Posthuman Nature in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

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In this article, I focus on the idea of a posthuman nature as presented in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement.* I also discuss other contemporary Asian writers whose works reveal the idea of vital materiality to uncover a broader mosaic.

Introduction to *The Great Derangement*

Amitav Ghosh's (2016) non-fiction book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* documents the extraordinary difficulties that have prevented writers of literary fiction registering the greatest crisis that humanity faces: namely, the climate crisis. The book has three sections titled "Stories", "History" and "Politics." As Julia Adeney Thomas, the reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* observes, Ghosh shows that "all three cultural modes share assumptions that render climate change unthinkable, occluding our view of its dangers rather than aiding our understanding" (Thomas, 2016). Other reviewers such as Elizabeth Abbott (2018) and Lavanya Suresh (2017) echo this view. In this essay, I argue that Ghosh, in proposing an alternative view that understands nature as far from inert, and foregrounding vital materiality, is not only aligned with ecocritics who conceive of a posthuman nature but his views resonate with some ancient concepts from Asian philosophical schools that continue to remain influential. Furthermore, in holding these views, he is not alone. His views resemble the perspectives of several other contemporary Asian authors. Unlike post-Enlightenment Western thought that emphasizes human exclusivity and the control of Nature, there is less resistance to the idea of vital materiality in Asia.

One of the important points that Ghosh raises is Asia's pivotal role in tackling the climate emergency. He points out that most discussions about the climate crisis remain largely Eurocentric. Yet, as the home of the most populous countries in the world, including China, India, and Indonesia, "the continent of Asia is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming" (Ghosh, 2016: 87). Therefore, an awareness of history, especially the history of fossil fuel consumption is vital to understanding our current predicament.

At one point in the book, Ghosh points out how politics has played a major role in shaping not only the contours of globalization, but also literary and artistic trends. For instance, Asian writers and artists "created ruptures that radically reconfigured the region's literature, art, architecture, and so on" (120). These ruptures meant jettisoning many traditions, including those "that accorded the nonhuman special salience" (120). He explores how the emphasis on exclusive human agency have influenced human thought and actions in distinctive ways. For Ghosh, the history of the planet, in its socio-cultural, historical, and political aspects, is entangled with its literary histories. These ideas expressed by Ghosh are particularly important to our ensuing argument that focuses on some influential Asian philosophical views. *The Great Derangement* pushes us—as readers and global corporate consumers—to acknowledge that our current 'scientific' view about 'nature as inert,' serving merely as a backdrop to human agency, is incomplete. For Ghosh, alternate belief systems, based on the understanding of Nature as an agent, need to be taken more seriously. In foregrounding this view, Ghosh offers a radical perspective that remains contentious in mainstream Western thought that promotes human superiority over nonhuman Nature. Ghosh also discusses a related literary theme. He traces the ideas that lead to the evaluation and categorization of a fictional work as "serious literature" or fringe literature. He demonstrates how these are based on certain ideologies that are value-laden.

Climate Change and Serious Fiction

Ghosh argues that certain ideological trends in society have influenced not only scientific inquiry but also literature. With the rise of the bourgeois class, the idea of emphasizing 'probability' as a central feature of balanced narratives has led to a narrowing of literary themes (24). Ghosh discusses the irony of extreme climate catastrophes that now occur routinely, causing great social disruption, yet continue to be regarded as improbable narrative elements in "serious" fiction. Though it is common for authors to mine their lived experience, Ghosh observes that he has never written about being nearly killed by a tornado that hit Delhi on March 17th, 1978 (14), and examines this absence in his own work. Despite often thinking about that moment and wanting to describe it in his fiction, Ghosh realizes that in fact he is not able to because including such dramatic moments would seriously undermine the even tenor expected of a serious literary narrative. He asserts that this would lead to its being excluded from "the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence." It would be relegated to the "generic outhouses" which Ghosh likens to

"humbler dwellings that surround the manor house," where the gothic and the romance once dwelled and to where, now, science fiction and fantasy are relegated (Ghosh, 24). Despite this predilection to disregard 'extreme weather' and the reluctance to co-opt such dramatic images into the pages of "serious fiction", Ghosh believes that it is important to find ways of discussing the climate emergency. One way is to look beyond the current mainstream perceptions and explore alternate viewpoints that have always existed in literary, philosophical, and cultural spaces.

