lead these characters to fatal ends. This can be read as a metaphor for Ghosh’s warning- that when a region as populous as Asia will try to follow the footprint of their colonial forbears, then the tragedy will be sure and total.

Thus, it can be said that although an enthralling story of peoples and places, of relationships made and broken, of fortunes that grow and later crumble, *The Glass Palace* is also the story of violence unleashed on earth by human beings. The story, from the anthropocentric perspective, is a classic example of not only the plunder of nature, but also

⁷⁴Ibid., 430.

⁷⁵Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Haryana: Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 64.

the internalisation of this mindset of exploitation by a great many number of people, under the siege of imperialism. What we have in the story is the uneventful yet 'stable' past of the people being swept by eventful and tumultuous currency of the arriving present. And it is for us to see which kind leads to true happiness as we have already discussed the significance of notions like 'progress' and 'modernity' in the present context. In order to realise the helplessness of the people in the novel in discarding the beliefs offered by powers beyond their control, we must also remember the totality of the empire's control and the extremity of its propagation of 'one of the distinctive features of Western modernity: its insistence on its own uniqueness.'⁷⁶ There are a handful of people in the novel who could see through the hoax, like Dolly, Uma, and even queen Supalayat. But in general, the string is carried on- the baton passed onto new realities. Hence, we have a glimpse into the business of palm-oil when the plot reaches a relatively calmer and saner turn. This, in particular, is the testimony of the invisible trail (of modes of being) left by former powers- a legacy so strong that one can't be sure if it can be gotten rid of at all. It will be fitting, in this context, to end with a speech made by Arjun when, toward the end of the novel, he comments on the totality of the subjugation of people like him and so many other Asians:

'Did we ever have a hope?' he said. 'We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives; colored everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves. And that, I suppose, is where I am . . .'⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁷⁷ Amitav Ghosh, *The Glass Palace* (New York: Random House, 2001), 460.

Chapter II

Alternative Methods of Cognition in *The Hungry Tide*

And if I cried, who'd listen to me in those angelic
orders? Even if one of them suddenly held me
to his heart, I'd vanish in his overwhelming
presence. Because beauty's nothing
but the start of terror we can hardly bear,
and we adore it because of the serene scorn
it could kill us with. Every angel's terrifying.
So I control myself and choke back the lure
of my dark cry. Ah, who can we turn to,
then? Neither angels nor men,
and the animals already know by instinct
we're not comfortably at home
in our translated world.⁷⁸

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* locates itself in the '*athhero bhatir desh*'⁷⁹ - a land ruled by the multitudes of tides- all having their different features. The 'tide country' that is the locale of the novel is the present day Sunderbans spread over the coasts of West Bengal (India) and Bangladesh. The tide country, in the novel, is a land which can't be identified with other geographical territories by virtue of its unusual relation with time. To describe the distinct flow of events in the tide country, Ghosh, through the character of Nirmal, depicts the speciality of the land:

What was happening here, I realized, was that the wheel of time was spinning too fast to be seen. In other places it took decades, even centuries, for a river to change course; it took an epoch for an island to appear. But here in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days. In other places forests take centuries, even millennia, to

⁷⁸Rainer Maria Rilke, "The First Elegy", in *Duino Elegies and The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company Boston, 1975), 5.

⁷⁹Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004), 95.

regenerate; but mangroves can recolonize a denuded island in ten to fifteen years. Could it be that the very rhythms of the earth were quickened here so that they unfolded at an accelerated pace?⁸⁰

The tide country, as we are going to see, is not only a land of exception for its geographical aspects but also for its cultural amalgamation with the people who reside in its clutches. Unlike other natural settings in which people write their histories, the unpredictable events of the tide country make the usual and authoritative continuity of human actions impossible. It moulds and controls the fates of its subjects and becomes a brooding presence in their nights and days.

In the novel, people from different places end up in this tide country which becomes a melting pot of not only human beings but also of human characters, emotions, and varieties of humanness. The novel begins with a train journey where we can see Piyali Roy and Kanai Dutt both making their ways to the tide country. In the course of the journey they get to know each other and about their interests. Piya is a Cetologist who is heading towards the rivers of the tide country to study Gangetic Dolphins. Kanai is a translator and interpreter by profession who has been summoned by his aunt, Nilima Bose (Mashima) at her residence in Lusibari, an island in the tide country. Kanai invites Piya to his aunt's residence since she will be working in close areas. Kanai meets his aunt at Canning station and on their way to Lusibari, they talk about Kanai's expulsion to the same island years ago when he was a kid, and about his uncle and Nilima's husband Nirmal's mental deterioration in the last few years of his life. Piya, on the other hand, procures necessary permits to work on the waters and find any lead if possible. But she has a horrible experience with the guard provided by the authorities and the launch owner. In the course of their journey, they come across the boat of Fokir Mondal, a boatman who was fishing in 'off-limits' waters according to the guard, for which he becomes subject to harassment to the guard and the launch owner, Mej-da. Then,

⁸⁰Ibid., 202.

through an accident, Piya ends up on Fokir's boat and she has no mind for returning to the launch. Fokir is able to show Piya the spots where she could sight the Dolphins and after a couple of days, they head toward Lusibari. When Kanai reaches Lusibari, he gets his hands on the notebook that his uncle left for him and when he begins reading it, a flow of historical events flash up through the narrative of Nirmal which includes the infamous Marichjhapi massacre and how he himself got involved in the affair. Through recollections of the past, we know the history of these islands- how these islands were populated with the endeavour of the likes of Sir Hamilton and how his legacy is still strong in Lusibari. The geography of Lusibari and its surroundings too, are described in a revealing way:

At low tide, when the embankment, or bādh, was riding high on the water, Lusibari looked like some gigantic earthen ark, floating serenely above its surroundings. Only at high tide was it evident that the interior of the island lay well below the level of the water. At such times the unsinkable ship of a few hours before took on the appearance of a flimsy saucer that could tip over at any moment and go circling down into the depths.⁸¹

After Piya arrives at Lusibari, she arranges for another expedition on the rivers within a couple of days, this time Fokir, Horen, and Kanai accompanying him. This journey also heats up the situation as Mashima is worried about her nephew's well-being, Fokir's wife Moyna is cautious about the American, Piya, who is showing too much interest in her husband, Kanai is anxious about his prospects with Piya, and behind all these there is the gradual revelation of Nirmal's story which effects all of them in certain ways. In the waters, even before they get to do what they set out for, they come across the incident of a tiger killing in a village which triggers different emotions in all of them. It seems to disturb Piya the most, with others being okay with it. When, in the course of their work, Kanai and Fokir are alone on Fokir's boat, there is tension between them and Kanai is left alone in a nearby jungle where he visualises the man-eater, a tiger. The shock startles him, and upon returning to the launch, he decides to head back to Lusibari on some pretence. But before leaving, he

⁸¹Ibid., 39.

finishes Nimal's notebook which ends with the beginning of state authorised violence at Morichjhapi in May, 1979 and the plight of the helpless dwellers. The next day, when he and Horen leave for Lusibari in the launch, Piya and Fokir set off toward distant waters into deep creeks where they can locate the dolphins. On their way, Horen gets the news that there would be a storm the next day and they return to Garjontola to wait for Fokir and Piya to return so that all of them can safely reach Lusibari early next morning. But Piya and Fokir have other plans; they spend the night anchoring the boat in a creek, unaware of the impending danger. Next morning, Horen reluctantly leaves Garjontola as the time of the storm draws closer. Even before they can reach Lusibari, the storm picks up pace and Kanai reaches the shelter of the Hospital just in time. In turbulent waters raged by the storm, Fokir's boat is almost shattered and the two of them try to withstand the storm by tying themselves with a tree. But in that destructive Cyclone, Fokir is hit with a trunk and dies in his effort to save Piya's life. After the tragedy, Piya feels indebted to Fokir and his family. She makes good use of the knowledge that she gained through Fokir, and starts her next project from Lusibari, seeking to be a part of the place and a help to Fokir's wife and son.

In 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that historians have, in an orthodox way, separated human history or the record of the social evolution of humans and natural history which concerns the changes in geology. Although the separation served well for a long time, climate change, according to Chakrabarty, has put a question mark on this division. He states that although the agricultural-industrial way of life and the high fossil fuel usage are the legacy of a few developed nations which brought the Anthropocene into being, the catastrophe will endanger the existence of all human beings as a species. He suggests that we move beyond the last few centuries of recorded history and realise how contingency played a major role in enabling human beings across places to cultivate lands or discover fossil fuels. In his words, human beings did not always act toward

this climate catastrophe- it is just that ‘we have stumbled into it’⁸²with the help of some planetary situations, and later, it got accelerated by the industrial activities of some nations. Chakrabarty argues that although this high Carbon footprint is the doing of few nations, if we are stuck only on the history of capitalism, it will not get us anywhere because the crisis that has befallen us is the crisis of human species which calls for our shared responsibilities that traces back to our age old shared history.

