

Precarity, Climate Change and Migrant Labour Amitav Ghosh's Eco-Aesthetics

Binayak Roy¹

Abstract

Migrant workers play an increasing role in Asia, where they are both remarkably mobile and largely disorganized. The workers' position leaves them disempowered within the workplace; it also leaves them vulnerable in the world outside. In this sense, migrant workers lead lives that are, in Hannah Lewis's view "hyperprecarious". The celebration of the collective has been a recurrent trope in Ghosh's oeuvre, and this article seeks to shed light on the formation of communities of migrant labourers in a transnational space in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*. It explores the heterogeneity of exploitative labor conditions, their situatedness as well as their "lived experiences" documenting the variegated landscape of neo-slavery for vulnerable migrant workers. It also highlights how Amitav Ghosh interrogates the ways in which the Western colonial episteme has commodified nature, land, mountains, and ecology in his most recent writing.

Keywords: Community; Migrant Labour; Neoliberalism; Precarity

[...] the violation of the Earth is a vital aspect of the counterrevolution. The genocidal war against people is also "ecocide" in so far as it attacks the sources and resources of life itself. It is no longer enough to do away with people living now; life must also be denied to those who aren't even born yet by burning and poisoning the Earth, defoliating the forests, blowing up the dikes. — Herbert Marcuse, *The New Left and the 1960s*

The greatest single fact of the past three decades has been, I believe, the vast human migration attendant upon war, colonialism and decolonization, economic and political revolution, and such devastating occurrences as famine, ethnic cleansing, and great power machinations. — Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile*

"Nature in the present capitalist society is [...] material for domination and exploitation", asserts the prominent Frankfurt School theorist, Herbert Marcuse, while in a socialist society, "nature would exist in its own right" as both living space for human beings and animals, and

¹ Binayak Roy, University of North Bengal, India. E-mail: binayakroy78@gmail.com



as the domain of, “its own creations.” (1970/2014, 346). In his essay “Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society” Marcuse addresses “the destruction of nature in the context of the general destructiveness which characterizes our society” (209). “The domination of nature is tied to the violation of nature” warns Marcuse, and the “search for new sources of energy is tied to the poisoning of the life environment” (209). Emphasizing the internal contradiction of Marxism, he contends that “the demands of exploitation progressively reduce and exhaust resources: the more capitalist productivity increases, the more destructive it becomes” (“Ecology and Revolution” 174). The intertwining forces of capitalism, empire and the processes of decolonization create an unprecedented climate crisis and produce climate refugees who cannot be confined within the territories of the nation. European colonialism was a lucrative politico-commercial enterprise inextricably tied with capitalism. Exploring the relationship between the ideology of imperialism and its functioning through the practice of colonialism, Denis Judd argues that “no one can doubt that the desire for profitable trade, plunder and enrichment was the primary force that led to the establishment of the imperial structure” (3).

Amitav Ghosh concedes that “capitalism and empire are certainly dual aspects of a single reality” but asserts that the “relationship between them” has never been “a simple one” (*The Great Derangement* 117). In “Histories,” the second section of *The Great Derangement*, he develops a genealogy of the carbon economy that finds resonance in theories of postcolonialism, environmental justice, and modernity. Disagreeing with Naomi Klein, Ghosh argues that it is not capitalism per se but rather the unequal operations of empire that have driven global dysfunction. Contrary to conventional histories of fossil fuel development that locate its birthplace in nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, Ghosh finds the use of coal in China in the eleventh century and traces the history of Burma’s oil industry much earlier “possibly even a millennium or more” (*GD* 134). In spite of this, neither China nor Burma emerged as large-scale fossil fuel-based economies before Britain or other Western countries. While steam power initially thrived in the Calcutta and Bombay shipyards, it “could not take hold in India” (*GD* 144) because the British Parliament passed the Registry Act in 1815 which imposed tight restrictions on Indian ships and sailors.

While Britain and Europe witnessed rapid industrialization in the 19th century, the stringent rules of the colonial machinery forbade the synchronous development of carbon economy in India and Asia. Consequently, industrialization became a “process of technological diffusion that radiates outwards from the West” (*GD* 126). Hence carbon emissions were “closely correlated to power in all its aspects” which is a “major, although unacknowledged, factor in the politics of contemporary global warming” (*GD* 146). Although Asian countries have been the biggest contributors to recent climate changes due to the boom in industrialization, Ghosh reverses the scale in his crisp observation that “some of the key technologies of the carbon economy were first adopted in England, the world’s leading colonial power” (*GD* 148). Examining the congruence between the logics of capitalism and the physical properties of fossil energy and its impact on climate change, the political theorist, Timothy Mitchell, adroitly predicts that “the political machinery that emerged to govern the age of fossil fuels, partly as a product of those forms of energy, may be incapable of addressing the events that will end it” (7).