Alternate Views of Nature

In *Nature Across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures*, Harold Coward (2003) points to the differences between post-Enlightenment humanist thought that embeds human exclusivism and that has been identified as the ideological backbone of many Western historical movements like colonialism, forming a core part of Western mainstream thought, and perspectives on Nature from ancient cultures like traditional Chinese, Hindu and Aboriginal Australian cultures. He remarks:

> In contrast to some attitudes toward nature as an 'It' that is separate from humans, Hindus see the surrounding world as a 'Thou' of which they are an interdependent part. Humans and their society are imbedded in nature and dependent upon cosmic forces. Individual human life is experienced as a microcosm of the universe. Human life is in continuity with the cosmos. Hindu religion has a strong ethical direction aimed at keeping this relational continuity in balance. This approach has much in common with traditional Chinese and Aboriginal Australian views and practices. (2003: 411)

In the above passage, we find that in Asia, and in Australian Aboriginal perspectives, the concept of human separation from nature is viewed as an aberration rather than the norm. Ghosh too talks about how, for example, the people of the Sundarbans, who live in and around the mangrove forest "have never doubted that tigers and other animals possess intelligence and agency" (64). Here, he also refers to the quintessential Asian genre of Bonbibi stories that imbues animals and the forest with agency. The gaze exchanged between humans and non-humans becomes important in this genre. The Bonbibi folktales are popular across West Bengal in India. Coward observes that the ancient Hindu myth is founded on what we would now call "a profoundly ecological vision. The human/nature relationship was at the core of that vision and permeated the biological, physical, and spiritual dimensions of life" (412). This ecological vision can be identified in

the Bonbibi myth. It can also be identified in ways in which Hindu myths often pair up humans, gods and animals, and indeed, the smallest and largest of them. Thus, the popular iconic god, Ganesha is drawn in the image of a human with an elephant-head. His *vāhanā* or vehicle is a mouse. Such unions between humans and animals abound in many Asian mythologies.

In the Bonbibi myth, Bonbibi is the lady of the forest, a guardian spirit or nature goddess, an incarnation of *prakṛti* (nature), who is venerated by both Muslims and Hindus in the Sundarbans region of Bengal. She is believed to protect her devotees from man-eating tigers. Folk belief identifies the tiger as Dakshin Rai, a demon in disguise, who marks humans with his sharp eyes. The gaze exchanged between humans and nonhumans is significant because it *complicates* and overturns the unidirectional flow of power from predator to prey. Interestingly, in this instance, the predators can be *both* human and animal. The man-eaters are predators, but so are the humans who hunt and kill animals. Therefore, the gaze of the man-eater as it pins down its human prey defies the portrayal of animals as creatures of instinct, merely following their 'animal nature.' Instead, this mythic embellishment of the tiger imbues it with agency. The gaze is no longer the sole preserve of the human.

The Bonbibi narrative also challenges the idea of animals as always "the observed." As John Berger (1972) states, the idea that animals too can observe humans has lost all significance. The animals are categorized as objects (14). Greg Garrard (2004) understands this objectification as a way of establishing our control over animals: "What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are" (Garrard, 2004: 139). Ghosh's text challenges and qualifies such universal assumptions in ways that are especially pertinent to Asian thought. It also links the text to posthuman modes of cognizing nature.

Posthuman Nature

The *Great Derangement* begins with an unusual rhetorical question: "Who can forget those moments when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive?" This query assumes an interrelation between what are usually classified as clear binaries: living and the non-living; animate and the inanimate. By raising this question, Ghosh introduces us to the idea of the human-nature continuum and how all things on Earth are interrelated. This idea is at the center of the posthuman concept. As Ghosh rightly notes: "The humans of the future will surely understand, knowing what they

presumably will know about the history of their forebears on Earth, that only in one, very brief era, lasting less than three centuries, did a significant number of their kind believe that planets and asteroids are inert" (Ghosh, 2016:3).

