Eco-material Rifts in South Asian Anglophone Fiction

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Eco-material Rifts in South Asian Anglophone Fiction

Muhammad Manzur Alam

Dissertation submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in
English

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ABSTRACT

Eco-material Rifts in South Asian Anglophone Fiction

Muhammad Manzur Alam

I examine how South Asian Anglophone fiction represents the evolution and derangement of postcolonial ecologies, especially how unrelenting colonial and capitalist interventions affect the symbiotic relationship between subaltern people and nonhuman entities. The conceptual methodology develops from Karl Marx’s theory of “metabolic rift,” which illustrates how capitalist exportation of crops causes loss of important soil nutrients because the nutrients are consumed in distant locations and not returned to the original soil. My concept of “eco-material rifts” extends Marx’s idea to contend that the “rifts” have grown into more complicated and difficult to remediate modes of material rifts today. I scrutinize the ways in which South Asian authors, such as Amitav Ghosh and Indra Sinha, expand the concept of rifts in writing on the multilayered consequences of colonial and postcolonial exploitation. These eco-material rifts include dislocation of marginalized entities, organized drugging and demolition of human bodies, discriminatory displacement of humans based on their class, gender and race, toxification of ecological sites and human bodies, and the formation of psychological rifts that prompt replication of colonial violence of the past. The selected texts not only offer plural perspectives on pressing ecological concerns of postcolonial locations but also suggest narratives of resistance from subaltern viewpoints. Such integration of local perspectives, I argue, demonstrates that the complexity of postcolonial ecologies can enrich global environmentalism and foreground the question of environmental justice for the victimized communities. The epilogue examines pedagogical angles of teaching South Asian fiction through the lens of eco-material rifts.
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Introduction
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I. Introduction: Postcolonial Ecocriticism and South Asian Ecologies

In his essay “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism,” Rob Nixon argues why environmentalism and postcolonial literary studies have struggled to encompass global environmental concerns. He demonstrates that prominent American authors dominate anthologies and lists of ecocritical/environmental works, based on which he deduces that “literary environmentalism was developing de facto as an offshoot of American studies.”

Moreover, he views the two fields of ecocriticism and postcolonialism as partially incompatible because ecologies are largely a bioregional concern with projects of national/local issues, whereas postcolonialism’s transnational politics prioritizes issues of hybridity, displacement, and migration. Lawrence Buell et al. point out a similar divergence: “ecocritics usually projected harmonious, widening circles of concern and involvement from the local to the global and sometimes the cosmic, whereas postcolonial scholars tended to stress tensions and disruptions between local and global frameworks of experience.”

According to them, these contrary directions of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism are hard to be reconciled. Over the last decade or so, much has been researched on how a combination of these two fields, postcolonial

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ecocriticism, can reduce the binaries of global and local paradigms of politics and place. However, postcolonial ecocriticism is a relatively new field that grapples to discern the differences among postcolonial environments and address their diverse histories of evolution and existential threats.

Postcolonial ecocriticism can be a more effective methodology if we do not try to generalize the environmental realities of postcolonial locations and rather attempt to see how particular, local environments can address global realities. Scholars like Rob Nixon, Scott Slovic, and Upamanyu P. Mukherjee stress that postcolonial ecocriticism could be more inclusive of what we can call a bottom-up approach, seeing how the ground reports from local regions contribute to the broad frames of postcolonial ecocriticism. Postcolonial environments are already victims of an unequal pattern of global development; such environments transform unevenly “because of the extreme unevenness of capitalist development in the postcolony.”

Since postcolonialism, according to Mukherjee, is a particular historical stage of global capitalism, postcolonial environments also change unevenly from the impact of the “radical unevenness” of “the globalization of capital.” We can argue that even within the postcolonial regions and environments, we notice further uneven patterns of transformation. Global capitalism does not exploit all postcolonial sites or their human and nonhuman inhabitants to the same degree. Transnational corporations and their local allies victimize the peripheral postcolonial sites and their underprivileged people to a far greater degree. For example, the 1984 chemical gas leak from the Union Carbide Corporation’s pesticide plant in Bhopal, India killed

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4 Mukherjee, 13.
thousands of people, including members of the plant’s laboring class and their families living around. The toxicity unleashed in the environment by the industrial disaster also deformed many poor people to different extents in the following years.

Writers and ecocritics closely observe the transformation of their surroundings and can generate awareness about such ecological transformation by producing reliable representations of local ecologies. Scott Slovic et al. emphasize granting “ecocritical agency…to scholars living in, coming from, or in other ways deeply familiar with regions of the world (even in the Northern Hemisphere) that have traditionally been un- or under-represented in the halls and pages of ecocritical scholarship.”

They consider that it is more effective to allow peripheral voices to represent local ecologies than to offer a centralized eco-poetics for all marginalized ecologies. One way of integrating the plural voices from the periphery is to discuss the bulk of ecological narratives produced by diverse scholars and writers including novelists, poets, and ecocritics. Often, these works can capture specific situations that mainstream ecocriticism, or postcolonial ecocriticism to be more specific, seems to generalize. Examples of such specific situations or phenomena include Amitav Ghosh’s depiction of the human vs tiger stalemate in *The Hungry Tide*, an example that demonstrates how the geopolitical history of a place can baffle global environmentalism. Conservationists support only the preservation of the tigers and stress the removal of the subaltern people from the Sundarbans. However, Ghosh’s representation of the subaltern people, who were forced by circumstances to settle in the Sundarbans, has brought global attention to the fact that we cannot ignore the rights of these people. Other specific examples from fiction include the demolition of female bodies for patriarchal control in Ghosh’s

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Ibis trilogy and Indra Sinha’s depiction of human bodies in a borderline state between human and animal in Animal’s People. These examples are helpful to point out the ongoing discriminatory politics in the history of South Asian environments. The symbolic suggestions, as well as the sympathetic reactions created by these representations, can surpass the impact of the traditional ecological reports people have become inured to. Ecofiction, thus, has the power to transform ecological data into portrayals of lived experiences while implicating the culpable quarters causing the derangement of environments. These fictions can appeal to the stakeholders to rethink the question of justice for various marginalized human groups and their environments.

In my dissertation, I discuss works of South Asian Anglophone fiction which represent examples of how colonial interventions and capitalist extraction combine to transform the configurations of local environments. These interventions and extraction not only disrupt the ecological dimensions in general, but they also reflect inner discrimination in the way they target certain classes and genders of humans. Often, this discriminatory treatment is meted out against the marginalized human groups living interdependently with the surrounding nonhuman entities, or against bodies of women considered disposable for maintaining a patriarchal control over social interactions. To ascertain concrete examples of the disruption of South Asian ecologies, I will focus on the fictional representations of rifts or ruptures created in the interactions among humans and nonhumans. Although I will mainly apply the revisionist strands of postcolonial ecocriticism which stress the distinctiveness of postcolonial ecologies, my main concept will take shape through a discussion of eco-material rifts which serve as a unit or metaphor for the bigger South Asian model of uneven ecological development. These rifts or dislocation of integrated human and nonhuman agents can capture the connection between individual postcolonial environments and the bigger global network of extractive power. The representation
of eco-material rifts in fiction brings out individual examples of rifts as lived experiences, as opposed to ecocritical theories which often occlude certain local realities by generalizing ecological realities of the world as mere facts. The discussion of rifts is helpful to capture how an advanced, imperialist order of capitalism today exhausts postcolonial ecologies incrementally and, in the process, creates rifts of human body, identity, and mind.

II. From “Metabolic Rift” to “Eco-material Rifts”

My idea of eco-material rifts originates from Karl Marx’s concept of “metabolic rift.” Marx advanced his ideas of “metabolic rift” in the context of the capitalistic concentration of wealth in Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This phase of industrial capitalism, mainly in Britain, thrived on resources which the industrialists concentrated by the forcible accumulation of land and other material means of production from poor farmers, resulting in the conversion of many farmers to wage-earning workforce for the industries in the city areas. Marx showed that such capitalist industrialization had a deeper impact on ecological relations. “Metabolic rift” explains how capitalist production and export of local crops to distant areas prevents the return of vital soil nutrients, such as phosphorus, nitrogen and potassium, to the original soil. Such a phenomenon leads to the loss of important soil nutrients because crops and food are exported to the cities and are, thus, consumed miles away from their place of origin. Marx notes that such capitalist production “disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and

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the earth, i.e., it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil.”

The consumption of products in the towns also converts products into wastes and pollutes the environment. The separation of the labor force from their original place, and their relocation to the city-based industrial areas, helps the owners of industries control both the labor force and the resources at will. This whole process reflects a split between land and its vital elements such as soil nutrients and labor, which Marx identifies as rifts of metabolism.

Marx considers that the continuation of “metabolic rift” is the key reason for the disruption of “social metabolism,” which is the usual cycle of life and production. The capitalist concentration of production converts land into private properties for a handful of owners and separates the vital nutrients and workforce from land. Such separation hampers the local cycle of agriculture by displacing soil nutrients and labor from the ecological set-up which, according to Marx, “produces conditions that provoke an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism.”

Marx’s idea of social metabolism signifies the ecological dynamics born out of human interactions with land in a certain place. Such interactions are also seen in the way many subaltern groups in the peripheries of South Asia live interdependently with their surrounding environments. As my dissertation chapters will explore later, some of these groups are portrayed as the ecological refugees in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, the opium farmers

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in Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, and the ethnic minorities in Numair Atif Choudhury’s *Babu Bangladesh!*

The transformation of postcolonial environments reflects an exacerbated capitalist ethic and ecophobia of people, which complicates Marx’s observation about the early phases of ecological transformation. The British colonial administration introduced land, forest and water management systems in South Asia which promoted monoculture plantation of crops like opium and indigo at the expense of subsistence agriculture, and reintroduced ecosystems as privatized, chartered resources. Such ethic and practice of capital concentration at the expense of the material environment gradually worsened during the postcolonial period. Transnational corporations and the local elites continue their collaboration to not only extract and commodify land, water, and forest resources but even dismantle many ecosystems through rifts of vital elements or dumping of toxic, waste materials. I term these forms of ecological ruptures as *eco-material rifts* to illustrate the derangement of the materiality of postcolonial ecologies via the displacement of integral human and nonhuman entities. If the alienation of labor and nutrients from land marks the beginning of material rifts, Anglophone South Asian novels demonstrate the exacerbation of such rifts in certain postcolonial locations to a much greater extent, ranging from the exhaustion of resources and gendered alienation of labor to the toxification of land and human bodies. Industries such as fisheries and timber cause deforestation as well as intervene in the ecosystems of water bodies. Besides, TNCs also promote harmful cultivations, such as tobacco, which separate farmers from their usual cultivation of crops and use the farmers as cheap labor. Moreover, explosions and leaks of gas and chemical plants owned by TNCs have, in cases, led to the toxification of postcolonial environments and deformity of subaltern humans. Transnational corporations (TNCs) and their local collaborators, therefore, take up projects
which not only turn postcolonial environments into extractable resources or waste materials but also deform human bodies through discriminatory exploitation based on their location, class, and gender. These discriminatory treatments displace and deform entities and rearrange ecosystems following the demand for the market and labor, resulting in many unwholesome and stalemate ecological situations that I will explore in the main chapters.

Capitalist commodification heavily relies on the physical or tangible attributes of targeted products or entities. Marx argues that the capitalist disruption of land metabolism leads to the commodification of labor and crops which, according to Marx, have material or physical attributes. Marxist metabolic rift considers the exported crops as material commodities, and he clarifies that “the physical properties of the commodity” determine its use-value and that “the physical bodies of commodities, are combinations of two elements, the material provided by nature, and labour.” However, the materiality of commodities, which Marx saw as productions of natural resources and labor, is a lot more complex and hard to trace today. Material ecocriticism, which is one of the recent branches of ecocriticism, highlights the difficulty of tracing the ecology of matters, and of separating these matters from the integrated politics and narratives. This complexity can also be seen in the way capitalist commodification thrives on a selective and discriminatory commodification of various human and nonhuman agents. For example, the extraction of labor and resources from a certain location often begins with promoting monoculture agriculture which replaces local crops with the likes of opium, tobacco, or more recent palm oil plantations. Corporations promote the cultivation of such hazardous crops by incentivizing farmers with loans and by drugging the bodies of certain classes or groups of people with the product itself; also, the bodies of farmers maintain proximity to such

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9 Marx, vol. 1, 133.
cultivation which is unhealthy in the long run. Often, the cheap labor of women in postcolonial locations is employed during the unhealthiest phase of harvesting such crops. Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* Trilogy depicts such instances of monoculture plantation and control over the human body by fictionalizing the British opium production in South Asia. The colonial production and trade of opium not only replaced the production of local crops to a great extent but also exercised unprecedented control over the land and body of marginal people by evicting them to acquire more land and labor for maximizing profit from opium production. The export and circulation of opium and other products as commodities is, thus, synonymous to the discriminatory extraction and transformation of lands, crops, and human bodies. Commodification in recent times transforms ecological sites and human bodies through an integrated extraction and flow of capital, labor, and resources, which shows that the physical properties of commodities have evolved to be more intricate.

It is helpful to clarify where my concept of eco-material rifts stands in relation to the “material turn” proposed in the general theories of material ecocriticism. Material ecocriticism calls for a reassessment of phenomena as a complex amalgam of matters in which both human and nonhuman agentic particles, while blurring their traditional differentiation, create an ongoing, evolving narrative. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann observe: “a material ecocriticism examines matter both in texts and as a text, trying to shed light on the way bodily natures and discursive forces express their interaction whether in representations or in their
concrete reality.”¹⁰ They highlight that the continual interactions of the physical aspects of different entities and the discursive forces, together, create ecological materiality.

The “material turn” postulated by Iovino and Oppermann might strike as less generic and abstract if we narrow their observations down to ideas of local, eco-materiality. The ideas of the “material turn,” which flatten human and nonhuman entities to untraceable matters, might also lead to a situation of abstractedness, overlooking human culpability in transforming ecosystems. Timothy Morton acknowledges humans as an influential “geophysical force” although he stays consistent with object-oriented ontology, or OOO, to claim that humans lack “direct access” to entities including the nonhuman.¹¹ Morton suggests “that things exist in a profoundly ‘withdrawn’ way: they cannot be splayed open and totally grasped by anything whatsoever.”¹² The “material turn,” therefore, evokes a fluid intermingling of entities, narratives and politics, through which humans and nonhumans seem to lose their differentiation and evolve indefinitely.

I present the overall concept of eco-material rifts as a South Asian context of the “material turn,” in which I examine specific examples of material movements that OOO deems as intractable in general. This focus on the South Asian context not only illustrates certain alliances between humans and nonhumans but also indict some humans as culpable for disrupting such alliances. In other words, the concept of eco-material rifts narrows the focus to specific units of ecosystems exploited by human investment in global capitalist expansion. Such

¹² Morton, 16.
expansion relies heavily on the way humans interpret the material world to put themselves in an advantageous position and alter the material realities. The human interpretation of the world includes a hierarchical ordering of human groups and nonhuman agents so that some entities can be considered disposable or extractable. For example, Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies* (2008) demonstrates how the combined authority of the British traders and the local patriarchy regulates the cultivation of opium as well as the lives of the marginalized people. In the novel, the imperial ship Ibis transports, among others, some smuggled opium, a widow from Bihar escaping the horrors of the custom of Sati, and indentured laborers from India to Mauritius—all of which are examples of entities displaced by the capitalist patriarchs. Such examples of eco-material rifts, therefore, capture the culpable as well as the victimized parties in the context of postcolonial ecologies. If material ecocriticism sees the overall material phenomena and its flow as mostly untraceable, eco-material rifts are examples of units and movements of entities from one configuration of ecologies to another.