Chakrabarty’s argument for a more inclusive outlook which undermines the rapid march for freedom of some human societies (advancement of capitalism) and his criticism of ‘disciplinary prejudices’⁸³build toward the need to ‘look on human history as part of the history of life on this planet’.⁸⁴ Quite interestingly, this comprehensive view of human life finds reflection in Bruno Latour’s book *We Have Never Been Modern*, albeit in a different manner. Latour brings forth two critical processes which define Modernity in the Western cannon: ‘Hybridization’ and ‘Purification’. ‘Hybridization’ serves to create ‘networks’ which hold different kind of things like governance, religion, war, science in one place. He defines ‘Purification’ as the process of creating separation between humans and non-humans.⁸⁵ This process serves to distance society and the natural world, and encourages compartmentalisation of disciplines. According to him, the latter gains currency because of the former one: Modernity characterises itself with the co-existence of the simultaneous processes of proliferation and separation. Latour argues that the Modern age revelled in its capability to be distinct, particularly in regard to time: ‘The adjective ‘modern’ designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word ‘modern’, ‘modernization’, or ‘modernity’ appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable

⁸²Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (January 2009): 217, <https://doi.org/10.1086/596640>.

⁸³Ibid., 215.

⁸⁴Ibid., 213.

⁸⁵Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10-11.

past.⁸⁶ This archaic past (which is still the present of certain cultures) holds the possibility of proliferation which the modern West couldn't afford, according to Latour. He states that although it is impossible for an anthropologist to see the Western society like a 'seamless fabric',⁸⁷ the synchronous study of different fields becomes possible in the case of other cultures like the Chinese or the Achuar. Latour calls this 'nature-culture': 'hybrids of nature and culture'.⁸⁸ Latour sets out by suggesting that even the Western cultures were always aware of the two practices (Hybridization and Purification) going on together with them, but didn't acknowledge it in the fear of becoming premodern/ antimodern.

It is in the interest of the present study to focus on the converging point between these two works which are otherwise quite different in their scopes. Chakrabarty demonstrates the importance of being aware of our species history and our shared past in order to tackle the phenomenon of Anthropocene. Latour shows how the natural world and the human society always got hybridized and it was Modernity's thrust on 'individual moral adventure'⁸⁹ that dismissed the consciousness for the non-human:

Modernity is often defined in terms of humanism, either as a way of saluting the birth of 'man' or as a way of announcing his death. But this habit itself is modern, because it remains asymmetrical. It overlooks the simultaneous birth of 'nonhumanity' - things, or objects, or beasts – and the equally strange beginning of a crossed-out God, relegated to the sidelines.⁹⁰

To drive the point home and show the relation between modernity, the sense of human alienation from the surroundings and the coming of the Anthropocene, I shall use Ghosh's own words regarding the eerie connection between Climate catastrophe and modern ways of life:

⁸⁶Ibid., 10.

⁸⁷Ibid., 7.

⁸⁸Ibid., 10.

⁸⁹Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Haryana: Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 55.

⁹⁰Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 13.

Over the last few decades, the arc of the Great Acceleration has been completely in line with the trajectory of modernity: it has led to the destruction of communities, to ever greater individualization and anomie, to the industrialization of agriculture and to the centralization of distribution systems. At the same time it has also reinforced the mind-body dualism to the point of producing the illusion, so powerfully propagated in cyberspace, that human beings have freed themselves from their material circumstances to the point where they have become floating personalities ‘decoupled from a body’. The cumulative effect is the extinction of exactly those forms of traditional knowledge, material skills, art and ties of community that might provide succour to vast numbers of people around the world—and especially to those who are still bound to the land—as the impacts intensify.⁹¹

I shall use this rallying point as a critique to investigate the events in *The Hungry Tide* which revolves around the locale of the tide country, in relation to the idea of Anthropocene.

In *The Hungry Tide*, the islands as habitats are shown to denounce human individualism and separation between elements. The tide country censures any kind of set divisions between fields: land and water, rivers and seas, animals and humans, past and present, nature and faith. Ghosh writes that there are no clearly visible boundaries to separate fresh water from salt water, or rivers from seas. The tidewater intrudes deep inland and submerges stretches of forest under water, which surface hours later. The tidal currents ‘are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily — some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before.’⁹²In day to day affairs, human life in these islands is dependent on natural contingencies as well as the acts of the wild. From reclaiming islands to making settlements there: the islanders realise it pretty well that their tomorrow depends not only on their personal acts, but also on the coming of the tides, the blowing of storms, the appearances of the man-eaters, and even the strength of the ‘*badh*’ (embankment).The unpredictability of human life is natural in the mangroves where to live is to fight against all odds:

⁹¹Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Haryana: Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 107.

⁹²Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004), 13.

At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them. Every year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles.⁹³

In the tide country, the people's belief in the legends and myths bind them together with each other as well as with the hazards of the land and brings a different sense of time and space. At the beginning of the novel, in Kanai's train journey, Nirmal's story about the legends of the Ganges and the subsequent description of the islands obscure 'the linear movement of the train by imposing the time of myth'.⁹⁴ In his story, the river Ganges' journey is explained not with geographical data but with mythical facts:

there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva's matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe thousands, of tangled strands.⁹⁵

Nirmal's story connects the past with the present, the unknown with the known, the myth with reality. The belief in Bon Bibi's story is another connecting force which acts like reality for the lay people and pervades their imagination. In the novel, we see the first glimpses of this belief in Horen Naskor when he meets Nirmal, Nilima and Kanai at the embankment of river Matla. He says: "Jongol korté geslam, I went to 'do jungle' yesterday, Mashima," Horen replied, 'and Bon Bibi granted me enough honey to fill two bottles. I came here to sell them.'⁹⁶ The detail of Bon Bibi is informed immediately through the mouth of Nilima: "The goddess of the forest,' Nilima had whispered back. 'In these parts, people believe she rules over all the animals of the jungle.'⁹⁷ But for a city bred kid like Kanai, it is hard to fathom the situation which goes beyond logic and he struggles to hide his amusement: "O?" Kanai had been astonished to think that a grown-up, a big strong man at that, could entertain such

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴ Laura A. White, "Novel Vision: Seeing the Sunderbans through Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20, no. 3 (Summer2013): 519, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44087261>.

⁹⁵ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004), 12.

⁹⁶Ibid., 32.

⁹⁷Ibid.

an idea. He had been unable to suppress the snort of laughter that rose to his lips.’⁹⁸ Nilima’s rebuke of Kanai is quite symptomatic of how realities change with changing beliefs and truths become relative: ‘“Kanai!’ Nilima had been quick to scold. ‘Don’t act like you know everything. You’re not in Calcutta now.’”⁹⁹ The significance of Bon Bibi’s legend is magnified in the performances of the story. The greed of Dhona, the sorrow of Dukhey, the cruelty of the demon-king Dokkhin Rai, the strength of Shah Jongoli, and the mercy of Bon Bibi become so vivid even in that humble performance in the hospital complex that the emotions couldn’t be checked: ‘No less real were the tears of joy and gratitude that flowed from his eyes when Bon Bibi appeared at Dukhey’s side. Nor was he the only one: everyone in the audience wept...’¹⁰⁰ Even in this story is an irony evident which is again an antithesis of the trajectory of the modern world: ‘Thus did Bon Bibi show the world the law of the forest, which was that the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous were rewarded.’¹⁰¹

The mangroves are also unique in its chemistry with time- it doesn’t let the recording take place. History gets little chance to write itself in the mangroves as the past is always washed away by the unfeigned dominance of the landscape:

It is common knowledge that almost every island in the tide country has been inhabited at some time or another. But to look at them you would never know: the speciality of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts.¹⁰²

The landscape’s peculiarity also unsettles the linearity of the human vision. According to White, ‘the landscape confounds the ability of the human eye to oversee and compose order;

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 97.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid., 51.

the movement of the tides and the trees continually shifts the eye's relation to the land...'¹⁰³

The tide country's association with its inhabitants is so deep that it haunts them even when they are away. It is not simply a territory where one can stay and leave. Their native land is not only a place around them; it gets into the head as an abode of freedom, a manifestation of the bountiful Mother Nature, and a symbol of fluidity of life. Their innate connection with their natural habitat manifests itself; their homeland draws them with its intriguing features. When Kusum is in the dry, rough atmosphere of Dhanbad, all her senses feel for the muddy, green tide country and the longing does not limit itself to her conscious state, haunting her even in dreams:

Many months passed and we spoke of coming back here: that place was not home; there was nothing for us there. Walking on iron, we longed for the touch of mud; encircled by rails, we dreamed of the Raimangal in flood. We dreamed of storm-tossed islands, straining at their anchors, and of the rivers that bound them in golden fetters. We thought of high tide and the mohnasmounting, of islands submerged like underwater clouds.¹⁰⁴

This territory in contention seems to contradict the tenets of modernity on all fronts. At a very basic level, with all its beauty and mysteries, the tide country resists any sense of romantic Nature which can be a spot of comforting excursions. We have Kanai's shocking experience of being sent to Lusibari in his childhood as a 'punishment'. Later, we can see how normal domestic life of the place is invaded with the unpredictable occurrences of wildlife:

At night, lying on his cot, Kanai would imagine that the roof had come alive; the thatch would rustle and shake and there would be frantic little outbursts of squeals and hisses. From time to time there would be loud plops as creatures of various kinds fell to the floor; usually they would go shooting off again and slip away under the door, but every once in a while Kanai would wake up in the morning and find a dead snake or a clutch of birds' eggs lying on the ground, providing a feast for an army of beetles and ants.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Laura A. White, "Novel Vision: Seeing the Sunderbans through Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 521, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44087261>

¹⁰⁴ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004), 147.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