The point that Ghosh makes about the "very brief era, lasting less than three centuries" is significant. Post-Enlightenment European thought that subscribed to the pre-eminence of the human species in its bid for freedom from superstition, mysticism and medieval religious hierarchies, espoused egalitarianism and progressive attitudes, advocating the inherent dignity of all human beings. Ironically, however, this central tenet of liberal humanism was heavily compromised during the colonial era because the very definition of 'human' was heavily circumscribed. Natives and nonhuman Nature were subsumed under the same ideological space of passivity with 'Man' (read, European male) taking control of the natural world, mastering its waywardness, calming its savagery and pushing forward to civilize the barbarians. These sentiments directly drove Europeans to colonize and conquer non-European lands and indeed to 'civilize' Nature. Ghosh's reminder that all these developments belong to a brief, specific period of time, highlights the fact that there were very different ways of conceiving the natural world and human relations to it, in Chinese, Hindu and Australian aboriginal cultures among others, and indeed, even in earlier periods in Europe. For example, for the medieval Church and literati, nature was a symbol of the glory and orderliness of God and this idea found its cosmological model in the so-called *scala naturae* or the "Great Chain of Being," a depiction of the world as hierarchical, where humankind was placed higher than beasts and lower than angels. However, *scala naturae* was still not categorically dismissive of the status of animals. On the contrary, as shown by Thomas Aquinas who invokes the *scala naturae*, this concept of the "Great Chain of Being" acted as *a theological restraint* against abusing the natural world. Aquinas' faith leads him to believe that "the goodness of the species transcends the goodness of the individual … the multiplication of species is a greater addition to the good of the universe …. " (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3:71). Thus, medieval Christianity emphasizes respect for all of God's creation. This is aligned to some views that have emerged recently in ecological humanities.

The past decades of the Anthropocene have witnessed the emergence of approaches from various fields, questioning the idea of human exceptionalism, identified as a direct consequence of post-Enlightenment humanistic ethos that has insisted not only on the pre-eminence of the human but on our separate existence *above and beyond* nature, capable of mastering it. Under themes that delve on the "more-than-human" geographies (Greenhough, 2014) or the "almost

human" (Strum 2001), or the idea of "beyond humanity" (Ingold, 2013), there is currently an ongoing debate in several fields that culminates in the idea of "the Posthuman" (Braidotti, 2013). Debates around the posthuman engage diverse subjects ranging from nanotechnology, genetic modification of plants, animals, and humans, artificial intelligence and new reproductive technologies. All these debates question traditional boundaries separating the "natural" and the "unnatural."

A primary intervention in posthumanism is to interrogate familiar binaries such as 'nature/culture' and 'human/non-human.' For example, Donna Haraway (2003) develops the concept of 'naturecultures,' where these are perceived as entangled, hybrid spaces that operate as continuums. As Nicholas Malone and Kathryn Ovenden explain, "natureculture is a synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed" (2017: 1). These multiple positions are connected through the concept of the posthuman in that they aim to revise anthropocentric ontologies and epistemologies descended from humanist traditions. The posthumanist goal is to decenter the human, and its various proponents achieve this in different ways. For example, Rosi Braidotti (1991) argues that humans are embedded in hybrid relations of subjectivity or in materialist vitality (Braidotti 2001); Bruno Latour (2007) conceives of human agency as part of heterogeneous networks with material objects and artifacts; Timothy Morton (2013) sees human experience as limited by unperceivable "Hyperobjects"; on the other hand, Karen Barad sees the human being as affected by the strong impact of active matter (Barad 2003; Jane Bennet 2010). A common theme in these different conceptions is that the nonhuman and the natural are perceived as endowed with agency. There is an acknowledgment of the vitality of matter. These perceptions align with certain ancient Asian philosophical insights such as the *Sāṃkhya*.

The *Sāṃkhya* Philosophy

Sāṃkhya is one of the six philosophical schools in Hinduism known as *Darshanas* or insights [derived from Sanskrit *drish -to see*]. *Sāṃkhya* is perhaps the most ancient of the systems and was influential in antiquity. Historical antecedents of this school can be traced to the *Upanishads*, especially the *Svetasvatara* and the *Maitrayanya* (first millennium BCE). The main developments of this school occurred in the period extending from the first century CE to the eleventh century CE (Gupta, 2012: 130-34). *Sāṃkhya* is also important within Buddhism. *Duhkha* or suffering is foundational to *Sāṃkhya*, which

believes that liberation comes from knowing how to free oneself from *Duhkha*. *Sāṃkhya* has often been categorized, not without controversy, as an atheistic spirituality (Radhakrishnan and Moore, 1957).