Tracing the environmental history of South Asia through the lens of eco-material rifts is an effective tool to figure out how capitalist control and transformation of postcolonial ecologies happens through the dislocation of human and nonhuman entities, including extracted crops, indentured labor, and subaltern human groups living in peripheral locations such as forests. General historical accounts and imperial history of different locations treat space as a “passive backdrop,” but the environmental history of South Asia integrates a “spatial turn” with “concepts of place, space and scale” and emphasizes that “we cannot fully understand colonial relations
within any region without tracing entities that move in and out of that region.” This historicist reading of the colonial encounter highlights a dynamic relationship of exchanges between the colonial center and peripheries, in which the extraction of humans and nonhumans sustains via their transportation from place to place. In the following section, I discuss the history of colonial and postcolonial extraction, exploitation and export of crops and land materials, forest resources, and the subaltern body and labor, etc. This circulation of entities between the center and periphery can be traced as eco-material rifts that exemplify the severed relationships of humans and nonhumans inbuilt within the ecological dynamics.

As I have discussed before, my dissertation employs the concept of eco-material rifts as a postcolonial ecocritical tool to demonstrate how South Asian Anglophone fiction represents the complexity and transformation of local ecosystems under colonialism and during the shift to postcolonial globalization. The concept acknowledges the local dynamics of individual ecosystems and also addresses how the regional ecosystem is entangled in a continuous exchange with the global forms of politics and the flow of resources. Eco-material rifts are examples of the movements of ecological units and, by tracing these examples, we can indicate the way global politics is connected to the extraction of local resources. These examples of rifts, thus, address what postcolonial critics see as an incompatibility between the “timelessness” of regional ecologies and the temporality of global politics. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley note that the temporal and spatial methodologies of postcolonial theories might not

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always apply to ecocriticism.\textsuperscript{14} They observe that it is difficult to apply the historicist orientation of postcolonialism to understanding the environment because environmental change does not always conform to the human concepts of time. Upamanyu P. Mukherjee proposes to resolve this incompatibility by observing that ecocriticism can materialize postcolonialism and, conversely, postcolonialism can historicize ecological concerns.\textsuperscript{15} Postcolonial studies and the application of eco-material rifts can, thus, be helpful to pinpoint the way global capitalist interventions sever the material relations within South Asian ecologies. Also, we need to keep in mind that ecological stability is largely a concept of the Anthropocene and we cannot sufficiently trace the way ecologies evolve in deep times. Through tracing certain examples of ecological rifts, we can possibly capture how the material disruption of postcolonial ecologies has an underlying connection in history with the global capitalist schemes.

III. From Colonization to Globalization: The History of Capitalist Expansion and Extraction of Resources in South Asia

Through the idea of eco-material rifts, I aim to discuss the transformation of South Asian ecologies over time due to colonial and capitalist interventions. These extractive interventions are not specific to a certain historical period in South Asia. Nevertheless, I focus on the periods around the colonization of South Asia and its aftermath which saw an unprecedented regulation and transformation of environments. The subcontinent’s environmental evolution since time


immemorial has been shaped by solar and atmospheric forces, massive migration of peoples, plants and animals, urbanization of landscapes, interactions of cultures, policies and religions shaping people’s attitudes towards the environment, and foreign and local interventions and exploitation of ecologies. More recent histories, especially since the beginning of the British colonization of India in 1757, reflect a contradictory attitude towards the environment: the modernization of conquering, measuring and “understanding the nature” on one hand, and more exploitation of and violence against the nature resulting “from unequal access to ecosystem resources.”

The British Empire survived on the extraction of resources from the entire biosphere, and its two hundred year rule in the Indian subcontinent was no exception. The colonizers were responsible for the mismanagement and extraction of environmental resources, whose legacy impacts the subcontinent even today. The colonization phase saw the arrival of a huge number of European merchants in South Asia, including East India Company, who introduced policies and management systems that viewed the environment as a pool of resources for distribution and commodification. The British Governor-General Cornwallis’ 1793 “Permanent Settlement” policy gave the local elites of South Asia private ownership of large expanses of lands in exchange for an increasing amount of tax they paid to the East India Company (EIC). The privatization of land gave the British the scope to establish monoculture plantations, which replaced local crops and created a cheap pool of labor from the unemployed farmers who lost their lands. The primitive accumulation of land, therefore, replaced varieties of small-scale, subsistence farming with opium for export to China, as well as with indigo and cotton for the

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growing textile industries in Britain. To meet the growing market demands, the British authorities and their local allies coerced more and more local farmers, by direct force or incentives, to grow crops like opium and indigo. This caused a massive decline in the regular production of rice and other crops in Bihar, Benares, Bengal and other places, leading farmers into poverty or converting them into wage-earning laborers.

Along with the land reform, the colonizers’ forest and water resources management system also helped them control the regulation of resources in South Asia and ensure the maximum flow of revenue to Britain. The colonial management discontinued the poor cultivators’ selective use of forest resources and allowed merchants to conduct a massive amount of timber trading that endorsed the cutting of trees and deforestation in many cases. The poor farmers traditionally used tree loppings, along with the dung produced by cattle grazing in the forests, to make certain barren lands arable. The new policies disrupted this conventional interaction between farmers and the forests and interrupted subsistence agriculture. The British left the subcontinent in a condition of depleting forest and land resources. After independence, the landowning and trader groups in South Asia, along with those in the administration, replicated the colonial system of extracting environmental resources, further severing the ties of the marginalized farmers with the ecosystem. The elite groups also took control of natural resources and converted them into industrial products or commodities. The state-endorsed commercialization of forests and large water bodies, which created a widening gap between the state and its poorest subjects. The local capitalists also went for heavy industrialization that accumulated more bioregions as private property and converted more farmers into working-class laborers. The gap in people’s affordability increased and the laboring class started living in extreme poverty, which made them victims of pollution and diseases. Industrialists, even today,
dump waste materials into rivers and lakes, and the low-earning groups depend on such polluted water for their everyday use.

During the phase of colonization, the colonizers concentrated on profit-maximization by establishing an unequal flow of resources between the colonial center and the peripheral locations of the colonized space. This uneven flow of capital and resources, comprising human labor and nonhuman commodities, ensured that the profit mostly flowed from the colonized locations to the colonial center. In the postcolonial period, we notice a similar concentration of profit and power distributed between the West and South Asian elites, orchestrated by the neoliberal control of labor and resources in which the local elites, and sometimes even the government, perform the role of their imperial predecessors. Ania Loomba clarifies that “the newly independent nation-state makes available the fruits of liberation only selectively and unevenly: the dismantling of colonial rule did not automatically bring about changes for the better in the status of women, the working class or the peasantry in most colonized countries.”

Loomba’s observation about the unchanged “status of women, the working class or the peasantry” helps us view postcolonial ecologies along the same line of discrimination. The ongoing exploitation of women, labor, and farming is linked with the surrounding environments or the nonhuman agents. So, we can extend Loomba’s observation to view the exploitation in terms of the bigger context of postcolonial ecologies which are composed of interlinked environmental entities and humans. Therefore, viewing postcolonialism mainly from the perspective of decolonization can gloss over the internal discrimination against classes, genders, and the environment, whereas the examples of eco-material rifts are helpful to show how the

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marginalized entities of South Asian ecosystems continue to be targeted by extractive policies even after the independence.

The intensification of capital accumulation and extraction in South Asia has reached its peak in the current era of globalization. The advanced capitalist countries exploit neoliberal free trade and market policies to monopolize, and they intervene in the operations of international financial organizations and different nation-states. David Harvey observes that countries like the US are “able to control institutions such as the IMF and to project vast financial power across the world through a network of other financial and governmental institutions, has exercised massive influence over the dynamics of global capitalism in recent years.”¹⁸ Transnational bodies such as IMF and the World Bank fund many developmental projects in South Asia, which allow these organizations to recommend certain multinational corporations for running these projects. Upamanyu P. Mukherjee states that the neo-colonial rule by a globalized group, “whose interests are often embodied in gigantic transnational corporations,” focuses on short-term profit-driven interests and significantly damages postcolonial environments.¹⁹ These multinational corporations concentrate capital by taking up projects that target certain ecological sites in the global south. Transnational corporations increasingly collaborate with the local authorities and elites to charter “nature” for control and exploitation in the name of “understanding” or exploration. Most of these corporations are owned by countries such as the US and the UK that, in most cases, control the financial organizations. Therefore, it is easy for these corporations to influence the governments of South Asian countries and ensure the passage of capital and resources to their home countries. In 2011, The Bangladesh government signed an agreement

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¹⁹ Mukherjee, 7.
with the US energy company ConocoPhillips for exploring two deep-water gas blocks in the Bay of Bengal offshore. As stated by the agreement, Bangladesh would get only 20% of the extracted gas.

The corporate control of resource management has deeply impacted farming and the broad spectrum of ecology in South Asia, further increasing the orchestration of ecological rifts. The colonial trend of commodification proliferates during the post-independence period with increasing capitalist projects and initiatives that target marginalized entities. The nation-state continues to allow industrialists to accumulate more lands from farmers for building industries and power plants. The eviction of farmers eventually lead to their conversion into a pool of cheap labor, separating the farmers from their land and their usual mode of labor. In other cases, corporate industries intervene in farming by profit-maximizing activities, such as selling hybrid seeds that replace the traditional seeds in the market. Upamanyu Mukherjee cites an example of how the neoliberal economic policies impact the pricing of seeds in India and harm the farmers and the environment alike. In about ten years (between 1991 and 2001), the price of seeds increased from Rs. 7 per kg of general seeds to Rs. 700 per kg of corporate-owned hybrid seeds. These hybrid seeds required high quantities of water for irrigation, and “intensive use of chemical fertilizers,” often making the soil barren and forcing farmers into excessive amounts of monetary debts. Statistics show that “in the ten years between 1997 and 2007, 182,936 Indian farmers” committed suicide to escape the extreme living conditions.\(^2\) In the name of globalization of capital, the corporate elites, thus, resort to ruthless means to maximize their profits, which cause environmental damage as well as oppression of the poor farmers.

\(^2\) Mukherjee, 2.
Several industrial disasters have, so far, been the worst consequences of neoliberal capital accumulation in South Asia. These disasters prove that the transnational corporations and the South Asian corporate elites often join hands in attempting to make profits at the utter expense of certain locations and the marginalized human groups living there. The 1997 gas well explosion at the Magurchara gas field in Bangladesh, run by the U.S. company Occidental, damaged the biodiversity of reserved forests and tea estates. The company paid a negligible amount of compensation and left Bangladesh. Another example of severe ecological damage is the Bhopal disaster in India, which Indra Sinha’s novel Animal’s People has fictionalized. Chemical gas leak from the Texas-based Union Carbide Corporation’s pesticide plant in Bhopal, India in 1984 killed scores of people. Moreover, the toxicity of the damaged environment kept on causing different types of physical impairment to the survivors, mostly the poor people who were directly exposed to the toxicity.

IV. Eco-Material Rifts, and the Role of South Asian Anglophone Fiction

Works of South Asian Anglophone eco-fiction are integrally connected to the postcolonial ecologies they represent because both are commodified or regulated by the global flow of capital. These works of fiction gain circulation in the society not only because of their literary merit but also because of their relation to “the market or the education system,”21 which turns them into commodified productions of cultural difference or “intellectual commodities.”22 However, due to their paradoxical capacity to critique themselves and the capitalist forces that commodify them, such South Asian novels, quite like their counterparts from other locations,

21 Loomba, 63.
22 Mukherjee, 8.
earn their own “literary specificity and singularity” and bear a deep connection with the postcolonial environment and its “necessarily interlinked devastation of the humans, non-humans, soil, water, air and crops.” In addition, these Anglophone eco-fictions can address the binaries of global politics and local reality that ecocriticism grapples with. The novels themselves are products of a global capitalist system that promotes narratives intended to circulate ideologies or (mis)representations of cultures. However, many of these novels concern themselves with the problems of local ecologies and write back to the global capitalism with a strong environmental ethic that is shaped locally.

The selected works of Anglophone South Asian fiction in my dissertation not only attempt to incriminate global capitalism by illustrating the systematic, ecological rifts but also incorporate a local environmental ethic by opting for narrativity that mirrors the dynamics of local ecologies. The nonhuman world, and the accounts of its transformation related to the interdependent humans, dominate the narratives of these fictions to a great extent. These fictions offer a contrast to the narratives of certain canonical works whose protagonists attempt to represent unfamiliar locations. Quite like the narrative perspective of the American character, Piya, in Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, narrators in Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India* (1924), or even in a more recent work like V.S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness* (1964), arrive at unfamiliar places composed of marginalized humans and their surrounding environment. The narratives in the latter three works follow the same trend of applying human-dominated perspectives to the locations of cultural differences; they, altogether, reduce the nonhuman surroundings to mere backdrops and document how their pre-conceived ideas about these places come true and leave them at a point of exhaustion. *The*
*Hungry Tide*, as well, employs the narrative perspective of an outsider character who, however, gradually loses her power of narration to the growing voice of the nonhuman and the marginalized human groups. The layered narratives in the novel, created through the perspectives of different characters and nonhumans, gradually unpack the materiality of human and nonhuman entities and their disrupted relations. Michael Ziser observes that “nonhuman entities possess at least a quasi-agency” through which they can exert an influence on the stories we claim to offer solely from our human perspectives. Animals and water in *The Hungry Tide*, opium and its trade in the *Ibis* Trilogy, and chemicals in *Animal’s People* are important actors that regulate the course of narration of these novels in most cases. This mode of narration allows these fictions to go beyond the expected frames of a reflectionist aesthetic that indict social oddities from a limited, human perspective; these fictions also develop a unique ecological form of plural narratives in which different human and nonhuman entities gain narrative agency and indict the external influences which disrupt their alliances.

The examples of eco-material rifts in South Asian fictions broadly cover a systematic worsening of the overall ecological condition, from transportation and traffic of eco-materials to their toxification. Many of these forms of rifts take place through the control, commodification and transformation of subaltern human labor, land, and various crops. The overall despoiling of postcolonial ecology itself is a discriminatory treatment by global capitalism, in that the Global South experiences a lot more interventions and traffic of eco-materials than the Global North. Moreover, we see a gradual, discriminatory rift of the human body, identity, and mind, parallel to the overall transformation of ecology. Such discriminatory rifts are evident in the way imperial

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monoculture plantations not only caused replacement of local crops but also displaced subaltern people and converted them into cheap, indentured or exploitable labor. Romesh Gunesekera’s *Heaven’s Edge* (2002) and Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* Trilogy include narratives of individuals and communities affected by the imperialist plantation monoculture and primitive accumulation. Certain instances from these novels reflect that women, “low-caste,” and impoverished individuals or groups are the worst victims, often subjected to brutal tortures, poisoning, or threats of death. The discriminatory treatment of certain people and their habitats refers to the way extractive economy targets the humans within the postcolonial locations based on different elements of human identity, such as gender and class.