While the nineteenth century European novel assumed in “both fiction and geology, that Nature was moderate and orderly” (*GD* 29), the intrusion in the novel of the “weather events”



which have a “very high degree of improbability” (*GD* 35) challenged the orderly expectations of bourgeois ideals and refuted Enlightenment rationality. The modern novel, deeply rooted in middle class ethos with its exclusive focus on the questions of probability, was based both on the Enlightenment ideals of rationality and the uniform expectations of the bourgeois. Ironically, however, the novel’s attempts to be realistic by conjuring up worlds through vivid details of everyday life “to give a regularity, a ‘style’ to existence” end up by relocating “the unheard-of toward the background [...] while the everyday moves into the foreground” (Franco Moretti, cited in *GD* 22-23). Realist modes of fiction aimed at the rationalization of modern life by “offering the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life” converting the world of the novel into “a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all” (Moretti 381). Weather events, surrealism, or magic realism with its celebration of the improbable were unwelcome in the “deliberately prosaic world of serious prose fiction” (*GD* 35) because novels conjure up worlds “that become real precisely because of their finitude and distinctiveness” (*GD* 82). Ghosh locates this cleavage in the very nature of modernity and echoes Bruno Latour’s contention that modernity triggered the partitioning or “deepening the imaginary gulf between Nature and Culture” (*GD* 92). “Somewhere in our societies, and in ours alone”, asserts Latour, “an unheard-of transcendence has manifested itself: Nature as it is, ahuman, sometimes inhuman, always extrahuman” (*We Have Never Been Modern* 98).

However, Latour also insists that modernity never really achieved the separation of nature from culture to which it aspired: “Furthermore, the very notion of culture went away along with that of nature. Post natural, yes, but also post-cultural” (“Waiting for Gaia” 30). Interestingly, however, it was the Hungarian sociologist of culture Karl Mannheim who regarded the nature/culture distinction as one that had taken shape historically and indeed as the quintessence of modernity’s view of culture. For moderns, argued Mannheim, “being and meaning, actuality and value were experienced as having parted from one another.” This was how “the designation of culture as non-nature became genuinely concrete and internally consistent” (45-46). This project of “purification”, according to Latour, ensured that Nature was consigned entirely to the sciences, remaining distanced from the limits of Culture. The upshot of this fracture resulted in the suppression of hybrid genres like science fiction, or its new form, climate fiction from the literary mainstream: “The line that has been drawn between them exists only for the sake of neatness: because the zeitgeist of late modernity could not tolerate Nature-Culture hybrids” (*GD* 96).

The climate crisis expanded the horizon of fiction to incorporate within its domain alternate forms of human existence. The era of global warming has questioned the stance of “those old realists” (*GD* 107) and has “made audible a new, non-human critical voice” (*GD* 107). Moreover, the acknowledgement of “forces of unthinkable magnitude” (*GD* 84-85) has also led to the refurbishing of the novelistic techniques. No wonder, climate change “has reversed the temporal order of modernity” (*GD* 84). The extent to which non-human forces can intervene with human thought and uproot human settlement can be traced in the demographic dislocations caused in the delta region of the Sundarbans because of the devastations of violent storms. Climate change has been a matter of particular urgency for Amitav Ghosh as he explicitly states: “The Bengal delta is so heavily populated. [...] If a ten-foot rise or even a five-foot rise in the seas were to happen. [...] Millions of people would lose their livelihoods. [...] It is not something that we can postpone or think about elsewhere;

it is absolutely present within the conditions of our lives, here and now” (*UN Chronicle* 51). The inconceivably vast forces of nature are inextricably intertwined with the language of fiction. This interrelation between what were once considered unbridgeable binaries: living and the non-living; animate and the inanimate, establishes the human-nature continuum. Human life is about becoming, but a becoming-with other life forms; a non-anthropocentric conception of life in which human life has always been intertwined with multiple life forms and technologies. Amitav Ghosh therefore questions the restrictive nature of the Western tradition of the novel and also expands its scope.

Amitav Ghosh’s essay “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel” (1992) asserts his literary goals in writing about oil and the late twentieth-century phenomenon of globalization, its concomitant capitalism and the horrors of the “post-modern present”: “city-states where virtually everyone is a ‘foreigner’; [...] vicious systems of helotry juxtaposed with unparalleled wealth; deserts transformed by technology, and military devastation on an apocalyptic scale” (76). He braces the question how a writer can create a new kind of novel, the structure and form of which will reflect a globalized world. Ghosh expresses his dismay at the writers’ “muteness” about writing about the Oil Encounter: “on the American (or Western) side, through regimes of strict corporate secrecy; on the Arab side, by the physical and demographic separation of oil installations and their workers from the indigenous population” (77). While American novelists have turned insular, “becoming ever more introspective, ever more concentrated upon its[novel’s] own self-definition” (77) Indian writers themselves have preferred to ignore to write about the few thousands who live and work in the oil kingdoms as dehumanized beings. He laments the “radical turn away from the non-human to the human, from the figurative towards the abstract” (*The Great Derangement* 160) in 20th century art and literature. The story of the migrant labourers, the tools as well as victims of capitalism and dehumanizing industrialization, evokes “horror, sympathy, guilt, rage, and a great deal else” (76) which “no one [...] who has any thought either for his conscience or his self-preservation can afford to ignore”.

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* Ghosh laments the equation of the novel in the Western tradition with what John Updike terms the “individual moral adventure” (103) at the expense of the collective. Ghosh thus emerges as a theorist of the novel who celebrates the inextricable bond between ethics and aesthetics rather than their cleavage in a world in which “[d]ifferentials of power between and within nations are probably greater today than they have ever been” (*GD* 195-196). The celebration of the collective, the “men in the aggregate” (106), has been a recurrent trope in Ghosh’s oeuvre. His works repeatedly portray the plight of migrant labourers on the move, their strategies of survival and efforts to construct and represent themselves as a community against oppressive political and bureaucratic machineries. The perspective of precarity provides the potential to link actions to tackle forced labour with the broader struggle for (migrant) workers’ rights.