At a deeper level though, the place becomes entangled with the cultural layers of its populace and denies any kind of purification within its limits. Thus in the novel, Nirmal describes how the popular myth permeates throughout the surroundings, becoming a lived reality:

We came to a *mohona*, and as we were crossing it, I noticed that Horen and Kusum had begun to make genuflections of the kind that are usually occasioned by the sight of a deity or a temple — they raised their fingertips to their foreheads and then touched their chests. Fokir, watching attentively, attempted to do the same. ‘What’s happening?’ I asked in surprise. ‘What do you see? There’s no temple nearby. This is just open water.’ Kusum laughed and at first wouldn’t tell me. Then, after some pleading and cajolery, she divulged that at that moment, in the very middle of that *mohona*, we had crossed the line Bon Bibi had drawn to divide the tide country. In other words we had crossed the border that separates the realm of human beings from the domain of Dokkhin Rai and his demons. I realized with a sense of shock that this chimerical line was, to her and to Horen, as real as a barbed-wire fence might be to me.¹⁰⁶

The belief of the natives gives passage to the unknown, the mysterious, the uncanny- the traits modernity so abhors. Their belief makes them acknowledge their limitations, and makes them realise the immaterial demarcation between the realms of Bon Bibi and Dokkhin Rai as a real boundary for them. This boundary also becomes a metaphor for a threshold crossing which would mean danger to the intruders. Hence, here is a counter-narrative for the avant-garde: the sustainability of human life rests upon an act of faith; the humans can only live a sustainable life till the time they keep to certain limits. In the novel, this act of faith is achieved with a sense of fear, a fear which is diametrically opposite to the mindless confidence of the modern man about his hold on things. In the tide country’s unabashed primitiveness, this fear becomes a compulsion, as is said by Horen to Nirmal in the novel: ‘‘Because it’s the fear that protects you, Saar; it’s what keeps you alive. Without it the danger doubles.’’¹⁰⁷ This fear is essential to believe in things beyond human understanding, to stay at a safe distance from the inscrutable processes of Nature, a fear which makes one humble and lets one realise his limitations before the vast and endless cosmos in which the humans are

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 201.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.,221.

but grains of sand. Perhaps, this is the kind of realisation that dawns on Kanai toward the end of the novel after he feels the fright, being in the grip of merciless mangrove, which results in the obliteration of his feigned knowledge, his superficial confidence, leaving him aware of his ignorance and limitations.

In the novel, the perception and actions of people differ based on their forms of knowledge. Piya is a person brought up in metropolitan atmosphere and educated in the formal modern education system. She is a person who shows extreme concern toward wildlife and the inert objects of nature. It is she who is thoroughly disturbed with the tiger killing and shows her promise for great sacrifice toward the cause of preserving the non-human. Yet, her vision, on a closer analysis, seems to be very different from the likes of Fokir who knows things by some kind of intuition. Piya's vision of the mammals, and of all other natural objects for that matter, is mediated by modern tools: either her equipments or her theoretical knowledge of things. Fokir's unadulterated knowledge of the landscape and its life forms comes in sharp contrast with Piya's way of knowing things in line with the dominating form of gaining knowledge: by dissecting things. Thus, we observe the task she conceives for herself when she measures the expanse of her study:

Now, as she sat in the boat thinking about these connections and interrelations, Piya had to close her eyes, so dazzling was the universe of possibilities that opened in her mind. There was so much to do, so many queries to answer, so many leads to follow: she would have to acquire a working knowledge of a whole range of subjects — hydraulics, sedimentation geology, water chemistry, climatology; she would have to do seasonal censuses of the Orcaella population; she would have to map the dolphins' movement corridors; she would have to scrounge for grants, apply for permits and permissions; there was no horizon to the work that lay ahead.¹⁰⁸

It will suffice to say that this mediated knowledge is not only different in its process of accumulation, but also in its goal or usage. While Fokir's intuitive knowledge seems to be just there, without any destination as such, Piya's attempted discovery is something which can be 'capitalised', can be used to prove the worthiness of an individual:

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 115.

... but it was also true that if she was able to go through with it — even a part of it — it would be as fine a piece of descriptive science as any. It would be enough; as an alibi for a life, it would do; she would not need to apologize for how she had spent her time on this earth.¹⁰⁹

In terms of gaining knowledge and perceiving things, another human of the metropolis, Kanai's ways are not too different from Piya's, although his interests are quite different. Kanai is a person who, at least initially, is quite confident of his abilities, his capabilities in deciphering language as well as human beings. Thus, with a decisive nonchalance, he identifies Piya's American nationality, owing to his ability to interpret tongues. At the beginning of the novel, both Piya and Kanai locate the islands in a map, which signifies a way of knowing which is not primary, which Laura A. White terms as a 'type of distant overseeing that Ghosh distinguishes from a lived sense of place'.¹¹⁰ Kanai is another outsider who cannot come to terms with the rhythms of life in the tide country. The ways of the islanders seem to be funny to him. The lived realities of the place appear to him as distant fantasies. Thus, when Mashima warns him about tigers of the mangroves, he makes light of the situation due to its improbability: 'The tigers, you mean?' Kanai said. A smile lifted the corners of his lips. 'Why would a tiger pick me when it could have a tasty young morsel like Piya?'¹¹¹ The lack of his perception in and disconnect with natural affairs are quite evident. Kanai is the typical man of rationale who can value only those things which have material prospects: 'He had almost forgotten what it meant to look at something so ardently — an immaterial thing, not a commodity nor a convenience nor an object of erotic interest.'¹¹²

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 116.

¹¹⁰ Laura A. White, "Novel Vision: Seeing the Sunderbans through Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 519, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44087261>.

¹¹¹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004), 216.

¹¹²Ibid., 243.

In contrast to these two city-bred persons, Nirmal stands as a synthesis- a great convergence of different kinds of knowledge and consciousness. On the one hand, he is an intellectual, a man of letters. On the other hand, he is aware of the myths, the legends that colour the lives of the islanders, and the geology that is key to the understanding of the islands. He is termed as an impractical man by Kolkata's intelligentsia and is often criticised by his close ones for his mindless idealism. But it is he who feels sympathetic toward the cause of the helpless people, the poor folk who claim shelter on the island of Marichjhapi. Indeed, the incidents of Marichjhapi show how he was different from his comrades, how he saw things in their manifestations and was not stuck to political and theoretical compulsions. Fokir is also a character whose knowledge is either despised by the likes of Moyna and Kanai, or eulogised by Piya, so as to regard it as something abnormal. This categorisation of Fokir's knowledge and its use in utilisable (by Piya) and economic (by Moyna) causes become symptomatic of the erosion of unconventional, intuitive, and native modes of knowledge which is a characteristic of the Anthropocene.

The Marichjhapi massacre in the novel brings into tension the two world views: the unique universe of the tide country and the outside world. The islands of the tide country present a model of life which contradicts hegemonic notions of living. Here, everything including the human beings is reduced to primitive states- it is not only the nature of the place but also the necessity. But the Marichjhapi incident shows how the destitute people are not seen in their realities, but according to the viewers' mediated projections. This altered projection of the authorities and the world at large find the settlers as encroachers who threaten the wild life in the mangroves. Thus, the humans of the infamous island become theoretically different from these concerned human beings who seek to establish their way of looking at Nature. The islanders are not aware of their fault: why would they be reduced below the status of animals. But their ways of living in close proximity to nature, which was

originally the way of living for the human species, is vilified by forces who act as proxies for cultures that thrive on the nature-culture binary and who seek to relegate Nature to set boundaries, subject to conservation. In this context, it is relevant to note the play of words between ‘animal’ and ‘human’. Although it may be expected that human beings are up in the species ladder, the people of Marichjhapi are extended a kind of apathy which stands in contrast to the concern shown to the wild life. Pertinent to this is Kanai’s remark about the horror of the tiger attacks, incidents which get suppressed only because the victims lack representation:

If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter.¹¹³

Here thus, is an example of how the possibilities of species consciousness among human beings are ruined; how the possibilities of the co-existence of Nature and Culture is deemed invalid by the powers who themselves wield geological force on the earth.

To read the situation from the perspective of Anthropocene is to realise that the so called ‘encroachers’ couldn’t be perceived as a part of the natural setting because the people in power attached their own legacy of exploitation to these settlers. The settlers have no agency, and their perspective holds absolutely no value in ‘History’. They are certainly deprived of their human agency, all of which is grabbed by the people who act against them. Hence, the question becomes evident here, which is also a key question lying at the core of the Anthropocene: who is the human here? The authorities, officials, or the settlers? Hence this unevenness of agency and expression is also the tale of the coming of the Anthropocene.