The transformation of human bodies, or the rifts of human agents integrated within the bigger ecology, shows a progression from displacement and modification of human bodies to their toxification and demolition. The materiality of the porous human body is already inter-agentic as it continually evolves in relation to its surroundings. But, the capitalist interventions subject the porous human body to more transformation through forced labor conditions, as is the case with Monique Allewaert’s “parahuman.”25 Allewaert views the body of the laboring slave “as an organization of matter and parts…through which personhood is produced and negotiated as well as where the overlapping economic, biological, and social systems that compose place are produced and negotiated.”26 She reconceptualizes the subaltern body in terms of its direct


26 Allewaert, 17.
engagement with the environment controlled by the colonizing entities. Donna Haraway shows that the human body can be reconceived in terms of its interaction with the techno-scientific surroundings; she constructs the idea of “cyborg”\(^{27}\) as a transformation of the human body into what we can call a version of more-than-human materiality or an extended form of human materiality. Apart from these reconfigurations of the human body in terms of its enmeshment with the vital techno-scientific and ecological materiality, we also see how capitalism promotes drugs and toxic conditions through monoculture plantations and transforms the human body in more ways. Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy provides examples of how capitalist production drugs human bodies or demolishes the bodies of women for patriarchal control of ecological sites. Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* represents the transformed human body as a borderline entity between human and animal, which is an extreme example of such transformation. The rift of human agents in terms of their relation to the overall ecology reaches its climactic state through what we can call the *psychological rift*. The postcolonial mind often reflects a violent attitude toward the surrounding environment, and the roots of such violence lie in the systemic creation of an ecophobic mind of the postcolonial subjects. Such ecophobia develops from living in cramped spaces but mostly due to the traumatic, violent memories of a colonial past the postcolonial subjects repress or repudiate.

It is rather difficult to discuss the phases and instances of South Asian ecological rifts in chronological order. Nevertheless, we can detect an overall progression of rifts that begins with the disruptions in local cycles of cultivation and displacement of subaltern communities and

culminates in the toxification of “disposable” lands and psychological rifts of humans. The chapters of my dissertation explore textual representations of ecological rifts which move along the historical flow as well as the increasing intensity of rifts, based on how colonial and capital encounters have gradually shaped and deranged local ecologies. Even though each chapter deals with a major idea of rifts as represented in a certain literary text or a set of texts, certain overlaps are inevitable.

The first chapter focuses mainly on an early stage of eco-material rifts of subaltern agents and a subsequent situation of ecological deadlock, triggered by the hastily done Partition of British India in 1947. My primary text is Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) which fictionalizes the story of the successive displacements of a “lower” caste group of Hindu minorities who finally settled in the Sundarbans along the Bay of Bengal. I discuss the novel as a multilayered representation of how the Partition of India leads to a changed status of these people as refugees and causes their problematic coexistence with tigers, inviting divergent opinions from environmentalists. The overall narrativity shows that the effects of the hasty Partition extend beyond the initial bioregional divides to trigger more splits of perspectives and intentions which either promote or denounce the coexistence of the marginalized humans and the nonhuman entities in the Sundarbans. The problematic displacement of this group of people has created an impasse in the Sundarbans regarding “humans or the tigers,” in which people are forced to kill tigers for their survival in the forest. I argue that this grave environmental situation reflects an ideological gap between western conservationism and the local reality of the situation. Western conservationism puts sole emphasis on the preservation of tigers while ignoring the subaltern people’s reciprocal, constituting relationship with the ecological system.
The second chapter examines how colonial opium production promotes a differential treatment of human bodies and identities entrenched in interconnected rifts of labor and crops. I study Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* Trilogy, which comprises his three works of historical fiction, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015). The ship *Ibis* in the novels is used for shipping laborers, convicts and crops from the local to the outer regions and, therefore, serves as a microcosmic platform for rifted bodies and materials that include the transfer of labor and smuggled opium. The drawing out of interdependent humans and nonhuman materials reflects discrimination against certain individual characters based on their class, race, and gender identities and, thus, demonstrates the complexity of “eco-material rifts.” Ghosh adopts a multilayered approach in his representation as he offers the stories through the multiple perspectives of his characters and provides a narrative of the historical and political developments of colonial South Asia affecting the lives of his characters. This plurality of narratives reinvents the scenario of the exploitative colonial trades, in terms of their racial, class, gender, and environmental aspects, as Ghosh offers individual stories of material rifts. Overall, in this chapter, there is also a move from the local ecology to the outer regions. I illustrate that the opium cultivation and addiction starting in India reaches out to other regions like Mauritius and China, which helps to address the connections between the local environmental transformation and global political developments.

In the third chapter, I examine how Indra Sinha’s novel *Animal’s People* (2007) represents the toxification of the environment and the human body as the postcolonial developments of the Marxist “metabolic rift.” The novel fictionalizes the extensive deadly effects of toxicity following the chemical gas leak from Union Carbide Corporation’s pesticide plant in Bhopal, India in 1984. The explosion killed thousands of people, and the lingering
toxicity in the environment continued to cause physical damage to many of the survivors, mostly the poor people who had greater exposure to the toxicity. The novel demonstrates that corporate capitalists set up risky projects in the locations of subaltern people that are considered “disposable.” The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Animal, symbolizes the toxic outcomes of such projects, reflecting that the projects generally harm the health and life of marginalized people. Animal is a 19-year-old orphaned boy who walks on all fours and is an embodiment of how the disaster’s toxic outcomes transform human bodies into a borderline human-animal state. These toxic effects on the local ecology and its subaltern inhabitants demonstrate that the postcolonial rifts mark the advanced stage of material subtraction, in locations that have already undergone successive phases of rifts since the colonial period, or even the earlier times. However, Sinha also uses Animal’s narrative viewpoint as his resistance to the neoliberal aggressiveness against his land and body and represents the subaltern as victims with the ability to understand the oppressive power and to fight for justice.

In the fourth and final chapter of my dissertation, I analyze Numair Atif Choudhury’s novel Babu Bangladesh! (2019) for its representation of what I call “psychological rifts.” The idea of psychological rifts refers to an ecophobic unconscious that causes individuals and groups of people to exert violence against the “other” in the physical environment. Babu Bangladesh! depicts such rifts by demonstrating how the cases of mass violence against the religious and ethnic minorities and their environments in postcolonial Bangladesh develop from the country’s history of double colonization and its legacies. Leela Gandhi observes that “postcolonial amnesia,” in other words the repressed memories of colonial violence, can “perambulate the unconscious in dangerous ways, causing seemingly inexplicable symptoms in everyday life.”

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argue that the effects of unnegotiated trauma worsen due to the repressive religious, patriarchal, and political conditions of the postcolonial location and intensify people’s antipathy and violence against the ecological “other”—minorities of ethnic, gender, class, and nonhuman identity. *Babu Bangladesh!* captures a history of sustained and worsening practice of ecological violence in Bangladesh and demonstrates how the psyche of the postcolonial people carries the effects of the overall history of rifts from the colonial to the current forms of corporate violence. The cultural and historical instances of violence portrayed in the novel are symptomatic of psychological rifts—a developed stage of eco-material rifts.

The Epilogue discusses the pedagogical implications of the theoretical ideas discussed in the other chapters and offers some reflections on the potential ecocritical directions that the teaching of South Asian Anglophone fiction could take. I argue that the perspectives of eco-material rifts can offer a departure from, or at least propose new angles to, the usual postcolonial/diasporic critiques of South Asian novels dominated by the ideas of displacement, cultural differences, and identity crisis. At the same time, I claim that the teaching of South Asian fiction through the angle of eco-material rifts can promote interdisciplinary ideas and environmental justice narratives which can engage students from diverse disciplines in literary representations of the current global crisis of climate change. Such modes of teaching in the context of South Asia can help understand other locations around the world experiencing similar colonial/capitalist interventions.

V. Conclusion

Fiction treats the environment as an experience and not just as a set of facts or data. A fictional representation can potentially combine biological, sociological and anthropological data
with necessary elements of ethos and pathos and portray them as an experience better than
generic ecological reports can. Fiction also has the power to allegorize the political and social
elements related to environmental issues and narrativize them for creating the necessary appeal
for environmental justice. Fredric Jameson stresses that interpreting literary texts from the
political perspective is not an option but should be considered “as the absolute horizon of all
reading and all interpretation.”29 Jameson notes that literary texts develop unconsciously from
the underlying political realities; he also advocates for adopting a Marxist critical position to
properly understand the relations between the cultural-literary dimensions of texts and the
ongoing political and historical background shaped by class conflicts. He observes that it is “in
restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history,
that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds function and its necessity.”30 Therefore, any
work of fiction, as Jameson claims, is an allegory of political dimensions shaped largely by class
conflict, and our critical inquiries can attempt to uncover the ongoing narrativity that historicizes
those political dimensions in which literary works are situated.

Interpreting the portrayal of eco-material rifts in Anglophone South Asian fiction is a
revival of the Jamesonian paradigm of textual political allegories, mainly for the reason that
these fictions largely invoke the political realities of discriminatory class issues in the context of
marginalized humans and their nonhuman counterparts. The textual examples are helpful to raise
awareness about the history of environmental derangement in South Asia, the underlying
politics, and the beneficiaries and the victims of the derangement. The narratives in eco-fictions,

30 Jameson, 20.
of which the readers gradually become a part, make them “sadder but wiser” witnesses to the fatal turns in ecological conditions.
Chapter 1

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*: Subaltern Rifts, Ecological Impasse, and Plural Narrativity

“What was he thinking about as he stared at the moonlit river? The forest, the crabs? Whatever it was, she would never know: not just because they had no language in common but because that was how it was with human beings, who came equipped, as a species, with the means of shutting each other out. The two of them, Fokir and herself, they could have been boulders or trees for all they knew of each other: and wasn't it better in a way, more honest, that they could not speak? For if you compared it to the ways in which dolphins’ echoes mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks that fooled you into believing that you could see through the eyes of another being." (*The Hungry Tide* 132)

I. Introduction: Anglophone Fiction, and Rifts vs Narrativity in *The Hungry Tide*

One common assumption about Anglophone literature is that it subscribes to globalization’s demand for a brand of literature that homogenizes cultures and targets as its audience a group of privileged readers educated in English. This assumption also applies to the representation of environmental issues and climate change, mainly because Anglophone literature often adopts a generalized, metropolitan outlook that flattens the ecological differences of locations around the world, especially the peripheral locations of the Global South.

Anglophone writers and scholars come from diverse origins including postcolonial locations, but the institutionalization of English literature and commodification of literary productions level out “their diverse third world origins through the common currency of British or American academic
credentials.”¹ Most Anglophone authors live in metropolitan centers and write mostly about characters and issues that embrace cultural convergences in such centers. Therefore, these authors write about such cultural convergences or, when they tend to look beyond, they apply their metropolitan perspectives to “other” cultures. For example, Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* are texts that register imperial dynamics and generalize local cultures because they view local sites as mere backdrops for their visiting characters. On the other hand, “culturally rooted” writers, who write in their native languages, often essentialize the local realities to the extent that they overlook the pressing issues of global scale, issues that are not necessarily “flattening” but are interconnected with local dynamics.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is an exception to the above generalizations about Anglophone literature and regional works because it engages local issues, such as an existential battle between displaced people and a fading tiger population, with global issues like British imperialism and global environmentalism. Set in the wetlands of the Sundarbans, one of the largest mangrove forests lying on the Delta of the Ganges on the Bay of Bengal, Ghosh’s novel fictionalizes the existential struggles of an actual marginalized group of people in the Sundarbans who survived an organized police brutality known as the Morichjhapi massacre in 1979. The plot of the novel extends both in time and space to show how this carnage relates back to the Partition of India by the British Raj in 1947, after which these people moved to places in India and finally settled in the Sundarbans around the year 1978.² Ghosh’s choice to represent the existential crisis

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² Although most of these people settled in the Sundarbans following the Partition of 1947, a huge number of people joined them after the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971.
of displaced people is a departure from the traditional subject of Anglophone novels: “Whereas the majority of contemporary Anglophone fiction tends to focus on urban realities, Ghosh’s novel recovers a forgotten moment of dispossession and grassroots resistance in the rural Sundarbans.”

Ghosh presses forward the issue of environmental justice for a group of displaced, low-caste Hindu people who live in a postcolonial India that adds to their history of oppression. In this chapter, I read *The Hungry Tide* as a multifaceted representation of how the Partition of India, itself an instance of a colossal rift of ecosystems, results in successive cases of displacement of the poor Hindu people and their problematic coexistence with tigers, leading to divided opinions from environmentalists regarding this coexistence. Ghosh adopts a multi-layered narrative which includes outsider and insider narrative viewpoints, along with an influence of the nonhuman world of the Sundarbans on these viewpoints. The narrative shows how the effects of the Partition do not stop at the initial bioregional divides but cause divides of perspectives which either support or criticize the interdependent existence of the marginalized humans and the nonhuman entities in the Sundarbans.

I borrow from Karl Marx’s idea of “metabolic rift” to formulate my concept of *eco-material rifts*, examples of which explore the representation of postcolonial ecologies in Anglophone South Asian fiction. Marx’s idea of rift denotes alteration of ecological configurations by capitalist displacement of labor and crops. I argue that the basic idea of the Marxist rift develops into more convoluted examples of material rifts today, especially in the

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3 Shakti Jaising, “Fixity Amid Flux: Aesthetics and Environmentalism in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,” *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 46, no. 4 (October 2015): 66. Jaising further observes that projects like beach resorts, which Ghosh doesn’t directly mention in his plot, are the state’s endorsement of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession. Projects like these are threats to the subaltern people’s existence in the Sundarbans.
postcolonial regions. Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* represents the Partition of India as a willful, colonial divide of ecosystems and peoples, and extends the idea of the rifts by showing how the division has created a series of more precipitous rifts in postcolonial India. These rifts include the multiple displacements of working-class people due to their religious minority status, and these displacements cut the ties between their labor and the land. The postcolonial nation-state and its transnational corporate cohorts, through their capitalist projects and imported ideas of environmentalism, have first evicted them from the island of Morichjhapi and still try to coerce them out of their other settlements in the Sundarbans. The ideas of the rifts that I discuss in this chapter not only address these instances of displacements as material rifts that sever humans’ corporeal bonds with their surroundings but also demonstrate ideological rifts between the campaigns of tiger and wildlife conservation and the discourses of environmental rights for humans.

Ghosh’s engagement with the rifts and environmentalism of the Sundarbans leads to his paradigm of narration. The mode of narrativity that Ghosh employs in *The Hungry Tide* is multi-layered, which turns the setting of the Sundarbans into a meeting point of clashes and collaboration of interests, histories, politics, interventions, and perspectives. The overall frame of a third-person narrator incorporates two main perspectives offered by Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy (Piya), who approach the local setting with their outsiders’ knowledge. The counternarratives are offered by Fokir, a local fisherman, and the diary of Kanai’s uncle that unearths the buried history of the place for Kanai. Ghosh’s narrativity also incorporates the voices of nonhumans to mainly two ends: it reveals how the broader divides created by Partition can impact even the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the Sundarbans; and, it depicts the rapid changes in the ecological dimensions of the Sundarbans, created by the place’s unpredictable geophysical
changes that baffle outside explorers. Kanai is a Delhi-based businessman who visits his aunt in Lusibari, an island of the Sundarbans, and explores his uncle Nirmal’s diary that documents the eviction of the marginal people during the Morichjhapi massacre in 1979. Kanai learns about the tormenting eviction of the settlers from Morichjhapi, and about their resistance that took the life of Nirmal’s friend, Kusum. Piya is a Bengali-origin, American cetologist who comes to study the freshwater river dolphins of the Sundarbans. However, she is surprised at the frequency with which she has to readjust her educated perspectives. She gradually acknowledges the importance of local knowledge about the dolphins and their bigger habitats offered by uneducated Fokir and others and, in the end, she decides to work permanently with the local people. Fokir’s narrative perspective reflects his oneness with the flow of life in the forest and his faith that the forest goddess, Bon Bibi, dictates the course of all lives and affairs. In between all these narratives, we see the omniscient narrator incorporating the deep history of the place through the voices and roles of the elemental forces and the nonhuman agencies, such as those of water, cyclones and the land mass that control the environmental dimensions of the region. All these narrative standpoints, offered by characters from different times, classes and backgrounds, help Ghosh make a statement that the question of the displaced human group and their problematic yet symbiotic coexistence with the nonhumans in the Sundarbans require scrutiny through pluralistic perspectives.