Migrancy and Labour Precarity

Ghosh’s works enact an important political epistemology of migrant precarious labor-scapes and result in a *compelling intervention on the “continuum of unfreedom”* that affects migrant labor in neoliberal economies (Lewis et al. 2015; Skrivankova 2010). They explore the nexus of exploitation’s lived experiences, structural production, and some nuanced political responses to tackle neo-slavery conditions at work. The narratives explore the heterogeneity of



exploitative labor conditions, their situatedness as well as their “lived experiences” documenting the variegated landscape of neo-slavery for vulnerable migrant workers thereby veering away from constructing the migrant “as a pure *artifact*” (Sayad 178). Precarity can be challenged and resisted by forms of textual representation and discussed in terms of possible resolutions or alternative world scenarios “Literary texts”, argue Wilson *et al*, “allude to the affective dimension of precarity, found, for instance, in the reinforcement of ties to everyday routines and common practices” (442). The recognition and inclusion of migrants as transnational actors and activists from colonial times to the contemporary is central to Amitav Ghosh’s work. *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *Gun Island* (2019) expostulate alternative means of placemaking and dwelling and the formation of new solidarities and collectivities of environmental and refugee activism. The perspective of precarity provides the potential to link actions to tackle forced labour with the broader struggle for (migrant) workers’ rights.

Migrant workers play an increasing role in Asia, where they are “remarkably mobile” and “labor in a largely disorganized and vulnerable state” (Chin 3). The workers’ position leaves them disempowered within the workplace; it also leaves them vulnerable without. In this sense, migrant workers lead lives that are “hyper-precarious” (Lewis *et al* 581). “Precarity describes the rise of casual, flexible, sub-contracted, temporary, contingent and part-time work in a neoliberal economy” believes Lewis and Waite which explains labour market processes that are conducive to the production of forced/migrant labour. “Precariousness”, they further argue “is also understood as a condition or experience of (ontological) insecurity and as a platform to mobilize against insecurity” (Lewis and Waite 51-52). Chin deduces the modes by which the lives of these migrant labourers become precarious. First, “these workers are not offered any path to permanent residency and citizenship thereby entrenching their disempowerment.” Second, “unlike local workers, migrant workers lack the basic rights of political participation and representation” (11). Hence, they are relatively powerless to challenge their labour conditions through collective means. Economically insecure and socially marginalized, the lives of these workers become precarious because they are vulnerable at the hands of the employers who provide them with contracts and wages as well as the intermediaries who recruit and sub-contract them. Workers also become less involved in determining their own labour conditions because they have “fewer resources to contest work and resist” (Wilson and Ebert 268).

The concept of precarity, contends Susan Banki, “describes the condition of being vulnerable to exploitation because of a lack of security” (451). Although it suggests the potential for “exploitation and abuse” it does not signal “its certain presence” (451). Thus precarious work is not the fact of consistent unemployment, but the looming threat, and perhaps frequent fact, of it. “Precarity of residence does not suggest imminent deportation from a country”, asserts Banki, “but its very real possibility” (451). Similarly, social precarity does not describe an absence of supportive networks, but the potential for their dismantling. Banki conceptualizes a subset of the precariat: that of “non-citizens, who experience ‘precarity of place’”(452). The physical residence of persons, argues Banki, represents a key aspect of how one’s world is shaped and coloured, as does the physical removal of persons. Hence the permission to remain in one’s physical place lies at the core of a concept of national assignment of privileges and benefits. “Precarity of place”, contends Banki, “describes the absence of such permission

and can be defined as *vulnerability to removal or deportation from one's physical location*" (453, italics original).

Precarity of place is triggered by the imbalances created by both colonialism and neoliberalism, and the extreme movement of capital as part of the neoliberal agenda, have fuelled seasonal and temporary work, facilitating migrant labour. "Capital welcomes migration", asserts Standing, "because it brings low-cost malleable labour" (103). Undocumented migrants are for Standing a double-edged sword as they both fuel the neoliberal engine and are its primary victims: "Too many (socioeconomic) interests benefit from an army of illegal migrants, and too many populists depict attempts at legalization as eroding the security of the citizenry" (91). Unsurprisingly, the unequal flow of labour and capital across borders creates not only migrant populations, but also generates their deprivation. Undeniably, colonialism lies at the root of many of the conflicts that have produced today's flows of forced migrants, most of whom lack appropriate documentation when they cross borders. Contemporary migration scholarship emphasizes the vulnerability associated with 'illegality' and 'deportability,' centering on the power of nation-states to surveil, detain, and remove migrants from their respective territories. Vulnerability to removal is greatest for undocumented migrants, but even noncitizens with some form of legal status may be deported. Ghosh's novels explore the intricate nexus between colonial power and capital, representing the forcible ejection of colonial subjects out of their traditional livelihoods and their placement within a cash economy, their ultimate deportation to far off lands, and the continuity of this trend in the present century when the poor become hapless victims of the whims of weather and turn into insecure migrants.