Ghosh writes in the novel:

She had thought of these concepts — keystone species, biomass — as ideas that applied to things other than herself. To nature, in short — for who was it who had said

¹¹³ Ibid., 272.

that the definition of ‘nature’ was that it included everything not formed by human intention?¹¹⁴

It is certainly a question worth asking: which party meant harm intentionally- the settlers or the people in power, and who acted under bare necessities. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh writes:

... indeed, being independent of Nature was considered one of the defining characteristics of freedom itself. Only those peoples who had thrown off the shackles of their environment were thought to be endowed with historical agency; they alone were believed to merit the attention of historians—other peoples might have had a past but they were thought to lack history, which realizes itself through human agency.¹¹⁵

It is fitting that the islanders don’t get to speak their part, their internalisation of the manifold spirits of the surrounding deny them a place in History. Thus, the storm toward the end of the novel becomes as much a metaphor as a material occurrence. The storm, an act of nature, attracts enough attention to merit a place in records. In a way, it points out one of the key questions of Anthropocene: what constitutes an event in the Anthropocene? We know that Modernity neglects certain events and promotes some to advance its project. This same inequality is meted out to these wretched islanders: their collective endeavour to build something, and their existence based on their intricate bonds with nature- both are undone with the sweep of ‘modernity’ and their elimination is neglected by the modern man’s History. This certainly questions our ethics- what attracts our attention? The Anthropocene is a result of years of neglect of certain mild processes which kept on happening for ages and we only took note when really freakish things started to occur. This is the lack of vision, the limited perception of people in power which fail to keep pace with the rhythm of nature, a rhythm the knowledge of which can be gained upon freeing the mind of all the redundant baggage, prejudices that Modernity seeks to assign. Ghosh writes:

¹¹⁴Ibid., 129.

¹¹⁵Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Haryana: Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 82.

‘But that’s how it is in nature, you know: for a long time nothing happens, and then there’s a burst of explosive activity and it’s over in seconds. Very few people can adapt themselves to that kind of rhythm— one in a million, I’d say. That’s why it was so amazing to come across someone like Fokir.’¹¹⁶

The knowledge that Kanai gets to realise at Gorjontola certainly disillusion him, and helps him gain a broader vision; and it is not the kind that the world would cherish: ‘At Garjontola I learned how little I know of myself and of the world.’¹¹⁷

In a multitude of ways, the tide country counters predominant structures of thought. It prevents the authoritative gaze of the human beings as most of the happenings in the tide country happen out of their bounds. Rather, these events signal to a larger system in which the humans play a small and perhaps a passive role. The Marichjhapi problem may hint at the heightened active participation of certain interests in an otherwise passive natural setting which brings forth the question of cultural issues with respect to the environment. Irrespective of the realisation gained, courses corrected, the tide country continues to hold its sway in its territory- it washes out events and continues to bury the past; death and destruction are followed by new possibilities of the present. The ghosts of bygone days make space for the genesis of a new future; Fokir’s data serves to build Piya’s project, much like the submersion of mangroves and surfacing of islands. The novel leaves us with the cognition that it is certainly not about saving Nature, but realising our minuscule place in the scheme of things which span beyond the boundaries of our knowledge where we can only survive as a collective. It is also about knowing that the life of human species on earth is made possible with the silent contract between the humans and nature, that the former can survive only when it realises its dependence on so much else happening all around, that all the history of humankind can be buried underground by one great whim of Nature, changing everything the

¹¹⁶ Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004), 241.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 318.

way we know it. Ghosh testifies to this spirit by bringing in Rilke: ‘It was as if the whole tide country were speaking in the voice of the Poet: ‘life is lived in transformation.’’¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸Ibid., 202.

Chapter III

The Desire for Profit and the Conversion of the Natural in *Sea of Poppies*

To put the matter simply: there is nothing they want from us – they've got it into their heads that they have no use for our products and manufactures. But we, on the other hand, can't do without their tea and their silks. If not for opium, the drain of silver from Britain and her colonies would be too great to sustain.¹¹⁹

A typical feature of the Anthropocene is the changed landscapes- surroundings which lose their previous avatars in the onslaught of changes brought forth by modernisation and capitalistic impulses. These places which are in many ways home to its natural inhabitants also leave its people in disarray in times of unsustainable change. In Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, people who located themselves in certain natural boundaries find it hard to stay put with the transforming reality of the nature around them. The story tells how the rapidity of colonial constructions and changes dislocate these destitute people who find these altered surroundings as alien as the faraway places they are taken to. The age-long agricultural practices of the natives and their familiar environments are replaced by the colonial authorities who force new crop patterns and disturb the nature-human bond which was present not only in reality but also in cultural practices of the natives. New economies emerge where the poor are exploited ever more and they have no way out but to sell themselves. In this scheme of exploitation, opium plays a crucial role- although a known crop to Indian farmers, the British companies use poppy as a cash crop to gain high profit and as means to get a hold on China through its addictive substance. Opium is not only the agent of colonial oppression in the novel, it also overpowers human beings as it strips them of their agency and

¹¹⁹Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 75.

individual will, making them act on some non-human motif. In the novel, when the colonisers enforce opium cultivation on farmers of Bihar, it brings massive damages upon those farmers as there appears the scarcity of staple food and vegetables. Through the appropriation of this wonder crop, the rulers cause destruction to both nature and the poor farmers, resulting in famine and forced migration.

In the novel, Deeti (Aditi) is the wife of Hukum Singh, an opium addicted impotent former sepoy of the British army who works in the Ghazipur opium factory in Bihar. She, like Hukum's brother Chandan Singh, cultivates poppies in their fields near her house. She, like most farmers, is compelled to cultivate this hard-to-grow crop under the dictate of the colonial authorities. The produced opium is a cherished product to the men in power as it is the single largest export to China and a huge financially profitable business. Deeti is the central figure in the novel, and she also stands out by virtue of her intuitive vision which can predict things to come. In one such incident, she envisions a great ship on the Ganges, although she has never seen a ship in reality. Deeti's husband gets seriously ill at the factory and becomes almost disable. Taking this opportunity, his brother Chandan Singh lures her with all kind of wrong offers and in this tension, we get to know that it was Chandan who fathered Kabutri, Deeti's daughter, on the fateful night of her marriage. Deeti denies his offers and when Hukum Singh finally dies, she thinks it better to be a Sati and demolish herself on the funeral pyre of her husband rather than accept a life of indignity. But Kalua, the low caste cart driver who often lent his services to Deeti's family miraculously rescues her from the funeral pyre and they elope along the Ganges. But before long, they are tracked by Hukum Singh's uncle Bhairo Singh's people and they decide to include themselves as indentured labourers who are to be transported to Mauritius onboard the Ibis, a former slave ship which Mr Benjamin Burnham has bought. The crew with which the Ibis comes to Calcutta includes Zachary Reid, a black American who has risen through the ranks to be the

ship's second mate, and a team of lascars headed by Serang Ali. Mr Burnham wants to use the ship to send coolies to Mauritius and earn some money since his usual business, the export of opium has been halted by the Chinese. In his opium business, the Raskhali Rajas had a share. But when the business went into losses, the Raskhali estates fell in debt to the Burnham Brothers. The new Raja, Neel Rattan Halder is not able to settle the matter with Mr. Burnham and refuses to sell his estate to settle the debt. Mr Burnham, on the advice of his Gomusta, Babu Nob Kissin Panda, complicates Neel in a case of forgery and he is convicted by the British judge and given seven years of overseas imprisonment. Paulette Lambert, the daughter of the former curator of Calcutta's Botanical Gardens, Mr. Pierre Lambert, is adopted by Mr Burnham's after the death of her father. She is a liberal person who can't adapt to the ways of the religious zeal of the Burnhams. She plans to go to Mauritius where the Ibis is actually heading, as she was born in that place. Babu Nob Kissin, a firm religious person himself, thinks Zachary as the avatar of Krishna, the dark God of Hinduism. He starts following him closely and dreams of getting his '*mukti*' with the grace of the avatar. As it happens, the indentured labourers including Deeti and Kalua, Neel Rattan and his prison mate Ah Fatt, the team of lascars including Jodu, the captain Chillingworth, first mate Mr. Crowle, Zachary, Subedar Bhairo Singh with his men and Paulette in disguise of a native woman board the Ibis which will take them to Port Louis. But on the way of the journey, all sorts of mishaps happen include the deaths of Mr. Crowle, Bhairo Singh, a few of his men, and some coolies. Paulette reveals herself to both her half-brother Jodu and Mr. Zachary, for whom she has feelings. Before the Ibis reaches her destination, the trouble alters the fate of the passengers and Neel, Ah Fatt, Jodu, Kalua, and Serang Ali leave the ship in the mid-sea on a small boat, leaving Zachary to contemplate on the series of events.

So, the novel tells the stories of dislocations- which range from a village farmer, an opium addict, to a Raja and a variety of other characters. The vulnerabilities of these

characters occur from the greed of the colonisers who unleash violence on people and nature alike for their commercial interests. The actions of the colonial authorities show their zeal for personal wellbeing at the cost of destroying the bonds that make human life possible. They deem non-human elements as something alien, unchanging, and usable. This rigid view of things makes life difficult for everyone who is on the other side of the spectrum, have different theories to offer. Thus Deeti can't fathom the logic of planting opium which takes so much labour in place of regular foods like rice, dal, and vegetables. Neel is chided for contesting the logic behind the Opium exports to China. If we agree on the fact that Anthropocene came about with a long-drawn history of invisible violence on nature, then this novel certainly gives us glimpses of factors which initiates such violence in the context of the story. There are some key points which establish the culture of exploitation in the colonial landscape, as is seen in the novel.