II. The Great Rift, and The Hungry Tide

In The Hungry Tide, Ghosh demonstrates the Partition of India as what may be called the great rift, a rift which significantly altered the bioregional dynamics of even a remote deltaic region in Bengal, the Sundarbans. The British colonization of South Asia began and sustained
through the exploitation of material resources. The British Raj reformed the policies of land, river and forest management, which gave them and their South Asian collaborators absolute control over the resources and capital flow. The transformation of the South Asian ecological scene culminated in Partition, which also marked the end of British rule in the subcontinent. The British lawyer Cyril Radcliffe materialized the Partition of 1947 by hastily demarcating the borders between India and Pakistan. His boundary award, “which was to decide the future of millions of people, was all of six paragraphs long. It not only followed no geographic dividing lines but the award put fields in one country and villages in the other...the fronts of houses were in India and the rear doors were in Pakistan.”

Partition, hence, was not just a divide of peoples, it was also a whimsical, political split of “bioregions,” to borrow the term from Gary Snyder. Snyder has popularized the idea of place as bioregion that is not just composed of people but also of its nonhuman inhabitants including animals, plants, water life, and weather—its overall ecosystem. Such bioregions, as Snyder observes, can be torn apart

by the arbitrary and often violently imposed boundaries of emerging national states.

These imposed borders sometimes cut across biotic areas and ethnic zones alike.

Inhabitants lost ecological knowledge and community solidarity.\(^4\)

Snyder’s observation perfectly matches the damage Partition has caused to South Asian ecosystems. The Sundarbans itself is a glaring example of how Partition split an ecological unit

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\(^4\) Christopher V. Hill, *South Asia: An Environmental History* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2008) 173. Hill shows the dramatic results of Partition by commenting that thousands of peasants suddenly realized that they did not belong to the country they desired.

in a strange way, giving India and Bangladesh approximately 40% and 60% of the forest, respectively. Despite such a physical division, the forest “has a perpetually mutating topography: there are no constant borders between river and sea, fresh water and salt water.” This split, therefore, has caused a strange tension between the political divide and the natural harmony of the place. The two countries claim authority over the forest in terms of establishing corporate tourism or environmentally detrimental power plants, but often evade responsibility for deforestation or improper management of the forest’s water supply and animal population.

Another example of bioregional rift caused by Partition is the Ganges River, which can elaborate more on the impact of Partition on the Sundarbans. The river, which “was considered to be an international ecological marker,” now only briefly flows into Bangladesh from India after the act of Partition that divided the river between India and Bangladesh. Having little control over the flow of the river, Bangladesh is now at the mercy of India regarding the supplies of fresh water on which depends the lives of many fragile plants and animals of the Sundarbans. India controls the flow of water by the Farakka Barrage situated in the West Bengal. The lack of fresh water supply to the Sundarbans has also made the water saline and decreased water levels, leading to agrarian loss and health hazards. The split of the river system has, thus, severely affected the overall ecology of the deltaic coast of the Bay of Bengal.

Partition was the final blow of the British “divide and rule” policy to weaken the resistance to its colonial rule. The riots between the Hindus and the Muslims before Partition

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6 From the time of Partition of India in 1947 till the 1971 war of independence, Bangladesh was called East Pakistan.


8 Hill, 179.
claimed thousands of lives, so the creation of India and Pakistan, based on Hindu and Muslim majorities, respectively, sparked great fear in the people living as religious minorities in these two countries. The threats of ethnic cleansing led to mass immigration of people to their “designated” countries, leaving behind their homes and farmlands of generations. People living in a certain place for generations, mostly as farmers with close ties to their land, suddenly felt the urgency to leave everything behind and move to the country safer for them due to their religious identity. The people represented in Ghosh’s novel are a low-caste Hindu group who immigrated to India from East Pakistan (today’s Bangladesh) in search of a safer life. Ghosh’s narration points out the different phases of movements of these people before they settled on the island of Lusibari, one of the novel’s main settings:

Despite its small size, the island of Lusibari supported a population of several thousand. Some of its people were descended from the first settlers, who had arrived in the 1920s. Others had come in successive waves, some after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and some after the Bangladesh war of 1971. Many had come even more recently, when other nearby islands were forcibly depopulated in order to make room for wildlife conservation projects.9

The novel gradually explores the earlier history of how these “low-caste” people first settled on the island of Morichjhapi before they were evicted from the island for the sake of wildlife conservation. After the problematic Partition, these poor Hindu Bengalis who were late

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to arrive in India were dispersed off to a place called Dandakaranya in central India. This place, as the novel describes, “was more like a concertation camp or a prison…surrounded by security forces” so that they could not leave the barren lands (99). Following the Left Front’s coming to power in West Bengal in 1978, many of these refugees moved to settle on the island of Morichjhapi in the Sundarbans because they thought they would be able to survive better in the wild than in a barren place. Following the central government’s guidelines for wildlife reserves across India, the West Bengal government, however, declared the island of Morichjhapi a conservation project for tigers and the settlement of the people there illegal. The government orchestrated a brutal dispersal of these people from Morichjhapi in 1979. Many people died as a result of the clashes with the police, and others moved to the nearby islands. The chapter titled “Crimes” in the novel describes how, during the siege of Morichjhapi, “food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass…the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out” (215). Kanai learns about such accounts from his uncle’s diary and his aunt’s description and realizes that the worst fate for the refugees was that they were considered the least important of all living and inanimate existences. The diary also documents how Kusum, Fokir’s mother, reflects on their helpless condition as she listens to the police announcement that the island is a preservation project for animals and trees funded by people from around the world. Kusum observes that their “existence were worth less than dirt or dust” (216). One of these islands where the people eventually settled is Lusibari, which Ghosh uses as a setting in The Hungry Tide to document the life of these people in the aftermath of the

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10 The word “Dandakaraniya” means the Dandak Forest which, according to ancient Indian mythology, is the abode of the demon known as Dandak. The idea that the Dandak Forest is the place for exile in Hinduism goes back to the ancient text, Ramayana.
eviction. Priya Kumar discusses how the novel “chronicles the story of … [the] thrice-displaced East Bengali refugees who were never incorporated into the new national order of India.”\textsuperscript{11} The three displacements include their migration from East Pakistan to India, then their settling in the Morichjhapi Island, and finally their eviction from that island. Ghosh, as we can see, additionally represents these victims as thrice discriminated against, based on religion, caste system, and the consideration that they are less important than the nonhumans.

III. Between \textit{Belated Colonial Rift} and Postcolonial Extraction: The Formation of Multifaceted Refugee and \textit{Minoritarian Personhood}

\textit{The Hungry Tide} represents how the displacement of people by Partition has turned out to be a complicated instance of rift. I would like to use the term \textit{belated colonial rift} to highlight a sense of belatedness that characterizes the colonial dispersal of these people who are still considered disposable by the postcolonial nation-state. Although diasporic communities often continue to feel uprooted in the new places they settle in, they generally have political identity or recognition. However, this dispersed group still seems to be living in the cracks of colonial times even after a lapse of decades. After Partition, most migratory groups settled in different parts of South Asia within years, but these people are still living as political victims of Partition and render the image of a group of people still controlled by the colonial will. Therefore, there is a sense of oddness that marks their puzzling presence in the Sundarbans: the postcolonial nation-state does not validate their settlement, or even their existence, and the continuation of extractive

projects by local and global capitalists seeks to displace them from their present settlement. The settlement of these people is also still under threat from conservationists who term them as encroachers and from the neoliberal capitalists whose projects of tourism and power generation seek to capitalize on the forest resources. Arundhati Roy claims that postcolonial India is one of the largest “markets” for corporate globalization, and she argues that multinational corporations and the local government and corporations collaborate to operate projects responsible for “massive privatization and labour 'reforms' [which] are pushing people off their land and out of their jobs.”

The Sundarbans has become a hotbed for many projects, such as shrimping aquaculture, corporate seeds and hybrid vegetables, as well as for chronic explorations for deep sea ports, power plants and oil, which not only marginalize the local people economically but also coerce them out of their habitat. For example, the local government and the capitalists force or incentivize poor people to give up their land and work for the ever-expanding shrimping industry, which mostly serves the demands of western markets and the economic interests of local capitalists who own the industry.

The cases of displacement of the subaltern people, first from their land of origin in Bangladesh and then from the island of Morichjhapi, are examples of eco-material rifts that have eventually shaped their status as multifaceted refugees. Their eviction from Morichjhapi is a more solid case of an eco-material rift because it attempted to sever their ties from a place they have become a part of, through labor and frequent interactions. Marx’s idea of metabolic rift includes the separation of labor from land, which mirrors the displacement of these people who rely solely on their labor for survival. Because of their low-caste Hindu origin, they must involve

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in physical labor that keeps them separated from the people of other “higher” castes. Their dislocation can be classified as “agriculturist refugees,” among other options, because such “refugees with strong ties to land would need land to make a living.”

The notion of “agriculturist refugees” echoes Ramachandra Guha’s famous formulation of “ecorefugees,” and both these tags define the refugees because they survive mostly on what the surroundings offer.

Ecorefugees are displaced “ecosystem people,” as Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha would call them, because they “must scratch the earth and hope for rains to grow their own food, must gather wood or dung to cook it, must build their own huts with bamboo or sticks;” they are the people who “depend on the natural environments of their own locality to meet most of their material needs.”

The reason that the subaltern group decided to leave the barren lands of India where they were first relocated by the government is because the place offered them no means to apply their labor to survive. The newly formed nation of India kept them separated from places

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14 Ramachandra Guha, How Much Should a Person Consume? Environmentalism in India and the United States (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Guha uses the term “ecorefugees” to refer to the people who are victimized by industrialism and urban environmentalist initiatives, and are forced to move to locations where they do not often have access to even water and food.

15 Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, Ecology and Equity: The Use and Abuse of Nature in Contemporary India (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 3. Gadgil and Guha also maintain that the ecosystem people, who are the farmers and tribes of India and constitute about one-third of the total population, often become “ecological refugees” when they are physically displaced by developmental projects like dams and mines. For more on the idea of “ecological refugees,” see Ramachandra Guha’s How Much Should a Person Consume? Environmentalism in India and the United States (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
where they could apply their labor. Pramod K. Nayar observes that “[i]t is in a postcolonial India, with its colonial past and continued claims for social justice from the displaced, the Dalits, the minorities and women that refugees are ‘created.’” The status of these people as refugees represents postcolonial India’s failure to accommodate the poorest segment of its population. We can also identify these people by the popular categories of conservation refugees and climate refugees which refer to their current vulnerability. Conservationists prescribe protecting the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans by uprooting these people from the Sundarbans, and their eviction from the Morichjhapi Island is an example of that. Besides, climatologists predict that the whole coastal areas across the Bay of Bengal, including the Sundarbans, will be affected by the rising sea level, leading to more displacement of the poor settlers. Cyclones are a regular affair, and the tsunami of December 2004 caused by the Sumatra quake already hit the region hard. Such natural disasters wipe out houses and lives, and many people are forced to leave the place in search of a safer life.

Ghosh represents the displacement of the subaltern human group as a discriminatory, class-based rift that has eventually integrated them into the marginalized ecosystem which is the Sundarbans. The identification of these people as a low caste, disposable group in a newly decolonized country exemplifies that the end of the colonial rule does not mean an end of subjugation for all people. Ania Loomba claims that the postcolonial nation-state “makes available the fruits of liberation only selectively and unevenly” and, in most cases, “the status of

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16 Pramod K. Nayar, “The Postcolonial Uncanny; the Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide,” *College Literature* 37, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 89.
women, the working class or the peasantry” does not improve.\textsuperscript{17} Loomba explains that the nation-state replicates the colonial mechanism for discrimination and manipulation by allowing further capitalist extraction of labor and resources. The Sundarbans is an example that the discrimination against classes and genders can also extend to vast ecosystems that can offer possibilities for extraction through tourism, power plants, or commodification of resources. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee considers that postcolonial environments develop unevenly “because of the extreme unevenness of capitalist development in the postcolony,”\textsuperscript{18} controlled by the discriminatory globalization of capital that impacts different places of the world to differing extents. The Sundarbans’ location in the peripheries of Bangladesh and India makes this mangrove forest an easy target for environmentally detrimental, development projects. For example, experts predict that the proposed coal-based Rampal Power Station, a joint-venture by Bangladesh and India, can severely disrupt the ecosystem of the mangrove forest. We can understand Sundarbans’ marginalized identity also from the fact that its service to the mainland goes unacknowledged, which the novel explicates by introducing the character of an actual English merchant, Henry Piddington, a philanthropist who had an unusual fascination for storms. Ghosh fictionalizes Piddington’s opposition to the proposed construction of a colonial port, as he also includes Piddington’s views on the importance of the Sundarbans:

\textsuperscript{17} Ania Loomba, \textit{Colonialism/Postcolonialism} (London: Routledge, 2015) 16. Loomba states that colonial rule is not an imposition from outside alone, and so it can be duplicated from within even after the colonial rulers depart. Therefore, the act of ruling results in discrimination towards certain identities.

The mangroves were Bengal’s defense against the bay…they served as a barrier against nature’s fury, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges. If not for the tide country, the plains would have been drowned long before: it was the mangroves that kept the hinterland alive. (236)

The minority status of the Sundarbans as a postcolonial ecosystem, and the refugee status of its subaltern, human inhabitants, are continued discrimination by both the colonial and the postcolonial systems.

A common thread of marginalization brings the Sundarbans and the subaltern humans together, and Ghosh’s novel explores that the humans have mutually evolved with the place over time, both spiritually and materially. Monique Allewaert’s term “parahumans,” with which she identifies the slaves of the eighteenth-century American plantations, can help us understand the evolving materiality of the human group in the novel. Allewaert discusses how the enforced labor subjected the slave bodies to chronic interaction with the nonhuman surroundings and, thus, transformed the bodies into a reconfigured condition that the Anglo-European colonizers viewed as lowly. The colonizers considered such enslaved bodies as not being fully embodied, rather as bodies reduced to limbs and parts suitable for labor. Allewaert, however, argues “that this rendering of the body in parts did not signal the end of personhood but the origin of a minoritarian and anticolonial mode of personhood.”

Allewaert’s reconceptualization of the minoritarian body is an appropriate signifier for the agency of the subaltern group in the novel whose bodily materiality, too, evolved due to their interaction with the nonhumans and the overall ecosystem of the Sundarbans.

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Existential battles in the forest forced the people into extreme labor for survival, and Ghosh’s novel bears witness to how the chronic interactions with the surroundings have transformed their personhood and fashioned their interconnectedness with the nonhuman world. On one of her excursions on the water, Piya witnesses the fishermen’s unusual alliance with the dolphins. She observes with awe how the dolphins help the fishermen catch fish with their nets. The dolphins respond to the fishermen’s “strange, gobbling call” (139) and chase the fish towards the net, and swim “faster and faster in tightening circles” (140) to force the fish to stay within the reach of casting nets. This prompts Piya to ask herself: “Did there exist any more remarkable instance of symbiosis between human beings and a population of wild animals?” (140). Moreover, Piya observes the transformed limbs of Fokir, who is a local fisherman and Piya’s guide; her observations relate Fokir’s body with the condition of his extreme labor on the water, which parallels Allewaert’s formulation on the transformed, minoritarian body parts of colonial slaves. Piya first views Fokir’s “minoritarian” body as “skeletal, almost wasted…slowly yielding his flesh to the wind and the sun” (36) because of his strenuous task as a fisherman for years on the water. She gradually realizes that “his frame was not wasted but very lean and that his long, stringy limbs were almost fleshless in their muscularity” (39). Fokir’s body is adjusted to the environment to the degree that he can move effortlessly amidst the waters and vegetation of the forest and can sense the presence of other entities from a great distance. On another outing for Piya to study the dolphins, Kanai is surprised beyond wits to learn that it is “the goosebumps on Fokir’s neck” (265) that informs Fokir of the unmistakable presence or trails of tigers from a long distance.
What further shows the oneness of Fokir and the force of the forest is the intense episode of the cyclone in which Fokir saves Piya’s life by acting as a counterforce to the colossal destructiveness of the cyclone. The gale becomes so powerful at one point that it … sounded no longer like the wind but like some other element—the usual blowing, sighing and rustling had turned into a deep, earsplitting rumble, as if the earth itself had begun to move. The air was now filled with what seemed to be fog of flying debris—leaves, twigs, branches, dust and water. (312)

Fokir instinctively negotiates the course of the cyclone and sacrifices his own life to save Piya by shielding her body with his own: “Their bodies were so close, so finely merged, that she could feel the impact of everything hitting him, she could sense the blows raining down on his back…it was as if the storm […] had fused them together and made them one” (321). From Kanai’s narrative input, we learn that other people including Fokir’s father have also shown such negotiation with the nonhuman forces. Madhusmita Pati and Kailash Nath suggest that the correlation of the people with the Sundarbans has evolved to the degree that the people are only willing to listen to the forest spirit in resistance to state violence that seeks to oust them: “people still display a general willingness to coexist with predator species like the Royal Bengal Tigers in that open-ended and unstable landscape—and in all probabilities myths of Bon Bibi facilitate such co-existence not any of State’s administrative plans or designs as settlement projects.”