Gun Island (2019): A Tale of Climate Refugees

Precarity today has been caused by the effects of global neo-liberal capitalism in increasing worldwide inequality as "more extensive and less visible patterns of global dispossession" and "relatively unstable and dispersed conditions of deprivation and insecurity gain ground" (During 1). Climate change in the form of global warming and environmental degradation escalates with the neocolonial exploitation of the earth's natural resources in impoverished regions of the global south for the benefit of ever-expanding industrial, capitalist societies. Simon During delineates that subaltern crises have not only deepened, but heightened in the present age of neo-liberalism, as "the politics of subalternity were largely absorbed into the machinery of emergent neo-liberal state capitalism" (57), thereby increasing the vulnerability of the working class and labourers across the world and converting them into precariats, or denizens of the precarious society. *Gun Island* (2019) is a gripping narrative about climate change and its impact on the Irrawaddy dolphins; demographic dislocations in the Sundarbans. But it deals with the most urgent and fraught theme of refugees and illegal migration, displacement and renewal. In this tide country where the landscape is transformed every moment, nothing is certain and stable. It is a location perennially ravaged by violent storms, none more violent than the cyclone Aila which ravaged the region in 2009. The narrative chronicles how communities had been devastated and families dispersed; young men and women had drifted to the cities and the old had become beggars. Traffickers had transported women to distant brothels and strong men to faraway cities. *Gun Island* not only delineates the miserable condition of these "climate refugees" (*The Great Derangement* 192) but also charts the impact of the oil industry on nature and animals. The emissions from and the dumping of disposals by an oil refinery in the Sundarbans — "a giant conglomerate that's got



politicians in its pocket on both sides of the border” (GI 60) — have disturbed natural life in the region. With more and more chemicals flowing into rivers, the Sundarbans witnessed massive fish kills and the migration of dolphins. None is certain about its location in the world, “neither humans nor animals” (GI 97). This loss of territory for indigenous peoples as well as loss of biodiversity has transformed the Sundarbans from a threatening to a threatened ecosystem.

The narrative delineates how human migrations happen: the planning; the middle men; the dangerous journey in inhuman conditions; the fear; the torture; the extortion; and then, for some, the arrival in the promised land and an effort to eke out a new living, to fashion a new life. Tipu, an impressionable listless teenager, is allured by and then involved in this “people-moving industry” (GI 60) — “one of the world’s biggest and still growing fast” (GI 60). Initially a facilitator of refugee-movement he is transformed into a migrant himself, journeying with his intimate friend Rafi, from the Sunderbans to Venice — via Bangladesh (where it actually begins), back into India, and from then on to Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. His is one of the most harrowing accounts of social media-fuelled migration in the novel. In his case, it gets extended even more, as he gets injured in the last leg of the journey and has to take yet another route — via Egypt — to finally join his partner in Italy. The enthusiastic Tipu explains to the narrator Deen about the influence of the smart phone on poor country people; how it alluringly feeds them with images of a better life in the geographical West, feeding desires and fuelling new-found aspirations to a point where the only option seems to get connected to an intermediary who can translate those desires into reality — for an (exorbitant) price:

The Internet is the migrants’ magic carpet; it’s their conveyor belt. It doesn’t matter whether they are travelling by plane or bus or boat; it’s the Internet that moves the wetware — it’s that simple, Pops... It’s not the 20th century anymore. [...] And it doesn’t matter if you are illiterate: your virtual assistant will do the rest. You’d be amazed how good people get at it, and how quickly. That’s how the journey starts, not by buying a ticket or getting a passport. It starts with a phone and voice recognition technology.... And the same phone that shows them the images [of a better life] can also put them in touch with connection men. (GI 61)

The hegemonic discourse of what is considered a good and successful life is based on the assumption that life as it is today in the Western World represents the highest stage of development of human civilization. As it was in *The Circle of Reason*, it is the alluring nature of better living conditions and employment opportunities in the technologically superior and capitalist West that compels the destitute in South Asia to migrate to Europe by any means. Neoliberal capitalism thus promotes mobility and flexibility amongst the workers by importing a rhetoric of virtual community and instilling what Maddox terms “participatory consumption through sharing” (194). As Pierre Bourdieu encapsulates, neoliberalism aims to “call into question any and all collective structures that could serve as an obstacle to the logic of the pure market” (1). This finds a new expression through the enchanted screen of the cell phone where the market masks itself behind the notion of happiness.

Migration is not a freely-chosen emancipated decision, but a reaction to a specific concurrence of constraints, for example capitalist, gender-specific, ecological and/or (neo) colonial ones. The fear for their lives amidst environment disasters or the inability to earn a living in their home countries precipitates their decision to immigrate in spite of the fact they may not be

accepted in foreign lands which would enhance their precariousness. When Deen arrives in Venice, he accidentally meets Rafi one day in the street. By then, Rafi had already been there for a while; and, as he tells Deen, is actually one among thousands of Bengalis, both from India and Bangladesh in the city. Another immigrant, Bilal, recounts to Deen his experiences in a “connection house” in Zuwara in Libya, “a concrete warehouse with a tin roof; some two hundred other people were already there — Nigerians, Sudanese, Eritreans, Iraqis, Afghans and also some other Bengalis” (*GI* 193). Arriving in Venice, these immigrants are exposed to the brutalities of “existence of extreme precariousness” (*GI* 155) at the hands of right-wing political parties which campaign on an anti-immigration platform. The hostility that the natives feel against immigrants is evident when a young Italian threatens Deen with death, simply because he thinks he is a Bangladeshi labourer, or when right-wing activists take out a boat of their own to meet and potentially attack the boat carrying the immigrants out at high-sea to prevent them from reaching their shores. Xenophobia, thus, “bestows on this narrowly constructed social other (as the stranger or foreigner) a legibility — either as extreme negativity (which turns the other an erroneous anti-self) or as passing difference (which turns the other into just a retarded or delayed self-same) — which is by definition not possible in the self’s encounter with the other” (Khair 172). The Europeans, who had transported people between continents on an almost unimaginable scale thereby changing the demographic profile of the entire planet, suddenly find that the entire trajectory of global movement of people has been reversed:

The systems and technologies that had made those massive demographic interventions possible — ranging from armaments to the control of information — had now achieved escape velocity: they were no longer under anyone’s control.