As Bina Gupta (2012) explains in *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy: Perspectives on Reality, Knowledge, and Freedom*, *Sāṃkhya* is a dualistic system and the dualism is between *puruṣa* [*purusha*] and *prakṛti*, where *purusha* stands for pure consciousness, and *prakṛti* is variously interpreted as "non-conscious substance energy" and more commonly as "manifest nature." *Prakṛti* is the first "uncaused cause" of all objects, gross and subtle (Gupta: 135-38). *Purusha* or consciousness is considered the masculine principle and *prakṛti* the feminine principle, which is also linked to the Hindu goddess, Shakti, in 'practiced' faith.

According to *Sāṃkhya*, *purushas* are many. This is due to the cycle of birth, death and faculties; because of actions and functions at different times … and so forth. Thus, *Sāṃkhya* advocates a dualism between *prakṛti* and (many) *purushas*, a dualism that is unlike the Cartesian dualism between matter and mind. In *Sāṃkhya*, *prakṛti* being the first cause, is always there. *Purusha* is a witness of *prakṛti*. In Cartesian dualism on the other hand, *res cogitans* and *res extensa* are separate and it is only when *res cogitans* and *res extensa* meet that they come to know each other (Gupta: 137-8).

In *Sāṃkhya*, the *purusha* can see but cannot act as it has no agency; *prakṛti* has agency but has no path to walk. It just 'is.' Prior to the emergence of the world and its infinite concrete objects, *purusha* has nothing to see. Prakṛti being active, leads purusha to the goal of liberation. When the goal is reached, i.e., when *purusha* becomes free, their provisional co-operation ends. *Purusha* is liberated and *prakṛti* returns to its original state of pure undifferentiated homogeneity (Gupta: 138-43). Thus, it is *prakṛti* that is agentic in the evolution of *purusha.* In common understanding, *Prakṛti* is often parsed as nature or the goddess. Two pertinent ideas emerge out of this discussion. First, material vitality is profoundly realised in this system of thought for it is *prakṛti*, defined variously as nature, cosmic energy or the feminine principle in *Sāṃkhya* that works to liberate the individual soul or *purusha*. It is noteworthy that this alignment of nature, cosmic energy or *shakti*, and the feminine principle, runs counter to the ways that women have been conceived across cultures the world over. Indeed, ecological feminists or ecofeminists argue that under patriarchy, women and nature have been ideologically slotted into the same passive space.

One of the most dynamic subfields to emerge from ecological studies has been ecofeminism. Given the ideological links between passivity, nature, and femininity, it becomes necessary to probe the basic conceptual framework of ecofeminism, which is premised on the

view that under patriarchy, the exploitation of nature and that of women is ideologically linked. Sherry Ortner's famous essay "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" began an important field of enquiry. Several ground-breaking books that examine women-nature connections have appeared in the past few decades. Pioneering ecofeminist Karen J. Warren observes:

> Just as there is not one feminism, there is neither one ecofeminism nor one feminist philosophy. 'Ecological feminism' is the name of a variety of different feminist perspectives on the nature of the connections between the domination of women (and other oppressed humans) and the domination of nature … Given the newness of ecofeminism as a theoretical position, the nature of ecofeminist ethics is still emerging. (111)