The people’s resolve to stay in the Sundarbans despite the risks, and their faith in the spirit of the forest, are indications of their physical and spiritual attachment to the place. Initially, these

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people were scattered groups of migrants arriving in the Sundarbans at different times, but the state atrocities gradually and ironically turned them into a unified group of people with close ties to the new land.

**IV. Ecological impasse, and Rifts of Perspectives**

The problematic displacement of the refugees has not just blended them with the nonhuman world of the Sundarbans, it has also created a much-debated, impasse situation of “humans vs tigers,” a situation which compels humans and tigers to kill each other to survive in the Sundarbans. These displaced people have never received any government support to live elsewhere or any training to cope with the wild animals, so they have always safeguarded their existence by killing predators like the tigers who frequently kill humans as well. The novel dramatizes this stalemate in an episode when the local people trap inside a livestock pen a tiger that “had killed two people there and had long been preying on its livestock” (241). The people first seal the hut with layers of nets, blind the tiger with a sharpened bamboo pole, and finally set fire to the hut to kill the tiger. Horrified at this utmost cruelty, Piya goes into a frenzied condition and almost risks her life to save the tiger. Piya, however, fails to consider the reality that drives this frenzied mass into killing the tiger. Kanai points out to Piya that, whereas people from outside emphasize the endangerment of tigers, no one talks about how the tigers also kill the poor people:

> If there were killings on that scale anywhere else on earth it would be called a genocide, and yet here it goes almost unremarked: these killings are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. (248)
People from outside, more importantly even conservationists from around the world as well as in South Asia, fail to grasp the existential crisis that has brought the poor settlers of the Sundarbans face to face with the man-eating Royal Bengal tigers of the Sundarbans. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin consider that the particular incident of the killing of the tiger in *The Hungry Tide* symbolizes an ideological gap between “the rights of local peoples and western conservationist objectives.”

Even though Huggan and Tiffin acknowledge the victimization of the Morichjhapi residents, they also argue that, in the killing of the tiger, “human responsibility is elided and scapegoats are found in the shape of animals whose territories they encroach.” The question of “human responsibility” that Huggan and Tiffin “passively” refer to, might incriminate these subaltern people or indicate a collective failure of our anthropocentric worldview. Along with Huggan and Tiffin, environmentalists who try to strike a balance between the rights of the animals and those of the humans hardly see a solution to this impasse situation in the Sundarbans. This ecological deadlock appears as an irreparable rift that seems to baffle environmentalists.

Nevertheless, conservationists mostly approach the above stalemate situation of the Sundarbans from an ethos that stresses only the preservation of the flora and fauna and the fading tiger population. Proponents of universal environmentalism, NGOs, and state officials sidestep the existential crisis of the human group living here and, therefore, endorse the interests of the

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22 Huggan and Tiffin, 189. They also refer to this problematic coexistence as “‘predator-prey’ models of relationships in nature” (186).
corporations that join in the campaigns of “save the tiger” to oust these people. Rob Nixon states that the nexus between the global capitalists and the nation-state promotes conservation often by transforming some sites into touristic projects that yield profit but deprive the local people. Nixon observes that

> those forcibly removed by development include conservation refugees. Too often in the global South, conservation, driven by powerful transnational nature NGOs, combines an antidevelopmental rhetoric with the development of finite resources for the touristic few, thereby depleting vital resources for long-term residents. (18)

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Sundarbans is one of the world’s most famous tourist sites, but the tourism and the associated projects have disrupted the ecological interactions and led to human suffering. Kanai’s comment to Piya in the novel clarifies how the conservationists indict a helpless group of people as intruders into the land of tigers, without recognizing that these people are as victimized as the tigers:

> “Because it was people like you,” said Kanai, “who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I’m complicit because people like me—Indians of my class, that is—have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favor with their Western patrons.” (249)

Kanai’s observation also indicts the local elites who support the corporations and global environmentalists to benefit from overlooking the human condition. These local elites, who comprise the capitalists, politicians, government officials, and even social workers, often misrepresent the ground reality to the outsiders for their mutual benefit.

> There are conceptual gaps between Western environmentalism and postcolonial ecocriticism that result in the differing approaches to the deadlock situation in the Sundarbans.
Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley observe that issues such as “the economy, development, conservation, biopiracy, sovereignty, consumption, militarism, and (over)population” are often highlighted to point out a striking difference between “postcolonial concerns and the environmentalism of the privileged north.” DeLoughrey and Handley contend that the globalized concern about the future of the nonhuman world is contradictory to the postcolonial angle because the postcolonial angle indicts the idea of hierarchical organization of human and nonhuman lives in nature which benefits colonial projects. Conservationists’ overinsistence on wildlife preservation overlooks the fact that the class-based social organization has pushed a certain number of people to live in the peripheries in the global south whose interests clash with those of wilderness preservation, as is the case in the Sundarbans. The livelihood of these people depends on direct access to resources, but the privatization of forest resources through ongoing commodification and touristification threatens their existence, which is even worsened by state interventions such as direct police brutalities represented in The Hungry Tide.

Ghosh offers the story of Sir Daniel Hamilton, an actual Scottish businessman, as an antithesis to the one-sided blame that the conservationists and the Indian government put on these subaltern people for human intrusion into the Sundarbans. In the novel, Ghosh recounts the history of the Scotsman who was responsible for massive colonization of the Sundarbans under

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23 Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, “Introduction: Toward an Aesthetics of the Earth,” *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, eds. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (New York: OUP, 2011) 21. DeLoughrey and Handley claim that such overinsistence on issues like development and conservation are part of the mainstream ecocritical methodologies which may become tools to demote “the global south to a place without agency” (19).
the patronization of the British colonial rule. When Hamilton first saw the islands of the Sundarbans, “he saw not mud but something that shone brighter than gold.” He readily knew that “a single acre of Bengal’s mud yields fifteen maunds of rice” (42). Eventually, in 1903, “he bought ten thousand acres of the tide country from the British sarkar [government]” (43) and invited an immense number of people to settle on those islands, leading to farming, settlement, and exploitation of the forest as resources that completely transformed the ecosystem of the place. Although Nirmal, Kanai’s uncle, thinks that Hamilton “wanted to build a place where no one would exploit anyone and people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences” (46), the very idea of establishing an organized human society in the Sundarbans led to the successive environmental complexities. The tension between the fate of the subaltern people and the conservation of the forest system, therefore, is a continuation of the problematic colonization of the place under British patronization, which adds to the idea of an unresolved colonial hangover still signifying the debates about the place.

Ghosh’s slight development of the characters of tigers as individuals helps us analyze the impasse from an animal rights perspective as well. Ghosh informs us about a particular tiger that kills humans and then provides accounts of people killing it in turn. The locals kill the tiger as an act of revenge because it “had killed two people…just in one village” (248). Ghosh’s narrative of the tiger’s painful murder that drives Piya into a frenzy manifests the sufferings of an individual tiger who might consider the humans as the violators of its right to live in its own habitat. Ghosh also offers a couple of examples that tigers are intelligent enough to comprehend human attempts to fool them. Once, the people of the forest use “clay models of human beings which had been rigged up with wires and connected to car batteries” (200). Another time, people start to wear “masks on the back of their heads,” thinking that it would keep tigers away because they always
attack humans from behind (200). On both occasions, tigers seem to keep away for a while, but eventually carry on their attacks as before, which indicates that tigers might be intelligent enough to cope with the threats to their survival.

From the animal rights perspective, we can certainly condemn Fokir’s participation in the killing of the tiger. On the other hand, Fokir saves Piya’s life from the storm by sacrificing his own life, which helps Ghosh establish an alternative moral superiority for Fokir in the novel. This moral investment does not quite justify his part in killing the tiger, but it certainly shows the impossibility of the situation that leads to an old mode of “survival for the fittest” in the Sundarbans. Ghosh, therefore, represents Fokir’s sacrifice as a counter-discourse to the blame conservationists squarely put on the subaltern people without digging into the history that has created the impasse. Ghosh also indirectly proposes a redistribution of places in the Sundarbans by portraying the local people’s animistic faith in Bon Bibi’s power over the forest. As the legend of Bon Bibi goes, she and her brother Shah Jongoli came to the forest and defeated the evil demon called Dokhin Rai who often took the guise of a tiger and killed humans. Bon Bibi then divided the place and kept half for human habitation under her rule. She was merciful to Dokhin Rai and gave him the authority over the other half of the wilderness. With this redistribution of the place, “order was brought to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance” (86). This mythological distribution of places is symptomatic of a possible coexistence of the wild and the human in the Sundarbans.

Ghosh uses an archaic legend of Bon Bibi to offer a possible resolution to the deadlock in the Sundarbans. His reflection on the legend also indicates that the deadlock baffles mainstream ecocritics because they do not grasp the differences between the contemporaneity that shapes conservationist theories and the colonial belatedness that signifies the Sundarbans as a bioregion.
Conservationists with their insistence on tiger preservation impose the “present-ness” of their outsider perspectives on the belatedness of the Sundarbans. The vast mangrove forest’s unruly natural forces and unfathomable varieties of agential combinations characterize the Sundarbans with a sense of timelessness: “the specialty of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize land; they erase time” (43). The tides can change the landscape at will, defying the idea of human intentions and interventions controlling or demarcating the place. Then, we also have the subaltern people who carry with them a belated colonial hangover that seems to readily associate them with the “slowness” of the place, thereby dissociating them and their place from a contemporary understanding of spatiality.

V. Ghosh’s Plural Narrativity: The Subaltern Speaks

In The Hungry Tide, Ghosh employs a mode of plural narrativity to negotiate the split between conservationist ecocriticism and the local dynamics of the Sundarbans ecology. Ghosh’s plural narrativity not only merges his two sides of the narrative, the outsiders and the insiders who offer differing perspectives but also reflects a local environmental ethic in his integration of the marginalized voices of the Sundarbans. Ghosh creates a meeting point of global and local perspectives offered respectively through the contrary views of Kanai and Piya on the one hand, and the discovered diaries and the marginalized narratives on the other. The “outsider” characters, Piya and Kanai, control the narrative perspective of the novel up to a point when they turn into passive actors in the changing flow of narratives that include the perspectives of marginalized humans and the nonhuman forces. Piya offers her perspective formulated through the experience of her metropolitan, scholarly identity, which overlaps with the narrative viewpoint offered by Kanai, an Indian businessman. Kanai’s narrativity, in turn, lacks access to
the convoluted history of the setting, which is revealed gradually by the diary of Kanai’s uncle, Nirmal, who had a closer perspective into the ecosystem and the people of the Sundarbans. Kanai’s narration appears very precise when he initially describes the surroundings of the railway stations and the geographic settings of the place, but, as the novel progresses, he becomes more dependent on the narrative of his uncle’s diary. As Piya and Kanai travel further into the depth of the Sundarbans and meet its natural inhabitants, a whole host of new stories about the people and the place unfurl. The vast nonhuman world and the marginalized communities create their own narrative to explain their world and its evolution, ideas that convince the dominant characters, Piya and Kanai, to revise their perspectives.

Ghosh brings his central character, Piya, to a “peripheral” location, which helps him unearth truths about the environmental realities of a local setting. Piya gradually loses her confident voice to the growing voice of the nonhuman and the marginalized humans that offer surprisingly different perspectives on the local environment and the dolphin’s nature. Piya initially views the forest as a nice backdrop of flora and fauna, in which the preservation of animals and vegetation is what matters. However, she becomes aware of the contradictions of conservation attempts in which the motorboats of officials kill dolphins, as she also realizes the existential dilemma of the marginalized people that forces them to kill tigers. She, therefore, modifies her perspective and believes in the coexistence of human and nonhuman entities as ideal for the Sundarbans. On a trip on the river to observe the dolphins, she seems quite at a loss as she is increasingly reliant on Fokir for her study, as well as on Kanai who acts as the interpreter between them. She strikes more like “a textual scholar poring over a yet undeciphered manuscript: it was as though she were puzzling over a codex that had been authored by the earth itself” (222). This particular moment marks Piya’s transition both as a scholar and as an
observer. Her changed outlook on her research of the Sundarbans inspires her to contribute her knowledge to help the local people as well. She decides to help the Badabon Trust, a local community organization run by Kanai’s aunt, Nilima. The transformation of Kanai’s and Piya’s perspectives, along with the merging of contrary narratives, demonstrates Ghosh’s statement about the need for a combined perspective of western and local drives to understand the place and its relation to the bigger world.

Ghosh’s overall narrative bears a heavy influence of the nonhuman agents and forces. The nonhuman perspective of narrative is not something altogether new in literature. In traditional folktales, and in many modern works that incorporate magical and surreal elements, trees and animals speak, opening up metaphorical or allegorical interpretations of phenomena. Moreover, recent theories of narrativity offered by material ecocriticism defy anthropocentric authorship and criticism and press the idea that the literary text itself is part of a greater text in which nonhumans have a striking influence on the phenomena. Michael Ziser observes that our scholarly “habit of restricting the stories we tell about culture to the conventional human perspective alone leads to impoverished and inaccurate accounts of the world, in part because nonhuman entities possess at least a quasi-agency that must be taken into account.” He refers to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ broad formulation of culture to state that culture as a phenomenon has been conceived as a separate entity from nature, and literary culture, which is considered as one of the higher-order elements of culture, is therefore “a site doubly alienated from the natural and the nonhuman.” One of the conceptual outcomes of claiming the significance of nonhuman

25 Ziser, 3.
narrativity is that it frees the act of reading literature from the traps of anthropocentrism. Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, accordingly, advocates for bridging the gap between literary culture and the nonhuman influence that Ziser argues for. This method of acknowledging the role of the nonhuman can help us critique the complex environmentalism of *The Hungry Tide* and resolve the specific conflicts of local and global perspectives that the novel foregrounds.

Ghosh allots the nonhuman voice a significant portion of his narrative, and the nonhuman perspectives demonstrate Ghosh’s prioritization of the deeper ecological time of the setting and the powerful agency of the tide and the cyclone. The novel reveals the history of the place in deep time, which negates any early human interventions: “India broke away 140 million years ago and began its journey north from Antarctica…the subcontinent had moved, at a speed no other landmass had ever attained before…it’s weight forced the rise of the Himalayas” (151). This movement and collision of landmasses resulted in the creation of two rivers, the Indus and the Ganges. The fact that these two rivers were once joined is understood by the presence of their common, inter-waters citizen, “the shushuk, the river dolphin,” which does not live anywhere else in the world but in these two rivers (151). Piya is, therefore, surprised to discover the strange behavior of the dolphin: “But what she had seen today made her wonder if she hadn’t made a mistake. If these were coastal Oracella what were they doing congregating in a pool? That was out of character for them—only their river-dwelling kin did that” (104). But, Piya cannot be even sure that these are river dolphins because her academic knowledge tells her that the water is too salty for them.