This was why those angry young men were so afraid of that little blue fishing boat: through the prism of this vessel they could glimpse the unraveling of a centuries-old project that had conferred vast privilege on them in relation to the rest of the world. (*GI* 279-280)

The “migrant existence is often precarious in multiple, and reinforcing ways”, assert Paret and Gleeson “combining vulnerability to deportation and state violence, exclusion from public services and basic state protections, insecure employment and exploitation at work, insecure livelihood, and everyday discrimination or isolation” (281). The effective strategy for overcoming precariousness is collective organization and resistance. While the capitalist right wing political parties in Italy are adamant about prohibiting the entry of these immigrants in their country, pro-immigration camps led by European journalists and humanitarian workers raise their vociferous claim “*NO to xenophobia! NO to hate!*” (*GI* 274) which ultimately prove to be triumphant. The climate refugees thus straddle between heightened humanitarian sentimentality and xenophobic fear (as in conservative discourses). The contention that immigrant and undocumented workers are unorganizable is shattered by successful counter-hegemonic mobilization. The struggle ‘from below’ will in the end lead to an overturning of existing power relations.

In *Climate Change, Forced Migration and International Law*, Jane McAdam argues for a determined but measured response to the challenges ahead. Ultra-nationalisms and xenophobias work to keep migrants at bay. International refugee law provides refuge only to those directly escaping political conflict and those who can establish persecution and vulnerability if they were to



return home. Some have argued for an expansion of the category of “climate refugee” to include those displaced by environmental and/or climatic factors. But, as McAdam argues, migration decisions are not always made on one factor alone and it is often difficult to establish direct causality, especially when the factors involve slow-onset disasters. The political theorist Michael Walzer (1984) has argued, for instance, that it is right for any given community or nation-state to decide on who can or cannot be taken into its fold. Hardt and Negri envision a diffuse, but revolutionary, collective subject which will bring about global democratic transformation. For them, the basic freedom of movement across national and other borders lies at the center of this democratic project, alongside the right to a social wage and guaranteed income, and the right to access knowledge and the means of production (396–407). They assert that the “general right to control its own movement is the multitude’s ultimate demand for global citizenship” (400). Their alternative idea is to expand the rights and benefits available to non-citizen migrants within host societies. This idea lies at the heart of optimistic claims around ‘postnational membership’ (Soysal 1994) or ‘alien citizenship’ (Bosniak 2002).

Community is neither a productive project of becoming nor is it a social contract produced by citizens. It is a sharing of singularities who are together unbecoming and unbinding in their sharing and social binding. This unworking is the refusal of unity. It is resistance to totalizing communion. Nancy suggests that fascism annihilates community by destroying difference but that there is always a resistance to this destruction. “[T]he fascist masses,” Nancy writes, “tend to annihilate community in the delirium of an incarnated communion.... [C]ommunity never ceases to resist this will. Community is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence”(35). Amitav Ghosh’s novels explore multiple ways in which migrants are huddled in a ship or come together in a ghetto to form a collective band against the forces of power, be it a colonial regime or a neocolonial authoritarian state. They resist as a collective and in the process either emerge triumphant or are decimated. *Gun Island* charts the precarious existence of illegal traffickers and their ongoing engagement with right-wing nationalism, a struggle that hopefully, as hinted at the end of the novel, will be successful. Migration and displacement thus become a “mode of being in the world” (Carter, 101) in these narratives. The task that primarily concerns Ghosh then is “not how to arrive, but how to move, how to identify convergent and divergent movements; and the challenge would be how to locate such events, how to give them a social and historical value” (Carter, 101).

***The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (2022): An Allegory of Environmental Capitalism**

Amitav Ghosh’s latest work *The Living Mountain: a Fable for Our Times* (2022), an allegory for capitalism’s dominance and anthropogenic control over natural resources and indigenous livelihoods, has at its core a “living mountain” called the **Mahaparbat**, which is a source of sustenance for indigenous people, “something that cannot be traded” (LM 12). Their lives are disrupted by intruders into the valley who treat the mountain as nothing but a resource. While the valley people considered the mountain a sacred and living entity the encroachment of Anthropoi initiates the intrinsic bond between the human and the non-human world. The Anthropoi” becomes Ghosh’s focal point for establishing his critique of the discourse of ‘Anthropocene’ and anthropogenic activities. The Anthropoi and their helmeted soldiers – Kraani – dismiss the village elders and prevent the adepts from practising their skills. The

Anthropoi begin the assault on Mahaparbat, with the villagers of the valley providing support with provisions and as porters. Under the Kraani's supervision, they also toil in their fields to grow more food for the assault. Watching the Anthropoi climb Mahaparbat, the villagers begin to lose the reverence they once had for the mountain: "Gradually, as the spectacle took the place that the mountain had once occupied in our hearts, we burned with the desire to ascend those slopes ourselves" (LM 19). They assuage the mountain for the remaining riches inflicting more destruction upon the mountain than that by the Anthropoi. Their climb to the summit coincides with ecological disasters like landslides and avalanches. With the foreboding of more disasters in the future, the Anthropoi join the villagers in an effort to protect themselves. Their savants tell the villagers that "there was some wisdom in your beliefs after all. Can you please tell us your old stories, sing us your old songs, show us your dances – so that we can determine whether your mountain really is alive or not" (LM 34). Unfortunately, however, there are no adepts left, except for one.