Warren's perception is timely and relevant. In South and Southeast Asia, philosophical perspectives and indigenous myths link women with earth and nature in empowering ways, details of which can be mined from the works of contemporary women writers. It may appear that I am accusing these writers of viewing the women-nature relationship in reactionary ways. Women's conventional association with the natural world in Western culture which, as ecofeminists like Carolyn Merchant point out, is ubiquitous (Earthcare 3-26), received approval from writers such as Aldo Leopold (A Sand County Almanac) and continues to be celebrated by writers like Sharon Doubiago (Hard Country). But the woman-nature association has been contested by contemporary ecofeminists. Janet Biehl, Catriona Sandilands, and several others do not accept this essentializing of both woman and nature as it is reductive of the diversity of women, collapsing various ecological predicaments into one. However, there are some alternative relationships that connect the goddess with nature in some South Asian traditions that would prompt us to re/view this justifiable stand against essentialism. The unique traditions within Hinduism, for instance, perceive/deify the Earth as Bhooma Devi (Earth Goddess), "who" is not only agentic but often comes to the rescue of vulnerable women, liberating them from patriarchal excesses. The most famous instance of this is from the Uttar Ramayana, where the pregnant Sita, finally abandoned by Rama, brings up their twin sons in Sage Valmiki's ashram in the forest. When the boys are grown and reunited with their father, Sita rejects Rama's call for her return, preferring instead to return to her mother, Bhooma Devi, who enfolds her in her bosom and whisks her away to safety. Given the pervasive regional influence of the Ramayana, such beliefs undergird the social persuasions of many non-Hindu cultures as well. Ghosh's narratives that discuss the vitality of nature appear closely aligned to such philosophical and mythological insights.

In reflecting on Nature's agency, Ghosh discusses the circumstances that led to his ancestors becoming ecological refugees. In the mid-1850s, their village on the shores of the Padma River in the Northeast of the Indian subcontinent was drowned when the river suddenly changed course. His forebears were among the few who managed to survive (Ghosh, 4). Therefore, for Ghosh, the influence of the "elemental force" of the river that "untethered [his] ancestors from their homeland and launched them on the series of journeys" (4) that preceded and made possible Ghosh's own travels, is a clear instance of the vitality and agency of nature and ways in which it can influence human destiny. Thinking about this moment as he journeyed down the river in his later years, he cognizes the way in which humans routinely underestimate Nature's vitality. His recognition of this provides an immediacy to the agency of nature and brings into focus the validity of the concept of *prakṛti* as a shaping force for humanity. "When I look into my past the river seems to meet my eyes, staring back, as if to ask, 'Do you recognize me, whoever you are?'" (4). He wonders if this recognition was what his forebears experienced on that day when the river rose to claim their village:

> They awoke to the recognition of a presence that had molded their lives to the point where they had come to take it as much for granted as the air they breathed. But, of course, the air too can come to life with sudden and deadly violence – as it did in the Congo in 1988, when a great cloud of carbon dioxide burst forth from Lake Nyos and rolled into the surrounding villages, killing 1,700 people and untold number of animals. (5)

Ghosh offers a profound insight into the agency of nature with this example. He reveals how, in the limited view that humans adopt, agency is always understood as direct action by an individual agent. Thus, even animals are endowed with agency, like humans. However, humans have not yet cognized the immense agency of nature, of rivers, and volcanoes. Ghosh persuades us to realize how nature has the potential to change not only an individual life but the lives of entire communities. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett explains "vitality" as "the capacity of things … not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (2010: viii). Ghosh has a deep respect for the often-overlooked vitality of materiality. He observes: "it dawns on us that the energy that surrounds us, flowing under our feet and through wires in our walls, animating our vehicles and illuminating our rooms, is an all-encompassing presence that may have its own purposes about which

we know nothing" (Ghosh, 5). This is precisely what Bennett is talking about when she poses the rhetorical question, "what difference would it make to the course of energy policy were electricity to be figured not simply as a resource, commodity, or instrumentality but also and more radically as an 'actant'?" (Bennett, viii). The term 'actant' is borrowed from Latour. In his Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Latour expands on the idea of networks of relations between human and nonhuman actors, where both exert agency on each other. Thus, for him, 'actants' are the human and nonhuman actors in a network. They take the shape that they do by virtue of their relations with one another. This theory posits that nothing lies outside the network of relations, and suggests, as does Bennett, that there is no difference in the ability of technology, humans, animals, or other non-humans to act (Latour, 2007). Ghosh's narration of his ancestral migration instigated by the river's agency, speaks to this notion of material vitality. To revisit the Bonbibi tales, Ghosh expands on this vitality in ways that contribute to my thesis:

> In these stories a great deal hinges on the eyes, seeing is one of their central themes: *not* seeing is another. The tiger is watching you; you are aware of its gaze, as you always are, but you do not see it; you do not lock eyes with it until it launches its charge, and at that moment a shock courses through you and you are immobilized, frozen. The folk epic of the Sundarbans, *Bon Bibir Johurnama* (*The Miracles of Bon Bibi*), comes to a climax in one such moment of mutual beholding, when the tiger demon, Dokkhin Rai, locks eyes with the protagonist, a boy called Dukhey. (Ghosh, 29)

As Ghosh implies, these folk myths have not lost their sense of the enchantment of nature. In preserving this mystique, nature is respected by the natives of the Sundarbans. In her book, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001), Jane Bennett argues that the disenchantment narrative sustained by humanism, which "figures nonhuman nature as more or less inert 'matter'" (7), can be overcome by the telling of an "alter-tale" which recognizes the potential for re-enchantment by, for example, exploring "sophisticated modes of communication among nonhumans." *The Great Derangement* invokes such moments of nonhuman communication.

Richard Powers' 2018 eco-novel *The Overstory* revolves around nine characters, who due to various circumstances are drawn to trees. One character, Patricia Westerford, a botanist, discovers that trees communicate with each other and delivers a talk in which she claims "trees want something from us, just as we've always wanted things from them. This isn't mystical. The 'environment' is alive—a fluid, changing web of purposeful lives dependent on each other" (567). *The Overstory* suggests that in order to hear what the nonhuman world wants from us, and to prevent further ecological destruction, the human subject must become receptive. Ghosh's *The Great*

Derangement too appears to want to stimulate and inspire this much-wanted human receptivity. Ghosh points out how, for example, for the first people of the Yukon, "even glaciers are endowed with moods and feelings" (64). He argues that this awareness has also always been registered in the literature emerging from various non-western cultures. For example, in the Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, "there is a complete matter-of-fact acceptance of the agency of the nonhuman beings of many kinds" (64). Ghosh clarifies that this belief also extends to "techniques of storytelling" and in the way the nonhumans "provide much of the momentum" and many of "the resolutions" in the epic, enabling "the narrative to move forward" (64). Indeed, he also observes that these interventions by nonhumans and the elements can also be seen in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

For Ghosh, therefore, the central mystery resides not in the agency of nature, which he insists permeates the cultural wisdom of humans from ancient times but in *how* this pervasive awareness came to be *suppressed* in the first place. Ghosh cites Latour who suggests a reason for this suppression in western society: "Latour argues that one of the originary impulses of modernity is the project of "partitioning" or deepening the imaginary gulf between Nature and Culture: the former comes to be relegated exclusively to the sciences and is regarded as being off-limits to the latter" (Ghosh, 68). This scientific approach to nature has come to dominate discourses about nature and the nonhuman. This has led to the suppression of the enchantment, mystery and agency of nature and has directly resulted in its destruction and in the increasing predation of humankind. Slavoj Žižek observes: "nature is no longer 'natural,' the reliable 'dense' background of our lives; it now appears as a fragile mechanism which, at any point, can explode in a catastrophic manner" (2008: 435). Among contemporary Asian writers, there is a pervasive awareness of the critical role that nature and 'the material' play in culture.

Vital Materiality and Contemporary Asian Writers

As we read through contemporary Asian fictions, an interesting fact that emerges is that even in mainstream "serious" Asian fiction, there appears to be a greater acceptance of the agency of nature that what exists in mainstream western thought. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is only one example of this. This book is set in the Sundarbans, a labyrinth of islands in the delta formed by the confluence of the Padma, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna Rivers in the Bay of Bengal. In this liminal land between sea and shore, tidal floods rise and abate

with sudden ferocity, devastating settlements where people and animals cohabit precariously.

The Hungry Tide is about the strange friendship between a Bengali American marine biologist, Piyali Roy, and Fokir, a young, unlettered fisherman. What unites them is their love of dolphins, which she has come to study. Haraway's 'natureculture' concept is realized through Piya's and Fokir's friendship. We witness how nature and culture are inextricably entangled. Their love of dolphins surpasses the barriers of language and their completely different backgrounds to forge a strong union between the two. Also, the way in which the island-settlers are threatened by man-eaters, and how animal activists and human-rights activists fight over the land where the refugees are located, which was formerly a tiger reserve, are all instances of this 'natureculture' entanglement. Thus, nature and humans are *both* presented as agentic, possessing the power to affect and impact on each other's existences.