The title of the novel indicates the powerful agency of the tide, and Ghosh’s narrative frequently offers the tide or water in the Sundarbans as a significant counterforce to the human interventions that divide ecosystems. The tide frequently reorganizes the outlook of the islands,
thereby erasing the artificial, manmade borders. Very early in the novel, we learn that “[t]here are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea…the currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily” (7). Divya Anand says that Ghosh “uses water as the agent that rewrites the social matrix of the Sundarbans in the novel. Water is both motif and agent, shaping not only the story but also the geography and history of the land.” Anand claims that the agency of water flattens out all the hierarchical organizations of the society in the novel. Among the textual examples that support Anand’s claim is the storm in which Fokir sacrifices his life to save Piya. Although the novel presents the storm’s effect as catastrophic, its deadliness is what erases all class differences between Piya and Fokir. Fokir frequently uses his body to shield Piya from the storm till their bodies appear to have become one at a point. Another example of nonhuman influence that the novel manifests is the account of how the collisions between land and water create a unique ecosystem in the Sundarbans. We see that “the unusually varied composition of the water” in the Sundarbans in which the “waters of the river and sea did not intermingle evenly…but interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches”; it resulted in a larger number of fish species “than could be found in the whole continent of Europe” (104). These nonhuman dimensions of the Sundarbans, with the place’s composition of the unpredictable and powerful agency of water and land, exert an influence on Ghosh’s choice of narratives that switch between the narrative perspectives of the opposites, between outsider and insider narrators, as well as between the human and the nonhuman. Ghosh’s artistic outlook on the narrative of the place, therefore, is shaped by the very nature of its inhabitants, both human and nonhuman.

26 Anand, 23.
Ghosh’s adoption of the subaltern narrativity in *The Hungry Tide* extends Gayatri Spivak’s famous argument about the representation of the subaltern. Spivak claims that the very attempt to represent the subaltern voice ironically ends up silencing it. Since “the oppressed under socialized capital have no necessarily unmediated access to ‘correct’ resistance,” the mediatory authority that seeks to represent the subaltern resistance itself turns into a medium of control. To elaborate, Spivak uses the extended example of the Sati, the pre-modern practice of self-immolation of the Hindu widow on her dead husband’s funeral pyre, abolition of which helped the British to justify their *mission civilisatrice* in India and colonize the nation politically and culturally. With this example, Spivak claims that the authorities which represent the women may change but the reality of women’s subjugation under the ongoing capitalistic patriarchy doesn’t end. Representation can, therefore, turn out to be an act of oppression. *The Hungry Tide* offers certain examples of the subaltern, with the ecorefugees and the nonhuman entities, as an extension of Spivak’s example of the women in general. If the pluralistic form of narrativity allows Ghosh to mediate the voice of the subaltern, the same plural narrativity accords him the potential to keep his mediation to the minimum by allowing multiple voices of the marginalized group to reflect on their condition. Next, Ghosh’s plural narrativity, to say the least, de-privileges the one-sided Western narrative about the Sundarbans. If Spivak indicts the act of mediation as oppressive, Ghosh adopts plural narrativity to curb the condescending tone that a singular narrator from the cosmopolitan center might have otherwise reflected. Moreover, the voices of the subaltern agents in the novel question the perspectives imposed on them, as they also resist

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the state government’s initiatives to displace them. These are examples of Ghosh’s subaltern potentially demonstrating their “para-human,” non-English voices that expose the limitations of Western, anthropocentric discourses about the subaltern.

VI. Conclusion: After The Hungry Tide

The overall reading of The Hungry Tide through the lens of eco-material rifts allows us to spot the interconnected phases and activities of Sundarbans’ environmental change and the question of social justice for the people living there as refugees. This reading is helpful to determine the continual discriminatory treatment of the subaltern humans and ecosystems, from the time of the colonial Partition of India to the contemporary state-validated activities of tourism and commodification. In other words, the novel represents the displacement of people by Partition and exemplifies how the local environmental dynamics of the novel’s main setting, the islands of the Sundarbans, stretch to the greater West Bengal—and even to the bio-history of colonial India with connections to imperial Great Britain. The units of subaltern entities as examples of eco-materials rifts, such as the ones of the poor immigrants, the fading tiger population, and even the overall ecology of the Sundarbans constitute a helpful reading of Ghosh’s ecological narrative that effectively vies for environmental justice as well as for a revised eco-poetics for the marginalized, postcolonial environments of the global south. A complementary reading of the rifts and Ghosh’s narrativity, therefore, presents The Hungry Tide as an eco-fiction which attempts to break free from the traditional form of fiction by accommodating the pressing issues of climate change and environmental justice.

Ghosh’s recent works reflect further development of his thoughts and experimentation when it comes to the form of fiction integrating environmental or climate issues. In his non-
fiction book *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh laments that fiction writers consider environmental problems like climate change as peripheral issues because there are “forms of resistance that climate change presents to what is now regarded as serious fiction.”\(^{28}\) Ghosh elaborates that the very improbable and unpredictable nature of climate issues is what causes the resistance to both human understanding of the issues and their representation in literary fiction. Another reason Ghosh offers for such resistance is that the vocabulary of climate change doesn’t seem to suit the ears of fiction readers. So, the fact that “the Anthropocene resists literary fiction lies ultimately in its resistance to language itself” and so, Ghosh claims, “new, hybrid forms will emerge” to counter such resistance.\(^ {29}\)

Ghosh’s latest novel *Gun Island* (2019) adopts “hybrid forms” and exemplifies further evolution of his own narrative since *The Hungry Tide*. The novel’s mix of formal narrative with the supernatural and the improbable demonstrates that Ghosh tries to propose a move beyond the realist tradition of fiction. In the novel, Ghosh employs the legend of Manasa Devi, the Hindu goddess of snakes, chasing a gun merchant, which symbolizes the conflict between the old, traditional mode of life and the new, profit-making interventions causing environmental damage. The Partition of India affects Dinanath, the narrator and a rare book dealer living an isolated life in New York, who feels disturbed by more partitions and compartmentalization of the globalized world due to people’s class, gender, religious and migrant identities. Although he manages to migrate legally, characters like Tipu and Rafi go through illegal, hard journeys to move beyond South Asia due to their class and national identity. Through such characters, Ghosh indicts the

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\(^{29}\) *The Great Derangement*, 84.
restricted, discriminatory globalization, whereas characters like Piya and Dinanath represent cosmopolitan beneficiaries of the new world order. The beneficiaries now occasionally visit the Sundarbans, a victim of climate change, to meet their interests. The Sundarbans also stays as a combination of symbols in Dinanath’s imagination—symbols of wildfire, snakes, and storms which signify distortion and threats to the forest.

Ghosh’s journey as a writer from *The Hungry Tide* to *Gun Island* reflects that the form and content of fiction can demonstrate flexibility, or even evolve, to accommodate the shifting issues of environmental threats. In both these novels, Ghosh adopts an interdisciplinary outlook, which comprises biological, anthropological, historical and political angles with which his different characters address the human history and the nonhuman world. Yet he demonstrates that this interdisciplinarity does not have to come at the cost of the necessary components of plot and character development of fiction. Again, *Gun Island* complements Ghosh’s experimentation with the form and his environmental perspectives in *The Hungry Tide*. The latter adopts the perspectives of the subaltern characters to a large degree and implicates the colonial past and the failure of the postcolonial state to provide justice to environmentally displaced people. *Gun Island* does the other task of presenting the Sundarbans outside its locale, through the main narrator taking a *tour du monde* and showing that the forest exists as symbols and images in people’s minds and as part of their tourism and research plans. By representing the forest as fragmented symbols and myths in the novel, Ghosh also shows further deterioration of the Sundarbans and connects it to a discriminatory, globalized world that allows only the privileged people to escape deranged landscapes and visit them occasionally, academically and imaginatively.
Opium Trade, and the Differentiated Extraction of Human and Nonhuman Entities in Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* Trilogy

As for Deeti, the more she ministered the drug, the more she came to respect its potency; how frail a creature was a human being, to be tamed by such tiny doses of this substance! She saw now why the factory in Ghazipur was so diligently patrolled by the sahibs and their sepoys – for if a little bit of this gum could give her such power over the life, the character, the very soul of this elderly woman, then with more of it at her disposal, why should she not be able to seize kingdoms and control multitudes? (*Sea of Poppies* 35)

I. Introduction: Differentiated Rift of Entities, and the *Ibis* Trilogy

The opening pages of Amitav Ghosh’s novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008) announce the grand arrival of the British schooner *Ibis* at the Narrows at Hooghly Point near Calcutta around the year 1838, an arrival which readily grips the main characters of the novel with the ominous feeling that it has come for them and that it will change their lives forever. The *Ibis* is a former slave ship that now transports indentured laborers and convicts along the Indian Ocean, mainly from Calcutta to Mauritius. However, Burnham Bros., the owner of the ship, later engages it in opium transportation between India and China. Deeti, one of the central characters, and her in-laws live on opium cultivation on the outskirts of a town called Ghazipur in northern Bihar of India. The vision of the ship surprises her and she feels “instantly that the apparition was a sign of destiny,
for she had never seen such a vessel before, not even in a dream.”\(^1\) Another major character Raja Neel Rattan Halder, the wealthy zamindar of Raskhali from a reputed landed family of Bengal, tries to interpret the color of the squalls that have brought the ship to Hooghly and associates the winds “with sudden reversals of fortune” and “sure indications of a turn in his luck.”\(^2\) Both Deeti and Raja Neel would later board the *Ibis* to escape the horrible fates that befall them with time.

The ship *Ibis*, along with other commercial ships such as the *Anahita*, serves as a recurring synecdoche in Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* Trilogy for the activities of mobility, flow, export and extraction of labor, crops, cash and materials within the British Empire. Deeti boards the ship as a laborer to escape horrific consequences after her husband dies from opium addiction, and Raja Neel flees from the banishment from false charges of forgery that claim his title, honor, and wealth. The ship also carries other indentured laborers and many convicts who have been displaced or victimized due to the forced plantation of opium poppies and other capitalist schemes taken up by the British and the local traders in South Asia. The Trilogy, comprising *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015), is a literary indictment of the British Empire’s problematic cultivation and trade of opium that led to widespread addiction, environmental transformation, and warfare. However, the stories of Deeti, Kalua, Raja Neel and other dispossessed characters reveal that the colonial interventions had the worst impact on the people of certain class and gender identities, and such exploration helps Ghosh recreate the history of the colonial opium trade from multiple perspectives offered by a diverse pool of characters.

\(^2\) *Sea of Poppies*, 37 & 38.
In this chapter on Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* trilogy, I examine his representation of the British colonizers’ monoculture poppy cultivation in South Asia, as well as the opium trade across the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, which not only solidified the British imperialist and capitalist outreach but also disrupted the community and individual lives and transformed the ecology of local farming. Ghosh’s achievement, however, lies in his recreation of the time from the perspectives of his oppressed and subaltern characters whose stories usually remain occluded under the broad sweeps of colonial history. He recreates the traditional, impersonal histories of the nineteenth-century colonial trade of opium through individual stories of gender, class, and racial dynamics. Major characters including Deeti, Zachary and Raja Neel, traditional crops and surplus opium poppies, and a group of convicts and indentured laborers that we come across in the trilogy are all representations of displaced and extracted humans and nonhumans tossed around by the interventionist, colonial trade of opium. Ghosh brings in a multilayered approach to his representation via “the interweaving of the characters’ stories and through deploying elements from a variety of genres (historical novel, nautical novel, travel and adventure fiction).” The multiplicity in narrativizing the history of colonial spaces and trades reinvents the time for us because of the racial, class, gender and environmental undercurrents that he excavates through individual stories and representation of material rifts, an effort that surpasses the insights that the traditional historical accounts can offer. Ghosh’s commitment to telling the tales of the oppressed and occluded lives motivates him to freely choose his narrative modes and write back to the grand narratives that omit those lives.

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The examples of displaced entities in Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* Trilogy develop the Marxist idea of rift that I have discussed in the earlier chapters. Marx’s hypothesis of rift shows that the capitalist production and exportation of crops bars the return of important soil nutrients to the original land and, thus, harms the topsoil and the long-term fate of local farming. In this chapter, I discuss how Ghosh portrays that the East India Company sustained its capitalist expansion through a differential treatment of human bodies, race, and gender, embedded in other interrelated rifts of labor and cultivable crops. The ship *Ibis* in the trilogy transports people and materials from the local to the global regions and, thus, becomes a microcosm of the remapped empire, carrying an assortment of displaced bodies and materials including trafficked labor, smuggled opium, and female bodies escaping demolition. The extraction of such interdependent human bodies and nonhuman materials is what I have discussed as “eco-material rifts” in my previous chapters. The term explains the displacement of the concomitant materiality of humans and nonhumans as ecological units, and reading the *Ibis* Trilogy through the lens of eco-material rifts can materialize or concretize the examples of discriminatory extraction that affected the subaltern and women characters under the colonial rule in South Asia. The racial, class and gender elements of the rifts not only recreate the impersonal accounts and the underrepresented lives of the colonial South Asian farming, trade, and locations; Ghosh switches between the broader background of the colonial extraction of crops, capital and labor and the stories of individual characters, especially to show the discriminatory severing of marginalized identities and labor built within the process of material extraction. Ghosh’s narrative places the strong agency of opium at the center of individual lives as well as the processes of discriminatory extraction. Opium cultivation and trade proliferate while individuals, communities, and empires rise and fall. Opium addiction kills people like Deeti’s husband, turns pleasant people like
Zachary into exploitative traders, encourages discrimination of gender and class to victimize the likes of Deeti and Kalua, and engages the British and the Chinese empires in a deadly war.

If we read Ghosh’s novels through the lens of eco-material rifts, it makes his trilogy appear as a literary prologue to the later economic, social, and political dynamics of postcolonial South Asia. The rifts and movements across regions provide a basis for understanding the history of “former colonies …in terms of the trans-national processes which gave rise to their nation states.” On the one hand, the stories of dispersed individuals or indentured workers of the 19th century colonial times signpost the ongoing dispersal and creation of the South Asian Diaspora to other parts of the world. On the other hand, the material rifts of crops and human bodies, which manifest the principles of the colonial trade of opium, help us reflect on the various postcolonial modes of oppressiveness that continue to extract labor, crops, and bodies through a discriminatory treatment of various identities. An added significance of such an ecocritical reading, therefore, is the understanding that Ghosh evokes an urgency to consider how the capitalist and postcolonial trades replicate the colonial violence of the opium trade registered in its gender, class, and racial undertones. Ghosh’s dispersed characters and materials are elements of dialectic between the local and the global and are, thus, privy to the colonial history of South Asia and the later emergence of postcolonial nation-states in the subcontinent.