The most important point perhaps is the agency given to opium, even at the cost of certain human beings. Opium becomes a substance for overpowering human beings- poor and rich alike. For rich colonialists, the business of opium creates such opportunities that they are ready to discount everything else for the sake of it. For the poor farmers, it becomes a tool of oppression which magnifies their already bad condition with its high demand of labour. Opium also becomes different in the effort it seeks from the planters, the precision of timing, and the deftness of handling needed are certainly not very common to the conventional farmers. In its cultivation, opium seeks the mechanization that is symptomatic of modernity itself. In *Flowers in the Blood: The Story of Opium*, Dean Latimer and Jeff Goldberg describe in depth the stakes in the cultivation of opium. They write that the Indians were not competent enough for the opium enterprise and the farmers would often try to contaminate the harvest for earning a bit more. Such possibilities asked for the supervision of able men who could detect different kinds of corruptions in the opium, as any degradation of the end

product would lead to the defamation of the Company. According to Latimer and Goldberg, such mismanagement could be avoided and a lot of the harvest could be saved if the parties were a bit more careful:

By Company estimate, up to a third of any season's crop was commonly lost out of sheer negligence, beyond the depredations of weather and insects. If the gomastas could only be taught to go down among the koeri opium-cullers at harvest, and show them precisely how to do it: make the bulb incisions late on a moderately humid evening, promising for the coming morning an ideal dew, which 'allows the milk to thicken by evaporation, and to collect in irregular tiers' of white-red and rose-red milk along the sides of the capsules.¹²⁰

This sense of urgency, the need for precision, and the importance of 'time' are reflected in the novel when Deeti goes out to her poppy fields: 'The timing had to be exactly right because the priceless sap flowed only for a brief period in the plant's span of life: a day or two this way or that, and the pods were of no more value than the blossoms of a weed.'¹²¹ The complexity of the production was one of the reasons why farmers never took to planting poppy voluntarily on a large scale, except for domestic usage like making 'a dish of stale *alu-posth*, potatoes cooked in poppy-seed paste'.¹²² But with its increased monetary value, the authorities overlook the trouble that farmers like Deeti have to undergo and develop new strategies to intensify opium production. Thus, this once occasional crop quite drastically enforces itself on the farmers with all its hardships:

In the old days, farmers would keep a little of their home-made opium for their families, to be used during illnesses, or at harvests and weddings; the rest they would sell to the local nobility, or to pykari merchants from Patna. Back then, a few clumps of poppy were enough to provide for a household's needs, leaving a little over, to be sold: no one was inclined to plant more because of all the work it took to grow poppies – fifteen ploughings of the land and every remaining clod to be broken by hand, with a dantoli; fences and bunds to be built; purchases of manure and constant watering; and after all that, the frenzy of the harvest, each bulb having to be individually nicked, drained and scraped.¹²³

¹²⁰Jeff Goldberg and Dean Latimer, *Flowers in the Blood: The Story of Opium* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2014), 115-16.

¹²¹Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 4.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Ibid., 20.

In the novel, new agricultural practices, dependent on high input credits and other external factors make life for the farmer harder but the production more profitable for certain interests like the Burnham Brothers. Although in a slightly different context, Vandana Shiva, in her book *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* report how certain American private interests forced indigenous agricultural practices in India in 20th century to change from its inclusive and diverse character to input intensive, centralised, chemicalised, and credit dependant forms. She argues that former native ways of cultivation depended on nature's knowledge and self-sufficiency. This kind of practices had been happening for ages. But the private corporations, in order to sell their fertilizers and hybrid seeds, prompted a change in practices, terming the existent ones as archaic and deficient. Shiva states that these new processes led to high dependence on external inputs of chemicals, pesticides, seeds, fertilizers on the one hand and on the other hand led to adverse affects on the environment as well as on the farmers themselves who used these chemical stuff. Shiva writes that the Rockefeller scientists viewed 'Third World farmers' as deficient to improve their harvests. They wanted to impose their model of agriculture in places like India on the premise of increased productivity. All these happened, according to Shiva, in spite of this input intensive agricultural model's failure in America and its 'high ecological costs'¹²⁴ which resulted from 'intensive use of artificial fertilizers, extensive practice of monocultures, and intensive and extensive mechanisation [that] had turned fertile tracts of the American prairies into a desert in less than thirty years.'¹²⁵ Shiva notes how the strategy of the American corporations involved differed from the indigenous techniques in its disregard 'for nature's processes and people's knowledge'¹²⁶ much in line with the British Company's forced system of poppy cultivation in the novel. Like the businessmen in *Sea of Poppies*, the

1. ¹²⁴ Vandana Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1991), 33.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 34.

American experts thought of the sustainable agricultural practices as limitations on productivity which could be overcome through modern, exogenous practices:

In mistakenly identifying the sustainable and lasting as backward and primitive, and in perceiving nature's limits as constraints on productivity that had to be removed, American experts spread ecologically destructive and unsustainable agricultural practices worldwide.¹²⁷

Terming old ways as 'backward and primitive' for appropriating the new was always a case for modernity. Thus the thrust on 'improvement' through the replacement of 'indigenous, bottom up, organic-based strategy'¹²⁸ that Shiva writes about becomes a driving force as well as a justification to change nature's processes into scheduled procedures in Ghosh's novel to extract the most value. In the novel, Mr. Burnham justifies the cultivation of opium as a 'blessing' which has improved the prospects of India: 'And if we reflect on the benefits that British rule has conferred upon India, does it not follow that opium is this land's greatest blessing? Does it not follow that it is our God-given duty to confer these benefits upon others?'¹²⁹ This pretence of doing good to others is used as a sham to advance capitalist interests to places like China which resist the influx of opium. Mr. Burnham says: 'If it is God's will that opium be used as an instrument to open China to his teachings, then so be it. For myself, I confess I can see no reason why any Englishman should abet the Manchu tyrant in depriving the people of China of this miraculous substance.'¹³⁰ Today, the age of Anthropocene is mainly characterized by the extreme activities of human beings, including the appropriation of nature to their personal ends. Limitless exploration of resources, wars and unrest have become the hallmarks of the epoch. The colonisers, in order to remain in business, argue for their right to sell opium to the Chinese people even at the cost of going to war with China as, according to them, it is an act of 'progress':

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 77.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 78.

Why, one might even say that it is opium that has made this age of progress and industry possible: without it, the streets of London would be thronged with coughing, sleepless, incontinent multitudes. And if we consider all this, is it not apposite to ask if the Manchu tyrant has any right to deprive his helpless subjects of the advantages of progress?¹³¹

Historically, carbon economy's proliferation was formed by major European colonial powers. Amitav Ghosh notes that these colonial powers took the help of carbon intensive technologies to advance their causes and it is evident from the First Opium War how armoured steamships turned the tide in their favour.¹³² He states that 'carbon emissions were, from very early on, closely co-related to power in all its aspects: this continues to be a major, although unacknowledged, factor in the politics of contemporary global warming.'¹³³ This shows how the present climate scenario is the legacy of quests for profit through inhuman means as depicted through the dispositions and actions of the colonialists with regard to the opium trade in the novel.

But to only focus on the economic aspect of opium is to neglect its distinctiveness as a powerful substance capable of changing human conditions. Opium, with its power to transform the human biological system, snatches the agency of human beings to be in control of them. Thus, this innate object receives agency to dictate the fates of the characters in the novel when they themselves remain incapable to mend things for their wellbeing. Deeti's unfortunate marriage and her helplessness in being stuck in that situation are contrasted against the effect of opium which instantly affects a change in her reality:

Her head began to swim, but whether from the smoke or from the touch of his lips she could not tell. The fibres of her muscles began to soften and go slack; her body seemed to drain itself of tension and a sensation of the most delectable languor followed in its wake. Awash in well-being, she leant back against her pillow and then his mouth closed on hers again, filling her lungs with smoke and she felt herself slipping away from this world into another that was brighter, better, more fulfilling.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Haryana: Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 75.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 24.

Opium, quite metaphorically replaces newly married wife Deeti's attraction for her husband Hukum Singh. Hukum Singh unequivocally discloses his intimacy with opium which precedes any other human bonds for him: 'You should know, he said at last, that this is my first wife'.¹³⁵ While it is expected that the newlyweds would revel in their romantic exploration of each other on the wedding night, Deeti ends up concerning herself with the particulars of opium:

Peeping warily through the folds of her sari, she saw that he was standing beside her with a carved wooden box in his hands. He placed the chest on the bed and pushed back the lid, to release a powerful, medicinal smell – an odour that was at once oily and earthy, sweet and cloying. She knew it to be the smell of opium, although she had never before encountered it in such a potent and concentrated form.¹³⁶

If poppies, when cultivated beyond the limits, disturbed natural boundaries and made life unsustainable for the farmers by disempowering them, the end product, opium deprives people of their bodily rights. It acts as a stimulant for people who can't handle their problems and makes their inabilities look miniscule. Hence, a non-human object is granted enormous authority to wield its power over humans who don't quite possess the vision to look beyond the immediate, the gratifying, and the eventful. In *Where Are We Heading?: The Evolution of Humans and Things*, Ian Hodder writes about how human dependence on 'things' has gradually led human beings to deeper entanglement in the processes related to those objects. He gives the example of wheat, and how humans got entangled 'into the increased labor of plowing, sewing, weeding, harvesting, and processing.'¹³⁷ Hodder suggests that the entanglement in 'things' meant inventing new ways of making more of them, leading to demand-supply chains which results in huge pressure on natural resources and the state of the climate:

¹³⁵Ibid., 23.

¹³⁶Ibid., 22.