The anthropocentric world of the European Enlightenment put a premium on human reason as a panacea for all existential problems. The Enlightenment project, for example, looked to reason to free mankind from the darkness of superstition, prejudice and slavish obedience to religious precepts and thus pave the way for progress. This blend of rationalism and scientism is what Habermas calls "modernity". Contemporary theorists have thoroughly debunked the Enlightenment's millenarianism. An important advocate of the concept of the Counter-enlightenment, Isaiah Berlin consistently depicts the Enlightenment ideals as false, naïve, absolutist and dangerous. Berlin dismisses the Enlightenment as "monist" because the Enlightenment thinkers strived to understand the world in terms of a systematic and coherent whole subject to a set of universal and eternal laws knowable by man. What he celebrates is value pluralism. In his essay "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West", Berlin enumerates J.G. Herder's contention that there could be no comprehensive, unified "science of man" and that values were not universal:

every human society, every people, indeed every age and civilization, possesses its own unique ideals, standards, way of living and thought and action. There are no immutable, universal, eternal rules or criteria of judgment in terms of which different cultures and nations can be graded in some single order of excellence. (*The Crooked Timber of Humanity* 37)

Any monist attempt attempts to impose a single set of norms on all societies and all individuals is profoundly dangerous. The belief in the possibility of an ultimate solution to all human problems is "responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals" (Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty", 238-239). Hence, Enlightenment monism ultimately resulted in oppression. Amitav Ghosh endeavours to revise the aspects of thought based on Cartesian dualism that "arrogates all intelligence and agency" (GR 41) to the human being (a white human being) and marginalizes other forms of life. Indian intellectuals produced works of tremendous vitality in the 17th and 18th centuries; these ideas circulated in the Arabian world and even percolated into the West. Although "modernity" was not confined in the geographical space of Europe and was a global phenomenon, the Western brand of modernity, quite self-reflexively, flaunted its own uniqueness and "suppressed, incorporated and appropriated" other variants of modernity into "what is now a single, dominant model" (GR 146).



Theorizing about the idea of “epistemic injustice” and the concept of “distributive unfairness in respect of epistemic goods such as information or education” (1), Fricker argues that testimonial injustice occurs “when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (1). Consequently, it is “significantly harder reliably to filter out the prejudicial stereotypes that inform one’s social perceptions directly, without doxastic mediation” (36). The silencing of villagers’ knowledge and beliefs by the Anthropoi culminates in “testimonial injustice” when the villagers’ ways of knowing and celebrating nature are dismissed by the Anthropoi as irrational. Like the reductionist nature of Enlightenment monism, the Anthropoi celebrated their cherished ideas as “universal” and mocked the indigenous episteme of the local valley people as “false, local beliefs” and “ignorant, pagan superstition” (*LM* 26). The Anthropoi impose their way of ruthless extraction of the mountain ecosystem upon the valley peoples’ consciousness, urging them to follow suit. The supremacist nature of the Anthropoi is explicit in their claim that “this is the Age of the Anthropoi” and they “always know best” (*LM* 29) and therefore the Varavoi “need to copy us even more closely than you did before” (*LM* 29). The indigenous valley people, the Varavoi, refute the Anthropoi and their methods of climbing who always force them to follow their mode of thinking, and footsteps while depleting the Mountain of its resources.

Posthumanism entails a more inclusive definition of life, a greater moral–ethical response and responsibility to non-human life forms “Posthumanism”, continues Nayar, “interrogates the hierarchic ordering, exploitation and eradication of life forms. Normative subjectivity, which defined and categorized life forms into ‘animal’, ‘plant’ and ‘human’, is now under scrutiny for its exclusivism” (Nayar 138). This recognition of and responsibility toward all forms of life calls for an overhauling of its ethics and politics. Posthumanism studies cultural representations, power relations and discourses that have historically situated the human *above* other life forms, and in control of them. A “philosophical, political and cultural approach” it “rejects the view of the human as exceptional, separate from other life forms and usually dominant/dominating over these other forms” (Nayar 14) thereby interrogating his uniqueness. ‘Life’, far from being codified as the monopoly of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as a pre-established given, is conceptualized as a process, interactive and open-ended. “This vitalist approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portion of life – both organic and discursive – that has traditionally been reserved for *anthropos*, that is to say *bios*”, contends Braidotti, and the “wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as *zoe*. *Zoe* as the dynamic, self organizing structure of life itself” (60) stands for generative vitality. *Zoe*-centred egalitarianism is the core of the post-anthropocentric turn. Critical posthumanism thus refuses to consider the human as the centre of all things; rather the human is an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings with all forms of life. Its roots, claims Nayar, “lie in disciplines and philosophies in which modes of describing/ascribing difference and categorizations (human/non-human, human/machine and human/inhuman) historically [...] that create The Human as a category have been revealed to be exclusionary” (Nayar 15).

“The environmental fracture” asserts Ferdinand “follows from modernity’s ‘great divide’, those dualistic oppositions that separate nature and culture, environment and society, establishing a vertical scale of values that places ‘Man’ above nature (4). The valley people, the Varavoi, assert that the Anthropoi must acknowledge that “their stories were false, because their storytellers could not see that trees and mountains were living beings” (*LM* 31). These