The three novels portray the journeys of the main characters, such as Deeti, Zachary, and Bahram, and advance the issues of indentured labor, replacement of local crops by monoculture plantation, and the spread of opium trade and addiction. *Sea of Poppies* begins with the arrival of

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the *Ibis* near Ghazipur, Deeti’s village, followed by an extended representation of how opium
cultivation controls the local livelihood and economy. The narrative gradually shifts to the
household of Deeti which is regulated by opium in every possible way. Right after her marriage
to Hukum Singh, Deeti realizes that he is an opium addict and impotent. In the successive events,
she is drugged and raped by her husband’s brother. After her husband dies, Deeti refuses to
marry her brother-in-law and, instead, opts for *sati*, the practice of self-immolation on the
husband’s funeral pyre. Kalua, a low-caste oxcart driver, rescues Deeti from the funeral pyre and
they board the *Ibis* as indentured laborers, representing the fate of many upper-caste widows who
left on such ships to avoid gruesome death. Interspersed within the episodes of Deeti’s life are
many other stories including those of Zachary Reid and Raja Neel Rattan Halder. Zachary is a
“half black” American sailor who boards the *Ibis* from Baltimore. He gradually learns to dress
like a gentleman and pass for a white male and rises in power aboard the *Ibis* which experiences
chaos among the coolies and the guards. Raja Neel loses his zamindari due to the plots hatched
by Benjamin Burnham whose company, Burnham Bros., owns the *Ibis* and deals with the opium
factory in Ghazipur. Burnham ousts Raja Neel with framed charges of forgery in order to acquire
more land for poppy cultivation. It is also Burnham who first rescues Paulette, a French girl, but
later suppresses her botanic interests by his patriarchal control. Paulette escapes a forced
arranged marriage with an older English judge, disguises herself as an elderly Indian lady, and
gets on the *Ibis* as a laborer just like Deeti. *Sea of Poppies* ends with the calamitous development
of prejudices and power politics aboard the *Ibis*, leading to an attempt of assault on Deeti. Kalua
rescues her and murders Bhyro Singh, the subedar in charge of the guards, who resorts to
whipping Kalua under any pretext. In the backdrop of all these incidents, Ghosh portrays the
tensions between Britain and China brewing over the British monopoly of opium trade spreading
drug addiction in China, as he also depicts the South Asian landscapes and lives of peoples affected by the opium cultivation and drug addiction.

*River of Smoke* and *Flood of Fire* continue to represent the developments of the opium trade and personal tales. Deeti, Raja Neel, and other characters from *Sea of Poppies* feature to different degrees in these two novels. As *River of Smoke* begins, the main characters are found scattered in Mauritius and China after some of them escape the *Ibis* on a lifeboat when a severe storm hits the ship in September 1838. Deeti has now become the matriarch of a large clan in Mauritius after serving her term as an indentured laborer on the island. Raja Neel works disguised as a clerk for Bahram Modi, a free trader of opium from Bombay whose personal life and trading details feature prominently in *River of Smoke*. Neel meets Bahram through Ah Fatt, Bahram’s half-Chinese estranged son, whom Neel befriends on the *Ibis*. Neel helps in Bahram’s opium trade which faces challenges due to the worsening conflict between China and Great Britain resulting in more and more trade restrictions imposed by China. Bahram’s business almost collapses when the group of European traders in China decides to temporarily adhere to the Chinese demands that they surrender all their opium. Bahram dies shortly afterward. The conflict escalates between the Chinese emperor Manchu who wants to stop the opium import to China and the British traders who claim their imperial authority over the trade in the Chinese region of Canton.

In contrast to the respective dominant settings of the first two books of the trilogy in Bihar and in Canton, *Flood of Fire* switches back and forth mainly between the settings of India and China. This novel continues to show the implications of the opium trade on the farming landscapes of South Asia and on the lives of individual characters, while the conflicts from the political and business interests of different quarters rise to shape up as the First Opium War. The
novel represents Shireen Modi taking control of her dead husband Bahram’s falling business; she leaves India to collect compensation for her husband’s confiscated opium and to find out Ah Fatt, her husband’s illegitimate son with a Chinese mistress. Ghosh also portrays the character of Zachary Reid from the beginning of the book as Zachary gets acquitted from the trial of the troubles on the *Ibis* including the murder of the first mate. Zachary’s illicit affair with Mrs. Burnham and his friendship with Burnham’s clerk help him join Burnham in his trade of opium. *Flood of Fire* ends as the British bombard the Chinese port and declare war. The main characters gradually recede with their unfinished tales into the background of the battles that escalate for the control of places and trades, through which Ghosh shows that the bigger events of history transform, toss around, and then occlude individual lives.

In the following sections, I first focus on Ghosh’s literary recreation of the interdependent rise of opium monoculture and the British East India Company in South Asia, a rise that leads to unprecedented material rifts. Ghosh demonstrates that the imperial agents in South Asia thrive by exploiting the strong agency of opium and promoting a hierarchical treatment of class, race, and gender. Next, I elaborate on how Ghosh’s trilogy incorporates pluralist perspectives offered by his miscellaneous characters, which expose various modes of oppression, corruption, and discrimination entrenched within the material rifts caused by the opium monoculture and trade. In the final section, I concentrate on the issue of gendered rift through the stories of Deeti and Paulette. I argue that Ghosh’s women characters reflect the gendered aspect of eco-material rifts, in which their displacement or near immolation is the outcome of a complex oppressiveness that combines patriarchal control of bodies, colonial repression, and gendered violence.
II. Opium and the East India Company: monoculture plantation, and the rifts of materials and labor

In the *Ibis* trilogy, Ghosh demonstrates how the colonial monoculture of opium by the British leads to discriminatory material rifts, affecting mostly the impoverished, the women, and characters of “lower” castes. Representatives of the British Empire and their local cohorts exploit the strong power of opium as a drug as well as the allurement of its profitable trade to accumulate immense power and capital. They apply various colonizing measures, such as incentivization and coercion, to claim more lands from the local farmers and promote opium monoculture. Through individual stories of characters of different classes, races, and genders, Ghosh exposes how the overall opium cultivation and trade results in the drugging and enslaving of the bodies of the poor, commodification of the poor’s essentials, and displacement of local farmers from their lands. These stories reflect the discriminatory creation of material rifts, in that the massive scale of rifts caused by the transportation of overproduced opium is responsible for the enslavement and displacement of poor farmers and their conversion to indentured labor. Tracing the material rifts in the trilogy also helps to explain how Ghosh’s portrayal of the rise of new bourgeoisie like Bahram Modi and the fall of feudal lords like Raja Neel marks a shift from land-based feudalism to free-floating, free-market mercantile capitalism; the shift is also closely related to the tangible material movements that cause ecological transformation and affect the poor. Ghosh’s individual sketches of disenfranchised characters personalize the history of opium monoculture and trade under the discriminatory British Empire, and the discriminatory material rifts that affect the lives and movements of his characters project the later postcolonial forms of uneven ecological interventions and violence taking shape during the colonial times.
Ghosh highlights how the colonizers and traders exploit opium’s absolute power or agency to easily overcome human resolve against addiction or to overpower the territorial resistance to opium production and trade in various regions of South Asia and China. Ghosh’s depiction of opium’s power reinstates Michael Pollan’s point on the power of marijuana and other drugs which slowly and “ambiguously” intervene in our consciousness with a heightened sense of experience and aestheticism: “One of the things certain drugs do to our perceptions is to distance or estrange the objects around us, aestheticizing the most commonplace things until they appear as ideal versions of themselves.” 5 Pollan’s explication of the power of drugs slowly conquering human consciousness is what explains the way opium wins over the minds of different characters in Ghosh’s novels, although opium’s palliative and addictive effects on people are stronger and less “ambiguous” than that of Marijuana. Opium makes people dependent on the substance almost readily and breaks down the body slowly, and Ghosh’s exploration of opium’s agency and trade in the context of the colonial period in South Asia reveals an even stronger and more far-reaching impact of the substance. The novels demonstrate opium’s comprehensive, all-engrossing agency in various forms, such as plants, seeds, sludge, liquid, and smoke, of which each plays a distinguishable role in supporting the colonization of lands and markets and the enslavement of human bodies. Plants of opium poppies claim vast areas of land including that of Raja Neel; liquid opium, sap, or dried leaves control addicted villagers like Deeti’s husband and their households; the manual production of sludge in the

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5 Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2002) 147. I highlighted the word “ambiguously” to allude to Pollan’s argument that scientists are silent about determining marijuana’s “effects on our experience of consciousness,” although they have “a lot to say about the descent and biochemistry of Cannabis” (158).
factories numbs the bodies of the workers because of their proximity to the substance, and; seeds spread the cultivation of poppy across regions and beyond seas. The characters like Deeti, Hukum Singh and Ah Fatt, traders like Bahram, and a vast Chinese population are regulated by these various effects of opium, thus making the production and trade of opium successful in every region or market that the traders target. In *Flood of Fire*, Zachary reflects that opium’s influential lure and trade can thwart any resistance. He brags that he “had netted a profit of close to a million dollars on this one voyage…[so] it was evident that despite the best efforts of the Chinese government, the hunger for opium was only growing stronger and stronger, especially among the young.”6 Zachary’s success amidst the adverse trade conditions shows that the British colonizers and traders, as well as their local support system in the form of officials, clerks and guards, exploit the strong influence of the substance of opium to their advantage. They drug and control the bodies of the vulnerable population, such as the working-class people and women like Deeti, to cause their eviction, displacement, or transportation, as necessary. This strategy of control by the perpetrators leads to eco-material rifts in the process because they acquire more cultivable lands and increase the supply of cheap labor and exportable poppies.

Ghosh portrays some unique scenes from the inside of opium factories, scenes that reflect how the irresistible success of the opium business owes mainly to opium’s capability to enslave the mind and bodies of people. The use of opium or the proximity of the human body to the cultivation or production of the substance can change the materiality of human bodies so drastically that they hardly seem like human beings at some point. In *Sea of Poppies*, Deeti visits the Sudder Opium Factory in Ghazipur where her husband works, when she comes across the

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horrifying images of workers who are “bare-bodied men, sunk waist-deep in tanks of opium, tramping round and round to soften the sludge.” She almost faints from seeing the vision and smelling the strong fume inside the factory. The workers seem to her like “a host of dark, legless torsos…circling around and around, like some enslaved tribe of demons.” Deeti observes more about the strong influence of opium on the people who work in close proximity to the opium sludge in the factory:

Their eyes were vacant, glazed, and yet somehow they managed to keep moving, as slow as ants in honey, tramping, treading. When they could move no more, they sat on the edges of the tanks, stirring the dark ooze only with their feet. These seated men had more the look of ghouls than any living thing she had ever seen: their eyes glowed red in the dark and they appeared completely naked, their loincloths – if indeed they had any – being so steeped in the drug as to be indistinguishable from their skin. Almost as frightening were the white overseers who were patrolling the walkways – for not only were they coatless and hatless, with their sleeves rolled, but they were also armed with fearsome instruments: metal scoops, glass ladles and long-handled rakes. (87)

We can see how close contact with opium within the factory has made these people appear lifeless or demonic or reduced them to mere body parts. The workers’ bodies are so altered that they do not even need chains to be kept within the bounds of the factory; they don’t have the sense anymore to understand what has happened to them as they keep on performing their duties mechanically. They are “rematerialized,” dispensable, enslaved bodies, bound by the drug

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7 *Sea of Poppies*, 87.
8 *Sea of Poppies*, 87.
instead of chains, an image that speaks of the desensitizing aspect of the trade. Deeti further
witnesses the employment of child labor within the factory, which exemplifies that the ongoing
intervention into the local ecology of labor extends to such an extent that the traders even convert
children into workers. Troops of little boys are employed to examine the balls of opium kept on
shelves to dry, boys who are tortured brutally if they make any mistakes.

The trilogy depicts how the monoculture of opium leads to material rifts that exhaust
certain locations of their essential crops and labor and affect the poor and women characters to a
greater degree than others. The overproduction of opium and the interventions into the ecology
of farming largely sustained the interests of the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent and
beyond. Ghosh portrays opium as an engrossing catalyst for the British Empire’s rise in power
through ruthless policies in the name of “free trade,” which changed the farming landscape of
many parts of South Asia from polyculture, multicropping, and subsistence agriculture to
monoculture plantations and, in effect, dispossessed and displaced the poor. The irreparable
impact of monoculture plantation in South Asia was the replacement of subsistence agriculture
with a single crop and the loss of soil nutrients, an issue that I have discussed through Karl
Marx’s idea of “metabolic rift” in the earlier chapters. Eduardo Galeano in his *Open Veins of
Latin America* discusses that such monocultures are responsible for

the draining-off of natural wealth…Each region, once integrated into the world market,
extperiences a dynamic cycle; then decay sets in with the competition of substitute
products, the exhaustion of the soil, or the development of other areas where conditions
are better. The initial productive drive fades with the passing years into a culture of
poverty...”9
The ecological impact of monoculture plantations is, therefore, deadly in the long term, leading
to loss of land fertility, disruption of the overall ecosystem, and unemployment and displacement
of the working class. Some of Ghosh’s characters from the trilogy, such as Deeti, Kalua, and
many other unnamed characters, show that the effects of monoculture are discriminatory towards
the working class and the women who become dispossessed laborers once their labor utility in
the local area expires. The loss of wealth of the character of a local zamindar, Raja Neel, reflects
that the monoculture affects even the local wealthy in the long run, once the lands of the
powerless farmers have been claimed.

Across his three novels, Ghosh juxtaposes the general representation of opium
overproduction with stories of individual members of the poor farming community, like Deeti,
who suffer the consequences of material rifts caused by monoculture. This juxtaposition shows
how the monoculture increases the revenues of the British Empire and its associated
businesspeople but, in effect, strips the land of its nutrients and usual crops, and deprives the
poor farmers even of their basic needs. In Sea of Poppies, Ghosh portrays the debilitating effects
of opium cultivation on the subsistence of Deeti and other villagers in Ghazipur. The
monoculture of opium has led to the commodification of free materials that the poor often
depend on for their survival. Deeti needs thatch to fix the roof of her hut, but the growing
plantation of opium has made that an impossibility:

The hut’s roof was urgently in need of repairs, but in this age of flowers, thatch was not
easy to come by: in the old days, the fields would be heavy with wheat in the winter, and

after the spring harvest, the straw would be used to repair the damage of the year before. But now, with the sahibs forcing everyone to grow poppy, no one had thatch to spare – it had to be bought at the market, from people who lived in faraway villages, and the expense was such that people put off their repairs as long as they possibly could.¹⁰

The increasing plantation of opium has changed the scene of rural agriculture and interdependent livelihood. What once were easily available materials from fields are now commodities to be bought from the market or other people. In River of Smoke, Ghosh offers an image of the alarming rate at which opium was replacing other crops in India. Charles King, one of the members of the Chamber of Commerce in Canton and an actual historical figure whom Ghosh recreates, writes in his letter to Esquire Charles Elliot that the opium “traffic is the creature of the East India Company, itself the organ of the British government” which in time “has made the provinces of Malwa, Bihar, and Benares the chief localities of the opium cultivation” not just in India, but the whole world.¹¹ He further adds that “vast tracts of land in those districts, formerly occupied with other articles, [are] now covered with poppies,” and this already widespread culture of replacing traditional crops with opium plantations is “still rapidly on the increase.”¹² King’s letter indicates the unprecedented degree of the replacement of traditional crops in Bihar where Deeti’s village is located, and the unavailability of thatch for Deeti exemplifies that the overproduction of opium and the rift of traditional crops cause the commodification of even the cheapest of materials in a rural area.