This same idea is worked out in Gita Mehta's *The River Sutra.* This novel published in 1993 is constructed of subordinate stories supported by a frame narrative and is centred on the River Narmada. The textual form is appropriate in that the earliest known frame narrative that precedes better-known ones such as Boccacio's *Decameron* (1353) or Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1342) can be traced to India. The *Panchatantra* that dates to earlier than third-century BCE is universally accepted as the precursor of *The Arabian Nights* and other well-known frame narratives. The form of *The River Sutra* thus links the river with a cultural ethos indigenous to India. It also plays a pivotal role in the narrative, because every subordinate tale is connected to the river Narmada, which forms the traditional boundary between North and South India and flows westwards over a length of 1,312 kilometres before joining the Arabian Sea at the Gulf of Cambay.

The novel is constructed of six different tales of passion, enchantment, love and loss, held together by a frame narrative that centers on an unnamed senior bureaucrat, the manager of a guest house along the Narmada river. It is in the vicinity of this guest house that the bureaucrat meets the various characters who inhabit the subordinate tales, marking the river itself as a flowing theme, with every story rising from and ebbing into the Narmada. The word "*sutra*"[1] in the title, which in Sanskrit means a thread or line that holds things together, is derived from the verbal root "*siv*", meaning 'to sew'. The text thus sews together tales along the river Narmada making it *A River Sutra*.

The bureaucrat is of a contemplative turn of mind. His spiritual aspirations have persuaded him to downgrade his career goals and live in semi-retirement on the banks of the Narmada. He is predictably the

audience for the six tales that bead the narrative. Interestingly too, the frame narrative is interspersed with comments by the bureaucrat and his friends, all of whom are males. Thus, we hear the views of Tariq Mia, the mullah from the neighbouring village; Dr Mitra, the local physician; Mr Chagla, the bureaucrat's faithful assistant; and even the local constable, Sashi. The Narmada gets objectified as a feminine presence open to the androcentric gaze of these males. The narrative underscores this perspective by recounting the myth of the Narmada's "birth" in magical and erotic terms:

> It is said that Shiva, Creator and Destroyer of Worlds, was in an ascetic trance so strenuous that rivulets of perspiration began flowing from his body down the hills. The stream took on the form of a woman – the most dangerous of her kind: a beautiful virgin innocently tempting even ascetics to pursue her, inflaming their lust by appearing at one moment as a lightly dancing girl, at another as a romantic dreamer, at yet another as a seductress loose-limbed with the lassitude of desire. Her inventive variations so amused Shiva that he named her Narmada, the Delightful one, blessing her with the words, "You shall be forever holy, forever inexhaustible." Then he gave her in marriage to the ocean, Lord of Rivers, most lustrous of all her suitors. (Mehta, 1993: 8-9)

The Narmada is both mythical and real. It is "everywoman," described as virgin, seductress, bride, courtesan, and mother (as the protector of the pilgrims who come to her banks to worship her) all rolled into one. The Narmada is thus both sacred and erotic. It is the holy river, where "In the silence [the bureaucrat] … can hear waves lapping at the riverbanks and … think of the ascetics meditating by the holy pool at Amarkantak, seeking through their meditations to liberate themselves from the cycle or rebirth and death" (Mehta, 42). The Narmada also plays a pivotal role in the lives of the protagonists of the subordinate tales. Thus, its mystical power and influence is felt by the bureaucrat and his friends, and all the characters in the subordinate tales.

Next, we come to *The Fish-Hair Woman* (2012), a novel based on the "Total War" in the Philippines by the Filipino-Australian writer Merlinda Bobis. At the centre of the novel is the Iraya river. Bobis clarifies that 'Iraya' is a directional reference to place: it means 'towards the water'. She remarks that "[w]riting *FHW* (sic) was a return to water, to the wellspring of story, the 'true' destination" (Bobis, 311). The river stands witness to the political corruption during the erstwhile Philippines president, Ferdinand Marcos's regime. The fish-hair woman, Carmen, with her nine-meter-long hair, fishes out dead-bodies from the river. Once again, the river itself is treated as both mythic and real. When corpses float on it, its constituents change. The river smells of brine, signalling the taint to its clear waters, a tacit acknowledgment of its pollution. Nature is intricately connected and responsive to the brutal actions of the

humans, a geological force in themselves. The river Iraya is sensitive to the plight of the humans, protecting and soothing the villagers while demonstrating hostility to the soldiers, who are sceptical of its powers, unlike the villagers who respect the river. Thus, the entire action of the novel revolves around the river.