references to trees and mountains as living beings and the Anthropoi's manner of thinking as erroneous necessitate the development of alternate models of posthuman ecology that foreground pluralistic ethics and renounce universalist assumptions and capitalist ideology. This alternative model prioritizes "an ecology of the enslaved, an ecology that maintains continuities with the indigenous communities, an ecology that has been forged in modernity's hold: a decolonial ecology" (Ferdinand 13). In a desperate effort, the Anthropoi urge the valley people to sing their old songs and recount their ancestors' tales to prevent the escalating destructions. However, the valley people have lost access to their own epistemic narratives: "we had forgotten the old stories and dances. We too had come to believe that they were foolish and fantastical and had no place in the Age of the Anthropoi" (*LM* 34). Capitalistic ideology and Western anthropocentrism thus epistemologically entangle non-Western modalities of perception and knowing, thereby silencing other forms of knowledge and consciousness. The valley people eventually find an elderly woman who, after considerable persuasion, agrees to perform in the "our old ways" (*LM* 34). Miraculously, her dance makes everyone feel that the Mountain was "reverberating under our feet as though in answer to the dance" (*LM* 34). The Anthropoi ultimately realized that the Mountain is neither dead nor a passive entity; rather, it has a life of its own and the "poor, dear mountain" (*LM* 35). The indigenous people thus finally subvert the West's anthropocentric assumptions of itself as the fount of legitimate knowledge. The vital justification of a decolonial epistemic standpoint is also asserted through the old woman's final rebuff, "how dare you speak of the Mountain as though you were its masters, and it was your plaything, your child" (*LM* 35)? *The Living Mountain* thus interrogates the ways in which the Western colonial episteme has commodified nature, land, mountains, and ecology.

Towards the Possibility of an Eco-Aesthetics:

Amitav Ghosh's first commitment is to his art. The question that has engaged him a lot is whether this commitment excludes all other commitments. He admits that "a writer is also a citizen, not just of a country but of the world" (Hawley 11). Whether a writer should be a responsible citizen or an insouciant aesthete is the issue that occupies him in the essay "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi". His point of departure is Dzevad Karahasan's essay "Literature and War", touching on the relation between modern literary aestheticism and the contemporary world's indifference to violence. Karahasan holds that "The decision to perceive literally everything as an aesthetic phenomenon — completely sidestepping questions about goodness and truth — is an artistic decision. That decision started in the realm of art, and went on to become characteristic of the contemporary world" (cited in *II* 60). Ghosh abhors Karahasan's brand of aestheticism, and plumps for moral activism:

Writers don't join crowds — Naipaul and so many others teach us that. But what do you do when the constitutional authority fails to act? You join and in joining bear all the responsibilities and obligations and guilt that joining represents. My experience of the violence was overwhelmingly and memorably of the resistance to it. (*II* 61)

The 20th century has witnessed a more engaging role of artists and writers with more increasing fervor, "not just in aesthetic matters, but also in regard to public affairs" (*GR* 162) in a period of accelerating carbon emissions. By advocating resistance to violence and rejecting the "aesthetic of indifference", Ghosh squarely denounces the postmodernist dogma of pan-aestheticization as enunciated by Patricia Waugh: "Postmodern theory can be seen and



understood as the latest version of a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an aestheticised view of the world, though it may be more thoroughly aestheticising than any previous body of thought” (6). Lamenting the space for dissent in contemporary world, Amitav Ghosh clamours for the need to “recreate, expand, and reimagine the space for articulate, humane, and creative dissent” (*II* 275) to smother and neutralize the misdirected and banal energies of religious extremism. For Ghosh, “the affirmation of humanity” is more important, “the risks that perfectly ordinary people are willing to take for one another” (*II* 61).

Art is not illusionary, it has agency. Rancière asserts that “art and politics do not constitute two permanent, separate realities whereby the issue is to know whether or not they *ought* to be set in relation. They are two forms of distribution of the sensible, both of which are dependent on a specific regime of identification” (25–26). If aesthetics has any agency in relation to climate change, contends Miles, “it is probably in critical acts of re-distribution and re-identification, within but beyond the regime of the art-world” (70). Admitting the fact that art cannot transform the world since it is part of the world itself and “the conditions of its production are always present in an artwork, Miles claims that art “contributes to facing the forces and trajectories which appear to bring the world to the edge of destruction” (158). Amitav Ghosh espouses the individuality and freedom of all writers: “Artists are nothing if not individualistic and each must, and ought to, forge their roles according to their own ideas and desires” (cited in Hawley 11). He firmly declares that every writer is “an individual and every writer has a right to define their own role” (*Calcuttaveb* 2). He is shocked at the absolute dominance of the “logic of late capitalism”: “Today, for the first time in history, a single ideal command something close to absolute hegemony in the world: the notion that human existence must be permanently and irredeemably subordinated to the functioning of the impersonal mechanisms of a global marketplace” (*II*, 285). He totally rejects this capitalist dogma of postmodernism in his essay “The Fundamentalist Challenge”:

However, the market ideal as a cultural absolute, untempered by any other ethical, political, or spiritual ideals, is often so inhuman and predatory in its effects that it cannot but generate dissent. It is simply not conceivable that the majority of human beings will ever willingly give their assent to the idea that the search for profit should be the sole or central organizing principle of society. (*II* 285)

For his spiritual anchorage, he veers towards that brand of modernism which erected “religion as a bulwark against the dehumanization of contemporary life” (*II* 268). *The Living Mountain* is a timely reminder of the fact that human beings did have an extremely congenial and caring relationship with the earth and how man’s extractivism impulse which established the gospel of capitalism has spelt disaster for the globe.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Clare. March, 2009. “Convicts and Coolies: Rethinking Indentured Labour in the Nineteenth Century.” *Slavery and Abolition* 30.1: 93–109.
- Ashcroft, Bill. “Globalization, the Transnation and Utopia”. *Narrating the (Trans)Nation: The Dialectics of Culture and Identity*. Ed. Krishna Sen and Sudeshna Chakravarti. Kolkata: Dasgupta & Co: 2008. 1–24.
- Badiou, Alain. 2012. *The Rebirth of History*. London: Verso.