¹³⁷ Ian Hodder, preface to *Where Are We Heading?: The Evolution of Humans and Things* (New Haven: Templeton Press, 2018), 8.

And the things kept interacting with each other and generating new demands. Today these interactions have created problems on such a scale that continued technological response seems difficult. We struggle to find and institute solutions to global warming and environmental deterioration.¹³⁸

Given the potential of the drug (opium), its capability to bring about a turn of events, one can understand the fascination regarding this ‘thing’ in the novel:

As for Deeti, the more she ministered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency: how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoy – for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes?¹³⁹

The healing power of opium is agreed upon by captain Chillingworth who takes the service of the ‘magic’ substance to sustain himself against the hazards of the sea. It is clear that the source of human well being no longer remains within the confines of his mind and body- it gets shifted to this external factor called opium:

'A man's not a sailor, Reid, if he doesn't know what it's like to be becalmed in a dead-lown, and there's this to be said for opium that it works a strange magic with time. To go from one day to another, or even one week to the next, becomes as easy as stepping between decks.¹⁴⁰

The captain rightly points out intoxicating nature of opium which helps one to evade reality, especially when the reality is none too desirable. The opium which on one hand becomes a reason for the suffering also emerges as the medicine- the diversion from the cruelties that take place all around. Chillingworth asks Zachary: “Do you feel it? Has the earth lost its hold on your body yet?”¹⁴¹ The opium’s influence as well as its usability makes both the perpetrators and the victims blind to the uncomfortable and ambiguous reality of what Rob

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 26.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 298.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 299.

Nixon calls ‘slow violence.’¹⁴² Nixon writes that ‘slow violence’ is something that is orchestrated out of sight, and is ‘is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’.¹⁴³ Since we understand violence as something which is ‘an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility’¹⁴⁴, the consequence of the whole business of poppy cultivation is distanced from the stakeholders. Nixon goes on to suggest us to ‘engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.’¹⁴⁵ The whole operation of poppy cultivation, the change from rotating crops to singular ones, use of fertilizers, and the exploitation of the farmers and their eventual displacement: all this add up to the ‘slow violence’ which only results in huge pressure on natural resources, forced migration, over population and industrialization of cities, pollution of natural elements, and scarcity of common food grains leading to yet more intensive exploitation of nature- all of which are clear symptoms of the Anthropocene.

The slow but steady change always comes in tension with familiar things- ingrained beliefs and known visuals. The forceful expanse of the opium creates an imagery of Ganga seen in the light of a new time:

It happened at the end of winter, in a year when the poppies were strangely slow to shed their petals: for mile after mile, from Benares onwards, the Ganga seemed to be flowing between twin glaciers, both its banks being blanketed by thick drifts of white-petalled flowers. It was as if the snows of the high Himalayas had descended on the plains to await the arrival of Holi and its springtime profusion of colour.¹⁴⁶

This unnatural cognition goes with the discomforts sparked by the association with poppies.

And one can see how the life of the ordinary farmer becomes harder as he reels under the

¹⁴² Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence And the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 2.

increasing debt acquired from poppy farming and the shortfall of conventional natural remedies which previously helped farmers to sustain by being in possession of vast kinds of produce which came from different crops. Such is Deeti's plight here:

The hut's roof was urgently in need of repairs, but in this age of flowers, thatch was not easy to come by: in the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare –.¹⁴⁷

According to Goldberg et al., opium was not a native crop to Asia. In early periods of mercantile exchange, it was brought in by Arab merchants.

And its notorious endemic use in the Orient didn't begin until the 1700s, when industrious European mercantilists turned a modest native herb trade into the most profitable big business in the history of commerce up to that time. The opium poppy is botanically native to the Mediterranean region and it is from this part of the world that the real opium legends originate.¹⁴⁸

Basically, even after many centuries, the use of opium in Asia, including India was limited to basic herbal practices. In this way, poppy didn't become a popular crop and remained an alien flora until the British came and began its systematic production. Thus, through modes of commerce, the British spread the use of a crop away from its natural habitat: a phenomenon which is critical in the build up to the Anthropocene. In 'Defining the Anthropocene', Lewis et al. write that the coming of the Europeans to newly discovered lands in the 15th century led to a massive exchange of flora and fauna with the voyages, popularly known as the Colombian Exchange. According to Lewis et al.:

One biological result of the exchange was the globalization of human foodstuffs. The New World crops maize/corn, potatoes and the tropical staple manioc/ cassava were subsequently grown across Europe, Asia and Africa. Meanwhile, Old World crops such as sugarcane and wheat were planted in the New World. The cross-continental movement of dozens of other food species (such as the common bean, to the New World), domesticated animals (such as the horse, cow, goat and pig, all to the Americas) and human commensals (the black rat, to the Americas), plus accidental transfers (many species of earth worms, to North America; American mink to Europe)

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 19.

¹⁴⁸Jeff Goldberg and Dean Latimer, *Flowers in the Blood: The Story of Opium*(New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2014), 23.

contributed to a swift, ongoing, radical reorganization of life on Earth without geological precedent.¹⁴⁹

The arrival of the British and the subsequent thrust on the excessive cultivation of poppies is thus inherent to the culture of this global movement which disturbed natural ecosystems with new practices which later bore adverse effects to life systems of native places like the Americas and India. In the novel, Ghosh gives us a glimpse of this transition:

When Deeti was her daughter's age, things were different: poppies had been a luxury then, grown in small clusters between the fields that bore the main winter crops – wheat, masoor dal and vegetables. Her mother would send some of her poppy seeds to the oilpress, and the rest she would keep for the house, some for replanting, and some to cook with meat and vegetables.¹⁵⁰

A phenomenon which symbolises the Anthropocene is diminished biodiversity and similarity between different locales and ecosystems. This occurs mainly due to the tendency to replicate same systems of production across vast areas. Landscapes lose their distinctiveness and become replicas of other such places which share the same story. Deeti's observation of the land 'blanketed with the parched remnants'¹⁵¹ of poppy on the banks of river Karmanasa brings back to her the memory of her own fields and the same story of exploitation: 'This, she knew, was what her own fields looked like, and were she at home today, she would have been asking herself what she would eat in the months ahead: where were the vegetables, the grains?'¹⁵² The vision on the banks of Karmanasa makes Deeti recognize the problems that she is running away from: the burden of debt thrust on every farmer who has no other way but tilt their land for growing poppies which would only push them further into the debt trap. Deeti's instant recognition of the entirety of the plight by looking at the poppy fields is quite close to Ghosh's remembrance of past dislocations fired up by the bodies of rivers:

¹⁴⁹Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, "Defining the Anthropocene", *Nature* 519 (March 2015): 174, doi:10.1038/nature14258.

¹⁵⁰Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 20.

¹⁵¹Ibid., 129.

¹⁵²Ibid.

To recognize, then, is not the same as an initial introduction. Nor does recognition require an exchange of words: more often than not we recognize mutely. And to recognize is by no means to understand that which meets the eye; comprehension need play no part in a moment of recognition.¹⁵³

The act of authorization over nature does not remain limited to the farming lands. Waterways like the Hooghly River are used to transport massive amounts of opium and thousands of coolies to other colonies of the Empire. The busy river appears to be just a extended part of the colonial city advancing the entrepreneurial activities of the capitalist masters. The posh suburb of Garden Reach also shows the glimpses of the desire to mould nature in such ways that they become testimonies to their owners' diverse tastes as well as competitiveness to 'outdo each other':

The grounds of the estates were extensive enough to provide each mansion with a surrounding park, and these were, if anything, even more varied in design than the houses they enclosed – for the malis who tended the gardens, no less than the owners themselves, vied to outdo each other in the fancifulness of their plantings, creating here a little patch of topiary and there an avenue of trees, trimmed in the French fashion; and between the stretches of greenery, there were artfully placed bodies of water, some long and straight, like Persian qanats, and some irregular, like English ponds; a few of the gardens could even boast of geometrical Mughal terraces, complete with streams, fountains and delicately tiled bowries.¹⁵⁴

In *The Great Derangement*, talking about the cultural matrix that harbours such desires, Ghosh comments on the centrality of these desires in the build up to the carbon economy. Ghosh argues that our desire to control nature is fuelled by certain aspects of this Culture which champions man's limitless adventures in the inert background of nature. He sees these desires as crucial factors for the present planetary condition, which get manifested in our ways of living:

When we see a green lawn that has been watered with desalinated water in Abu Dhabi or Southern California or some other environment where people had once been content to spend their water thriftily in nurturing a single vine or shrub, we are looking at an expression of a yearning that may have been midwived by the novels of Jane Austen. The artefacts and commodities that are conjured up by these desires are,

¹⁵³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Haryana: Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 9.