Finally, the short story, "Immersion" (2005) by Bangladeshi writer Dilara Hashem, about a 'special' child, 'Badal,' fixated on a river, also uses an unnamed river as an enigmatic, active other. Suspended between the "imagined and the real", "the desired and the feared", and the "pristine and the polluted", the river in "The Immersion" is the site of both delight and sorrow. As a child, Badal had lived by a river. The memory of the golden stretch of the river would sparkle in his breast, and whenever he strained his ears to hear the splashing laughter of the river, Badal too, without any reason, would burst out in merriment (111).

Badal desires the river and dreams of it. For his sister's intended nuptials, he is sent away to a village with a river until the wedding is over, so he will be less of a disruption. But Badal, fascinated by the river, is repeatedly drawn to it. In the calm village with a beautiful river, Badal finds peace but also a newfound, unexplained excitement in the young girl, Moina, who lives there. One day, giving in to his impulses, "he crushed Moina against him" (132) and when she shook herself free and ran away, Badal, his whole body on fire in its budding sexuality, raced out, finally reaching the banks of the river.

> He flung himself into the waters of the river. And finally, as he had always dreamed, Badal was floating and drifting on the waves. His *lungi* ballooned like the sails of a ship. He tried to grasp the wind with his excited hands … Badal surrendered the desires and yearnings of his youth to the depths of his beloved river. (122)

When his uncle and father arrive the following day to fetch him back home, they find him "attired in peace, in quietness – finally at rest" (123).

Thus, the Narmada of *The River Sutra*, Merlinda Bobis's Iraya river in *The Fish-Hair Woman* and the idealised river of Dilara Hashem's in "The Immersion," are all enchanted realms. They are placed in a liminal Third Space of quest and seeking, yielding answers to mystical questions. Edward Soja, a postmodern, political theorist, borrowing from Henri Lefebvre's spatial thinking, understands it as "a third dimension." He remarks that

> Lefebvre made it possible to escape the prison of the Firstspace—Secondspace dualism. This dimension, a third possibility or moment that partakes of the original pairing, . . . can be understood as critical thirding-

as-Othering. It . . . [transforms] the categorical and closed logic of either/or to the dialectically open logic of both/and also. Two terms are never enough: *Il y a toujours l'Autre*. There is always the Other, a third term that disrupts, disorders, and begins to reconstitute the conventional binary opposition into an-Other that comprehends but is more than just the sum of two parts. (2009: 52)

Soja emphasizes that the 'Third Space' breaks up the hierarchical dualism of the self/other. The rivers in the texts discussed, like the Padma River described by Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*, break up the hierarchical dualisms of the real/imaginary; history/myth, culture/nature, through focusing on rivers that cannot be bound to either side of the binary. They are thus *both* real (or representative) and imaginary, tied to both history and myth, and to nature and culture.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed ways in which in *The Great Derangement* by Amitav Ghosh have pushed for an alternative view of an agentic, nonhuman nature to emerge. By allowing for the possibility of vital materiality, I have argued that Ghosh has aligned himself with ecocritics, who in diverse but interconnected ways have conceived of a posthuman nature. I then drew links with the ancient *Sāṃkhya* system, common to both Hinduism and Buddhism, where nature is recognized as agentic and necessary for human liberation. Thus, in holding these views, Ghosh is not alone. Finally, most importantly, I discussed how Ghosh's views are reflected in the fictional narratives of several other contemporary Asian authors. All these point to the fact that unlike mainstream Western thought, there is less resistance to the idea of vital materiality in Asia. However, contrary to expectations, this ideological acceptance of nature's agency has not in any material way reduced the exploitation of nature in Asia.

Notes

1. Within Hindu literature *sutra* denotes a distinct genre and is used as suffix in the title of many texts of this genre, as in *Kama Sutra*, which then indicates that this "sutra" is about "Kama" or sensual or sexual pleasure.

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