- Banki, Susan. "Precarity of place: a complement to the growing precariat literature". *Global Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Current Affairs and Applied Contemporary Thought*, 2013, 3:3-4, 450-463.
- Berlin, Isaiah. "The Decline of Utopian Ideas in the West." *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991.
- "Two Concepts of Liberty." *The Proper Story of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*. Ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Girouse[1958]. 1998.
- Bosniak, Linda. "Constitutional Citizenship Through the Prism of Alienage." *Ohio State Law Journal*, 63 (5), 2002: 1285–1285.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Essence of Neoliberalism". Trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro. *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December, 1998. mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu
- Braidotti, R. *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity, 2006.
- Chatterjee, Margaret. *Our Knowledge of Other Selves*. New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1963.
- Chin, C. "Precarious Work and its Complicit Network: Migrant Labour in Singapore". *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 2019. pp. 1-25.
- Cruz, Katie. "Beyond Liberalism: Marxist Feminism, Migrant Sex Work, and Labour Unfreedom". *Feminist Legal Studies*, April, 2018, 26(1): 65-92.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. 2004. "The Ethnographic State". *Postcolonial Passages: Contemporary History-writing on India*. Ed. Saurabh Dube. New Delhi: OUP: 70-88.
- During, Simon. "Precariousness, Literature and the Humanities Today". *Australian Humanities Review* 58 (2015): 51-56.
- Ferdinand, Malcolm. *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022.
- Ferguson, Sue, and David McNally. "Precarious Migrants: Gender, Race and the Social Reproduction of a Global Working Class". *Transforming Classes: Socialist Register* ed. Leo Panitch and Greg Albo, London: Merlin Press, 2015: 1-23.
- Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House, 2019.
- . *The Living Mountain: a Fable for Our Times*. New Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2022.
- . "The Chronicle Interview: Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*" Interview by Hasan Ferdous and Horst Rutsch. *UN Chronicle* 42.4, 2005: 48–52.
- . *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India, 2016.
- . "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel". *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2002.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Hannerz, Ulf. "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture." *Theory, Culture and Society*. 7, 1990: 237-52.
- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Hawley, John C. *Amitav Ghosh*. New Delhi: Foundation Books Pvt. Ltd., 2005.
- Judd, Denis. *Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present*. London: Harper Collins, 1996.
- Khair, Tabish. *The New Xenophobia*. New Delhi: OUP, 2016.
- Lewis, H., Dwyer, P., Hodkinson, S. and L. Waite. "Hyper-Precarious Lives: Migrants, Work and Forced Labour in the Global North." *Progress in Human Geography* 39 (5), 2015: 580–600.
- H Lewis & L Waite. "Asylum, Immigration Restrictions and Exploitation: Hyper-precarity as a lens for understanding and tackling forced labour". *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 5, 2015, pp. 50– 68, www.antitraffickingreview.org Accessed 26.6.2019
- Lin, Lidian. *The Rhetoric of Posthumanism in Four Twentieth Century International Novels*. Diss., University of North Texas, 1998. Ann Arbor: UMI.
- Linebaugh, Peter and Marcus Rediker. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.



- Lowe, Lisa. "The Intimacies of Four Continents." *Haunted By Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Ed. Ann Laura Stoler. Durham: Duke UP: 2006, 192–212.
- Maddox, Jessica. "Guns Don't Kill People ... Selfies Do". *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. 34.3, 2017.
- Marcuse, Herbert. 1972. Rpt. "Ecology and Revolution," in Douglas Kellner (Ed.). Herbert Marcuse, The New Left and the 1960s, Volume Three, Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.
- _____. 1970. Rpt. Interview. *Street Journal*. In *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia*. Collected Papers 6. York, NY: Routledge, 2014.
- _____. 1979. Rpt. "Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society," in Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (Eds.). Herbert Marcuse, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Emancipation, Volume 5, Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse. London and New York: Routledge, 2011.
- McAdam, Jane. *Climate Change, Forced Migration and International Law*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Miles, Malcolm. *Eco-Aesthetics: Art, Literature and Architecture in a Period of Climate Change*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Mishra, Vijay. "New Lamps for Old: Diasporas Migrancy Border." *Interrogating Post-Colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*. Shimla: 1996: 67- 85.
- _____. "Memory and Recall from Beyond the Troubled Black Waters." *South Asian Review*, 32.3, 2011: 89-108.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis and Oxford, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Posthumanism*. Cambridge: Polity, 2014.
- Neilson, Brett, and Ned Rossiter. "Precarity as a Political Concept, Or, Fordism as Exception." *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (7–8), 2008: 51–72.
- Paret, Marcel and Gleeson, Shannon. "Precarity and agency through a migration lens." *Citizenship Studies*, 20:3-4, 2016: 277-294.
- Radhakrishnan, R. *Theory in an Uneven World*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. Print.
- Rancière, J. *Aesthetics and its Discontents*. Cambridge: Polity, 2009.
- Sayad, Abdelmalek. *The Suffering of the Immigrant*. Trans. David Macey. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2004.
- Soysal, Yasemin N. *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Skrivankova, K. *Between Decent Work and Forced Labour: Examining the Continuum of Exploitation*. JRF programme paper: Forced Labour. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010.
- Standing, G. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.
- Walzer, Michael. *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*. New York: Basic Books, 1984.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism*. London: Arnold, 1992.
- Wilson, S., and N. Ebert. "Precarious Work: Economic, Sociological and Political Perspectives." *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 24 (3), 2013: 263–278.