¹⁵⁴ Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 67.

in a sense, at once expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being.¹⁵⁵

One symptom which starkly underscores the Anthropocene is the breach of planetary boundaries. Human adventures driven by greed cross the limits of Earth System Processes and the dangerous consequences fall upon humanity and other life forms. The business model centred on opium results in such a violation of the functions of nature and the backlash is obvious. In the novel, part of this violation plays out through the mechanisation of the production of goods. The opium, the most precious good of the British Empire goes through a bureaucratic process of production at the site of the Ghazipur opium factory. When Deeti enters the factory, the immensity of the factory strikes her with a sense of dread:

Deeti was about to step in when she glanced over the sirdar's shoulder, into the weighing shed: the sight made her pull back, with a sudden start of apprehension. Such was the length of the shed that the door at the far end looked like a distant pinprick of light; in between, arrayed along the floor, stood many gigantic pairs of scales, dwarfing the men around them; beside each set of scales sat a tall-hatted Englishman, overseeing teams of weighmen and accountants. Buzzing busily around the sahibs were turbaned muharirs bearing armloads of paper and dhoti-clad serishtas with thick registers; swarming everywhere were gangs of bare-bodied boys carrying improbably tall stacks of poppyflower wrappers.¹⁵⁶

The inhumanness of the activities is so alien to Deeti that the workers appear demonic in her eyes. The poor labourers who stir the sludge of opium become almost one with the mixture and it is as if the opium is trying to erase their identity, sucking them in the vast structure of its production:

When they could move no more, they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze only with their feet. These seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed red in the dark and they appeared completely naked, their loincloths – if indeed they had any – being so steeped in the drug as to be indistinguishable from their skin. Almost as frightening were the white overseers who were patrolling the walkways – for not only were they coatless and hatless, with their sleeves rolled, but they were also armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, glass ladles and long-handled rakes.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Haryana: Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 13.

¹⁵⁶ Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 62.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

The over infringement of natural thresholds and exploitation of labourers to commercial ends lead to massive displacements of populace. Among all the trades that filled the coffers of Britain, opium was the most lucrative business in terms of profits after the slave trade was abolished. Trying to extract the most profit from this substance through their efficient bureaucracy, they disturb natural boundaries by ways of imposing new crop patterns, farming techniques and causing massive movement of people from their familiar terrains to urban territories. In the present times, when we talk about climate change and environmental degradation, we also inevitably run into the crisis of immigration which results from changed natural circumstances which no longer holds the ability to sustain those human lives. Talking about wage and labour in 19th century India, William J. Collins, in the article ‘Labor Mobility, Market Integration, and Wage Convergence in Late 19th Century India’ mentions ‘climatic shocks’¹⁵⁸ which resulted in frequent famines and influenced the condition of the farming populace and their inevitable migration. People displaced for the change in climate and natural processes have always multiplied the problems in places they sought shelter, like cities, ports. In the paper ‘Migration and Climate Change’ prepared by International Organization for Migration, one can notice the degree of displacement caused by altered natural trajectories:

In the mid-1990s, it was widely reported that up to 25 million people had been forced from their homes and off their land by a range of serious environmental pressures including pollution, land degradation, droughts and natural disasters. At the time it was declared that these ‘environmental refugees’, as they were called, exceeded all documented refugees from war and political persecution put together.¹⁵⁹

In the novel, the unequal distribution of wealth and the seizure of natural rights of the inhabitants create an unhealthy state of existence. The poor people who no longer get to live

¹⁵⁸William J. Collins, “Labor Mobility, Market Integration, and Wage Convergence in Late 19th Century India”, *Explorations in Economic History* 36 (1999): 269, exeh.1999.0718.

¹⁵⁹Oli Brown, “Migration and Climate Change” *IOM Migration Research Series* (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2008): 11.

life in old ways become indentured labourers whom the masters transport to other colonial cities as workforce. As the situation back home grows more and more hostile with the growing scarcity of resources, the migrants, popularly known as ‘girmitiyas’, agree to move elsewhere in exchange of some money:

They were so called because, in exchange for money, their names were entered on 'girmits' – agreements written on pieces of paper. The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away, never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld.¹⁶⁰

The transported labourers settle in scores in the budding colonial cities which are in need of cheap labour. *The Sea of Poppies* records the growth of cities and other sites of mercantile activities happening simultaneously with the increase of the opium trade. Cities like Canton and Calcutta grow rapidly with the increasing flow of money as well as migrants who, after being deprived of their traditional means of sustenance, flock the urban locales. Even the river-ways like Hooghly show the thriving trade and movement of people to and from the city of Calcutta. Jodu is bewildered after seeing the busy passage in its variety of the occupiers:

Emerging into the busy waterway of the Hooghly, he found himself suddenly in the midst of a great multitude of vessels – crowded sampans and agile almadias, towering brigantines and tiny baulias, swift carracks and wobbly woolocks; Adeni buggalows with rakish lateen sails and Andhra bulkats with many-tiered decks. In steering through this press of traffic, there was no avoiding an occasional scrape or bump and for each of these he was roundly shouted out by serangs and tindals, coksens and bosmans;..¹⁶¹

When we try to image the Anthropocene, one of the first sights that throng our minds is the crowded cityscapes throbbing with industrial activities. The sites of these industries are proofs of the extremity and lavishness of human endeavour to do ‘good’. For example, here is the description of the Ghazipur Opium factory:

The factory was immense: its premises covered forty-five acres and sprawled over two adjoining compounds, each with numerous courtyards, water tanks and iron-

¹⁶⁰ Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 48.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

roofed sheds. Like the great medieval forts that overlooked the Ganga, the factory was so situated as to have easy access to the river while being high enough to escape seasonal floods. But unlike such forts as Chunar and Buxar, which were overgrown and largely abandoned, the Carcanna was anything but a picturesque ruin: its turrets housed squads of sentries, and its parapets were manned by a great number of peons and armed burkundazes.¹⁶²

When the migrants first come in visual contact with the colonial constructions of the cities, they become astounded by the vision of ‘the ghats, buildings and shipyards that lined the Hooghly’¹⁶³. It is hard for them to imagine an existence within the boundaries of these thickly crowded cities, given the kind of environments they are habituated with: ‘How was it possible that people could live in the midst of such congestion and so much filth, with no fields or greenery anywhere in sight; such folk were surely another species of being?’¹⁶⁴ Yet, in these urban sights, there are their poor brethren who try to survive against all odds. Dumped in huge numbers in cities, they can’t manage the means to pass their days as the competition gets tough for earning a living. The rise of opium production happens simultaneously with the destruction of their livelihood; cut off from their natural ways of sustenance and chased away from their native villages, they become like uprooted trees carried off in a faraway place. In the city of Calcutta, these migrants lose their self-esteem and act like beggars depending on the charity of city-breads, just to have few grains of food:

The town was thronged with hundreds of other impoverished transients, many of whom were willing to sweat themselves half to death for a few handfuls of rice. Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies; food was so hard to come by that people were glad to lick the leaves in which offerings were made at temples or sip the starchy water from a pot in which rice had been boiled.¹⁶⁵

Among the stories of division and exploitation that dot the novel, there are instances of alternative perception. In comparison with the lack of long term vision of the colonisers

¹⁶²Ibid., 61.

¹⁶³Ibid., 188.

¹⁶⁴Ibid.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 135.

who can't see beyond the immediate materiality, Deeti is shown to possess a foresight which lends her glimpses of future possibilities. She, in one such instance, visualizes the image of the Ibis:

It was Kabutri's question that triggered Deeti's vision: her eyes suddenly conjured up a picture of an immense ship with two tall masts. Suspended from the masts were great sails of a dazzling shade of white. The prow of the ship tapered into a figurehead with a long bill, like a stork or a heron. There was a man in the background, standing near the bow, and although she could not see him clearly, she had a sense of a distinctive and unfamiliar presence.¹⁶⁶

The incident is an act of intuition which is markedly different from rational reasoning which is otherwise the dominant way of interpreting things. Without any convincing reasons, she believes in the existence of the ship, as if knowing it through some non-human modes of perception: 'She had never seen the sea, never left the district, never spoken any language but her native Bhojpuri, yet not for a moment did she doubt that the ship existed somewhere and was heading in her direction.'¹⁶⁷ The capability to perceive beyond the systematic ways is not limited to Deeti. Serang Ali's expertise on the sea lets him ignore Zachary's warning when Zachary's calculations reveal that the ship is off its course: 'Now using the Captain's watch, and a sextant inherited from the dead mate, he spent a good deal of time trying to calculate the ship's position. His first few attempts ended in panic, with his calculations placing the ship hundreds of miles off course.'¹⁶⁸ Serang Ali uses a technique which doesn't need any tool, but a closer observation of the natural space: 'Zachary was to learn later that Serang Ali had been steering his own course all along, using a method of navigation that combined dead reckoning – or 'tup ka shoomar' as he called it – with frequent readings of the stars.'¹⁶⁹

The transport vessel Ibis emerges as a figure which brings together the colonisers, the intermediaries and the oppressed at one place, as parties on the same journey. Although

¹⁶⁶Ibid., 5.

¹⁶⁷Ibid.

¹⁶⁸Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., 12.

originally a slave ship, the things that happen on-board the Ibis in the novel make her a space for new possibilities to occur. It becomes a melting pot for people from different faiths, castes, professions, places and much of the concerns of the land melt away once it sets sail into the sea. A change in disposition happens among the coolies and they seem to reawaken to a new reality of shared destiny: ‘From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings – jaházbhais and jaházbahens – to each other. There’ll be no differences between us.’¹⁷⁰ Deeti realises that in order to wipe off the divisions of the past, all the past lineages should be disowned. Hence, she quite significantly grants the Ibis a parental character: ‘Yes, said Deeti, from now on, there are no differences between us; we are jahaz-bhai and jahazbahen to each other; all of us children of the ship.’¹⁷¹ In the Ibis she also gets to understand the poppy seed in a new way as the planet that rules her destiny.¹⁷² The past life of Deeti which was dictated by factors beyond her control is severed from her from by the protecting frame of the sea-vessel, which makes her forget the injustices of the past in the light of the new day:

It was now that Deeti understood why the image of the vessel had been revealed to her that day, when she stood immersed in the Ganga: it was because her new self, her new life, had been gestating all this while in the belly of this creature, this vessel that was the Mother-Father of her new family, a great wooden mái-báp, an adoptive ancestor and parent of dynasties yet to come: here she was, the Ibis.¹⁷³

In the course of the sea voyage, we see many other unexpected reversals like Paulette’s disguised journey to be free from the control of the Burnham family, the change in the Gomusta Baboo Nobokrishna Panda, or the justices brought upon the cruel figures of Mr. Crowle and Subedar Bhairo Singh. There are also the revelations about the characters of Zachary (his origins) and Serang Ali (his connections with piracy). Finally by fleeing the ship, the figures of Serang Ali, Kalua, Jodu, Neel, and Ah Fatt take the string of their lives in

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 242.

¹⁷¹Ibid.

¹⁷²Ibid., 311.

¹⁷³Ibid., 242-43.

their own hands, and also show a possibility of human bond across social and national divisions. The bondages existent on land is gone and the sea gives birth to new camaraderie which is based on common human emotions and not on individual acts to progress.

Thus, the culture of plunder and exploitation is countered with the final journey on water. It is as if the elemental nature of water acts to dispel the boundaries accumulated on land, as Deeti contemplates on this: 'Surely all the old ties were immaterial now that the sea had washed away their past?'.¹⁷⁴ They seek their agency and search for new locations to spread roots once again. Although they remain within the larger matrix of the empire and its hazards, there happens a cleansing of their visions. On the final night besieged by forces of nature- torrential rain and thunder, new realities surface, and the five men set out to create their destinies as they leave the Ibis.

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 294.

Conclusion

Anthropocene is a complex phenomenon which calls for action both at physical and conceptual spheres. The term has become relevant today not only as a result of human beings' accelerated enterprises on the earth, but also as a testimony to our modes of thought and the lack in our perception. Human history has always been replete with conflicts, but in the last three centuries, there has been a systemisation of violence which has taken the service of modern scientific tools. This systemisation has grown under the apparently beneficial ideas of the Enlightenment and 'progress' which advocated man's right to advance limitlessly, even against natural forces. Ideas which were expected to bring collective betterment for the human race ended up generating misconceptions about the boundaries of human deeds and the consequences of economic expansion. J.B. Bury, in *The Idea of Progress* argues how the human mind became convinced about the positive potentials of material progress so as to neglect the simultaneous stress it would produce. He writes in his book that the limitless technical disruptions and the eulogising of material knowledge have made people think that continuous progress of civilisation is very natural. But in the abundance of trade and commerce, he questions the stress of unsustainable economic rivalries, the zeal for wars, and the miseries of the labourers involved in systems of productions. He doubts whether material progress brought happiness and if worldwide connections and exchanges united people or opened new battlefronts: 'The very increase of 'material ease' seemed unavoidably to involve conditions inconsistent with happiness; and the communications which inked the peoples of the world together modified the methods of warfare instead of bringing peace.'¹⁷⁵ The search for abundant material comforts, under the guardianship of imperialism and capitalism leads to the wellbeing of a fraction of human society at the peril of their kind, other species, and the natural processes which sustain life on this planet.

¹⁷⁵J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into Its Origin And Growth*(London: Macmillan and Co, Limited, 1920), 332.

Following this biased view of progress, the characters in *The Glass Palace* collide with tragic destinies. From extracting value out of nature to using human beings as commodities, the instances of the culture of exploitation become evident in the novel. What is more revealing is the level of internalisation of this exploitative mindset by a number of people and the contrasting wiser voices of few others. One expects change, even revolution to be something positive, welcoming, and full of possibilities. But the change the empire brings to Burma makes one question the legitimacy of the new in comparison to the old. Bruno Latour writes: ‘In the countless quarrels between Ancients and Moderns, the former come out winners as often as the latter now, and nothing allows us to say whether revolutions finish off the old regimes or bring them to fruition.’¹⁷⁶ The coming of the empire in Burma happens along with the introduction of new techniques of using up natural resources, a way of profiteering the scale of which had been unknown to the local populace. The blessing of new knowledge, which could bring the world together in harmonious ways, breaks it further apart and binds it in ruler-oppressed binaries. People who lend their service to the Empire fight with their kindred who rise in rebellion against the injustices. Complicated in this complex web of domination, characters like Saya John, Rajkumar, Arjun suffer hugely. The imitation of the masters leaves the natives in a vicious cycle of violence. Thus, the desire to exploit other for the material benefit of the self- a characteristic of the Anthropocene, gets manifested.

Anthropocene, which literally means ‘human epoch’, is essentially the epoch of the dominance of knowledge which is centred on the human species. This knowledge is hierarchical in the sense that it denounces other, non-human centric modes of knowing. But in the instance of the tide country in *The Hungry Tide*, knowing is a continuous process of mixing myth and lived reality, seen and imagined, the fathomable and the mysterious. In the

¹⁷⁶Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10.

unpredictable environs of the mangroves, the natives survive by accepting the role of the uncanny which illuminate their life in so many ways. Characters like Fokir's perspective of things are totally different from that of Kanai and Piya. The difference in perception between the islanders and the tide country people becomes evident in the climactic Marichjhapi incident which makes two worldviews clash: the people in power force their way of perceiving on the islanders without fathoming the ground realities or taking the vulnerable people into consideration. The clash is an instance of domination of a mode of knowledge with all its rigidity and show of power on another more primitive, intuitive view of life which needed careful considerations. Hence, it will be prudent to ask if the wretched people should have got their say, to present their case, to justify their logic.

In *Creating An Ecological Society: Toward a Revolutionary Transformation*, Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams state that there are nine critical planetary boundaries out of which humanity has already breached four, namely 'climate change, biosphere integrity, land-system change, and the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles'.¹⁷⁷ The present study attests to at least two of these: violation of biodiversity and changes made to land usage. In 'Geology of Mankind', Crutzen states that most of the natural resources have been consumed historically by one-fourth of humanity. This phenomenon is present in all three novels but more so in *Sea of Poppies* where opium becomes a powerful element which cripples the vision of the colonisers on one hand, and becomes the go-to substance for the dispirited on the other, helping them to flee the brutal present. The cultivation of poppy and the export of opium to China with the help of various human and non-human elements attest to the model of anthropocentric appropriation of natural resources to serve capitalistic disposition. The bonds of humanity remains severed as the hunger to gain at others ruination drives the

¹⁷⁷ Fred Magdoff and Chris Williams, *Creating An Ecological Society: Toward a Revolutionary Transformation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2017), 25.

masters. Thus we get a glimpse of the self-sufficient ways of sustaining oneself being disturbed for the sake of colonial-capitalist interests.

In the context of humanity's mindless activities of exploitation, Crutzen notes that we remain in the realm of '*terra incognita*'¹⁷⁸ which means 'unknown territory'. Yet this unknown and alarming reality is not entirely our doing as, according to Ghosh, 'the climate events of this era, then, are distillations of all of human history: they express the entirety of our being over time.'¹⁷⁹ To understand the climate problem in the era of Anthropocene then, we need to look in new ways at our histories, our cultural expressions and our literary modes of representation which have occupied our imagination. The thesis questions our desires, our sense of progress, the things that make us happy through the exploration of these three works of literature. The reading foregrounds some crucial questions: whether we will remain complicit in all the mindless acts of so called 'development' happening all around us and even emulate it in our personal spaces or will we question the nature of this 'progress' and its actual costs on the earth which sustains us? It is time to think whether human beings should continue to follow a stubborn, materialistic and rational point of view which doesn't allow space for different ways of conceiving things, of seeing our surroundings as not objects serving our lives but us as parts of a larger existence, with us being a miniscule element dependent on so many other processes. As the famous mineralogist and biogeologist Vladimir I. Vernadsky puts it in his seminal work *The Biosphere*, every creature on earth is 'the fruit of extended, complex processes, and are an essential part of a harmonious cosmic mechanism, in which it is known that fixed laws apply and chance does not exist.'¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of mankind", *Nature* 415 (January 2002): 212, doi:10.1038/415023a.

¹⁷⁹ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Haryana: Penguin Books Limited, 2016), 79.

¹⁸⁰ Vladimir I. Vernadsky, *The Biosphere*, trans. David B. Langmuir (New York: Copernicus, 1997), 44.

Through the discussion, it is clear that nature is not something which is just out there, but it is actually us in extension. This is what should come into the consciousness of a human being: the entirety of the possibilities attainable by a human. And as my study suggests, if we understand that to be human is not about revelling in our superiority, but realising our responsibility, then the ‘age of humans’ won’t be an age of despair, but an era of bliss and sustainability. I understand that these complex strings of thought have not been explored in their totality in the limited scope this thesis. I also admit that the connections I seek to establish can be done in many other ways. To connect literature with our lived reality of the contemporary time has not been very easy and I hope there will be others who will seek to explore new ways of analysing literature to solve the crises of the present. In the meanwhile, we should continue purging our senses to search for the all-embracing presence encircling our lives in our thoughts and expressions so that we don’t fall for any hegemonic notion of the human species.

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