¹⁰ Sea of Poppies, 26-27.
¹² River of Smoke, 503.
The *Ibis* trilogy demonstrates that the colonizers adopt, and even modify, the strategy of “accumulation by dispossession” to expand the cultivation of poppies, which creates surplus labor and, ultimately, leads to substantial rifts of labor and materials. Ghosh provides examples of how capitalist traders like Burnham coerce and incentivize farmers into poppy cultivation, and these examples help Ghosh sketch the bottomless corruptibility of the system developing alongside the expansion of the trade. The middlemen for the East India Company apply force or offer monetary incentives to farmers in order to accumulate more and more land for poppy cultivation instead of regular crops, and to enlarge their territories for the opium trade. The early pages of *Sea of Poppies* document that the colonizers and their cohorts in the local administration, such as the educated class of clerks and farming agents, apply the age-old combination of coercion and incentivization to force farmers into growing poppies in their lands:

> Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign *asami* contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn’t accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged; he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off.¹³

As Ghosh shows it, the opium industry in South Asia thrived on the corruption of officials and their force on farmers to grow more opium. Farmers were compelled to give up their lands and other means of production and work as laborers for the cultivation of selected crops like poppies that can be exported and commodified. Removal of farmers from the local cycle of farming, as

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¹³ *Sea of Poppies*, 27.
well as the rift of local crops from their land of origin, is the process of “accumulation by dispossession” which, according to David Harvey, creates surplus capital and labor and tradable commodities to be “sent elsewhere to find a fresh terrain for their profitable realization.”\(^\text{14}\)

Harvey refers to the British opium production in India and the trade with China to explain that the creation of a new pool of labor and commodities prompted the British to force open the Chinese market so that the surplus opium could be exchanged for Chinese products or capital. Ghosh’s representation of the ecology of British opium cultivation and trade extends what Harvey observes about accumulation and exportation. The accumulation of the lands of characters like Deeti and Raja Neel leads to the creation of surplus opium and labor which the \textit{Ibis} and other ships transport to Mauritius and China. The surplus labor which is useless in India finds use in the plantations of Mauritius, causing a rift of labor en masse.

Ghosh illustrates how the monoculture of opium poppies allows the traders to not only convert farmers into a pool of cheap labor but also treat them as enslaved bodies and labor ready to be dispersed. \textit{Sea of Poppies} portrays a grim picture of how the colonial accumulation of land for the cultivation of poppy plants has driven farmers out of their lands; they now throng the cities in search of work, some even beg: “Many of these people had been driven from their villages by the flood of flowers that had washed over the countryside: lands that had once provided sustenance were now swamped by the rising tide of poppies.”\(^\text{15}\) Also, the pool of workforce that is created in one place is transported to other monoculture plantations that are in


\(^{15}\) \textit{Sea of Poppies}, 187.
need of more laborers. The formation and treatment of indentured laborers resemble the old institution of slavery because the musclemen and the system of the capitalist empire treat them like slaves who are bound by bonds and beaten for no reasons. Nandini Dhar observes:

the Indian peasant-turned-indentured laborer faced a reality of choicelessness which, although not equivalent to the forced abduction of the African slave, must nonetheless be studied alongside it—within an overarching framework of the epistemic and structural-material violences of the global machinery of a nineteenth-century imperialist-capitalism, which included but was not limited to the institution of plantation slavery.16

Dhar’s point on the choicelessness of the indentured workers explains the condition of a group of laborers whom Deeti witnesses in her village. Evicted from their farmlands, this group is now about to be shipped off to Mauritius because they have no other option but to move to other plantations where they can work. The contract they sign yields them little money and a one-way journey: “The silver that was paid for them went to their families, and they were taken away never to be seen again: they vanished, as if into the netherworld.”17 Deeti readily empathizes with their fate that they would never be able to come back home, hardly knowing that she would join them soon. The journey of this workforce is a “terminal departure characterized by an absolute break from the homeland,” and their traffic also means a painful severing from their

16 Nandini Dhar, “Shadows of Slavery, Discourses of Choice, and Indian Indentureship in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies,” Ariel 48, no. 1 (2017): 3. Dhar emphasizes that Indian peasants during the colonial times were forced to accept indenture due to their lack of choices. Although the peasants were not physically dragged onto the ship like slaves of earlier times, they didn’t have choices to stay back once their lands were taken away or their options to work on other farmers’ fields were blocked.

17 Sea of Poppies, 66.
location because these peasants are “girded firmly to the soil on which they labored.”\textsuperscript{18} Settling elsewhere, therefore, is a tormenting experience for them because the rift is comparable to the evisceration of human bodies from their oneness with the land.

Ghosh’s portrayal of the dislocation of Raja Neel Rattan Halder shows how the imperial agents like Mr. Burnham improvise the strategy of “primitive accumulation” to acquire entire estates for opium cultivation, an act that transforms Raja’s property from subsistence agriculture to monoculture. Raja Neel bears similarity with an actual Raja from Bengal during the colonial period, and his story in \textit{Sea of Poppies} demonstrates how Mr. Burnham acquires his property through an improvised version of the strategy of “primitive accumulation.”\textsuperscript{19} In his works, Karl Marx explains “primitive accumulation” as a process of capital accumulation through the forcible expulsion of farmers and owners from their land and resources. This mode of accumulation, according to David Harvey, has developed into such a complex process through the colonial periods and after, that it is no longer “primitive” but is an evolving strategy that exploits modern systems of the market, scopes for commodification, and legal matters.\textsuperscript{20} In the case of Raja Neel’s dispossession, we see a combination of the “primitive” forcible displacement


\textsuperscript{19} Karl Marx, \textit{Capital}, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1992) 873. Marx calls “primitive accumulation” the original sin of political economy because it deprives the laboring class the fruits of their own labor by dispossessing them from their land and turning them into saleable (labor) commodities in the market.

\textsuperscript{20} Harvey, 85. Harvey proposes to substitute Marx’s classical term of “primitive accumulation” with his formulation of “accumulation by dispossession.”
and a more recent way of “framing” him through legal matters. Neel’s father, the earlier Raja, invests money in Burnham’s business although he knows nothing much about the type of work Burnham does because he considers it an unlordly job. Burnham respects Raja’s intelligence and power, so he always returns him profit. After the old Raja dies, Burnham starts to deceive Neel who later finds out about their debts to many other merchants. Most startling is the discovery that the value of their entire zamindary is not enough to pay off the debts to Burnham Bros. Neel doesn’t agree to hand over his lands to Burnham because that would ruin the cultivators of different crops in his lands and the holders of other establishments, such as his family’s temple. In the events that follow, Burnham frames Neel with a case of forgery and the judge sentences him “to be transported to the penal settlement on the Mauritius Islands for a period of no less than seven years.”21 Burnham’s main intent is to capture Neel’s land to increase poppy fields by replacing the usual farming and fishing. Neel’s story also shows that the Company’s coerciveness in increasing poppy cultivation extended from poor farmers to even powerful landlords.

The strategies of coercion and accumulation sustain the capitalist empire, and Ghosh’s individual characters rising and falling in fortune demonstrate how the rifts and flow of opium, labor, as well as capital also enable a shift from feudalism and subsistence agriculture to mercantile capitalism or capitalist free trade. Just the way the East India Company’s expansion of opium production is responsible for Raja Neel’s eviction in the trilogy, the Company also promotes local traders like Bahram Modi to expand the jurisdiction of the opium trade. The replacement of feudal lords like Neel with opium merchants like Bahram Modi from Bombay

21 *Sea of Poppies*, 222.
marks the rise of free trade that strengthened the British capitalist and imperialist grip in South Asia and China. At the beginning of *River of Smoke*, Bahram secretly carries chests of opium in his ship, and his ability to mix regular trading with opium smuggling has made him almost unrivaled: “rare was the Indian merchant who could boast of travelling to Canton more than three or four times – but Bahram had made the journey fifteen times in the course of his career.”22 His achievements have made his father-in-law’s trading company, called Mistrie Brothers, one of the largest in Bombay. The idea of the opium trade at first disgusts his father-in-law Seth Rustamjee Pestonjee Mistrie, a business owner of Parsi Origin, who considers the overseas trading of opium as loathsome gambling. But Bahram argues that products like opium have changed the composure of the market and that they should deal in it to stay in the race:

> Today the biggest profits don’t come from selling useful things: quite the opposite. The profits come from selling things that are not of any real use…Opium is just like that. It is completely useless unless you’re sick, but still people want it. And it is such a thing that once people start using it they can’t stop; the market just gets larger and larger. That is why the British are trying to take over the trade and keep it to themselves.23

When the old Seth suffers from paralysis, Bahram buys the export division of their company from his brothers-in-law and invests all his capital in a consignment to China. The change in the trend of business, which now exports materials overseas, promotes Bahram and removes others like Neel. The material flow is a needed outcome of the policies taken up by the East India Company to increase its profit by expanding the market, and the process replaces the old modes

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22 *River of Smoke*, 42.
23 *River of Smoke*, 48.
of farming and businesses controlled by the likes of Seth and Neel. The gradual increase of material rifts and the associated change in the trade system help us understand how the tangible material rifts during the colonial period led to the later forms of ecological interventions and violence, as well as more mobility and rifts, during the more advanced capitalist, postcolonial times.

III. Hierarchical material rifts, and the “rounded” representation of history

The *Ibis* Trilogy offers a literary reconstruction of the time of the colonial opium trade from the perspectives of diverse characters that range from colonial administrators and local lords to characters of mixed race and indentured women workers. In contrast to the objective, impersonal historical accounts of the opium cultivation and trade of South Asia that we often come across, Ghosh’s historical fiction reimagines the time, trade and politics from inclusive, pluralist perspectives offered by his miscellaneous characters. Ghosh relies on archival research for his representation of the poppy cultivation in South Asia and the accounts of the opium trade along the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea during the 1830s. He acknowledges his “great debt to many nineteenth-century scholars, dictionarists, linguists and chroniclers” whose works have helped him in his representation of such a dense history of the time and his creation of a cast of wide cultural and linguistic varieties.\(^\text{24}\) Ghosh directly uses, as well as recreates, some of the actual, historical characters, along with the fictional ones. Some of the European traders of the Chamber of Commerce in Canton are actual historical figures. The real-life misfortunes of a

\(^{24}\) *Sea of Poppies*, 469. In the entry of “acknowledgements,” Ghosh also admits that it is almost impossible to provide the extensive list of works that have shaped his knowledge of the period.
Bengali zamindar inspire the story of Raja Neel Rattan Halder, and there is evidence that the character of Benjamin Burnham had a real-life counterpart. Ghosh calls this his “effort to re-create [the] roundedness of experience that makes historical form a distinctive ‘mode of enquiry.’”\textsuperscript{25} For this “roundedness” of representation, Ghosh creates narrative tensions by offering contrary perspectives of different characters or quarters on the same issue. If the imperial agents and traders in Ghosh’s novels attempt to normalize the violent expansion of opium cultivation and trade and hide their corruptibility on the one hand, his subaltern characters, on the other hand, expose the corruption, discrimination, and violence implicit within the policies taken up by the colonizers. Such dialectical opposition of perspectives helps Ghosh illustrate the various modes of hierarchy and discrimination, such as domination of women’s bodies and prioritization of racial identities, which remain ingrained within the material rifts that sustain the opium trade and replicate the hierarchical order and values of colonization. The trilogy portrays that the privileged capitalists like Mr. Burnham and Zachary Reid benefit from the hierarchies of race, class, caste and gender embedded in the overall system of poppy cultivation, whereas working-class women like Deeti narrowly escape demolition. Ghosh also portrays how the discriminatory and hierarchical practices change people’s characteristics and turn them into ruthless proponents and practitioners of the imperial trade.

The portrayal of the character of Benjamin Burnham in the trilogy serves as a perfect example of the traders who are trained by the East India Company (EIC) to forward the ideology and interests of the British Empire in South Asia. His character embodies the ruthlessness of the

EIC and its racist principles. The son of a timber merchant from Liverpool, Burnham receives “his articles of indenture as a free merchant” from the Company in 1817 which gives him the opportunity to deal in the “two things to be exported from Calcutta: thugs and drugs – or opium and coolies as some would have it.” Soon he starts to ship Indian prisoners to British Empire’s penal colonies including Mauritius and makes a great amount of capital that he invests in the opium trade. His character reflects how the imperial trade of opium transforms some people into ruthless, racist traders who further promote corruption and ideas of white supremacy to expand the trade. Burnham expresses his ideology when he defines the idea of human freedom to Zachary as “what the mastery of white men means for the lesser races.” He utters this ideology to justify the slave trade in Africa and his intended free trade of opium in China. Ghosh shows how the individual acts of corruption, such as Burnham’s, are part of the larger corrupt system integrated by the EIC, which itself has become a symbol of corruption. The involvement of the East India Company in the usual, as well as illegal, trade of opium reaches to an extent that it earns the name of “the father of all smuggling and smugglers.”

Burnham’s character not only exemplifies how the British promote the hypocritical idea of their racial superiority, but he also tries to justify why the “superior” race can force their rights to spread free trade and drug addiction in other lands. Some of the characters including Mr. Burnham promote a certain narrative of the free trade that backs up the British Empire’s illegal means and extreme measures like warfare to safeguard the trade of opium. Such narrative constructs the so-called free trade as the exercise of a divine right that celebrates the freedom of

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26 *Sea of Poppies*, 70.
27 *Sea of Poppies*, 73.
28 *River of Smoke*, 379.
people offered by the “superior” race, which is the British. In *Sea of Poppies*, Mr. Burnham explains to Raja Neel why the possible declaration of war on China by the British Empire would not be for opium but for upholding the sanctity of free trade:

> The war, when it comes, will not be for opium. It will be for a principle: for freedom – for the freedom of trade and for the freedom of the Chinese people. Free Trade is a right conferred on Man by God, and its principles apply as much to opium as to any other article of trade. More so perhaps, since in its absence many millions of natives would be denied the lasting advantages of British influence.\(^{29}\)

Burnham’s perspective reflects that the British would go to any extent to protect their economic interests and political outreach. His justification of war also has an interesting, paradoxical rationale that claims the need to liberate the very Chinese people from an oppressive regime that denies its people the “religions” right of trading and enjoying opium. To strengthen his narrative, Mr. Burnham stresses the medicinal values of opium and ascribes the chance of addiction to the fallen nature of people, for which opium itself is not responsible. What exposes the hypocritical side of the free trade narrative is that the creed of free trade is not followed by the British in their own country. Raja Neel informs Bahram Modi that the Chinese now understand that “in their own countries, the Europeans are very strict about limiting its circulation…sell[ing] the drug freely only when they travel east, and to those people whose lands they covet.”\(^{30}\) Ghosh, thus, draws the character of Burnham to elaborate how the imperial agents circulate the idea of racial

\(^{29}\) *Sea of Poppies*, 106.

\(^{30}\) *River of Smoke*, 215.
superiority to spread drug addiction, overpower other peoples, and control their economy and politics.

The trilogy incorporates different characters’ standpoints for and against the imperial “free trade” of opium, which indicates that the corruption and greed of people have made the trade more powerful than even empires. Ghosh represents some Chinese administrators and a very few upright members of the Canton Chamber of Commerce as the moralists who question the unregulated operation and the unflagging optimism of the opium trade that the traders of the East India Company promote. Some company representatives practice the common imperial practice of branding certain rulers as “oppressive,” rulers who often try to protect the interests of their people by opposing imperial interventions. *River of Smoke* shows how the colonizers frame their story of labeling local rulers as tyrants so that they can apply force to keep their market open and justify the application of their force. At a gathering of the members of Canton’s General Chamber of Commerce, Lancelot Dent offers such a narrative to Bahram in which he defines the Chinese Emperor Machu as a tyrant:

> It should come as no surprise that the Grand Manchu has decided to demonstrate his omnipotence by prohibiting the entry of opium into this country. It is in the nature of tyranny for tyrants to be seized by fancies, and it is clear that this one will stop at nothing to enforce his whim: arrests, raids, executions, – the monster is willing to use every instrument of oppression that is available to him.  

However, Zadig Bey, another businessman whom Bahram closely knows, offers a counternarrative of Chinese leniency, that “the Chinese have always been very careful in dealing

\[31 \textit{River of Smoke}, 225.\]
with us foreigners: they’ve avoided confrontation and violence to a degree that is hard to imagine in any other country.”

At another meeting of the merchants, Mr. Burnham tells Bahram about the helplessness of the Chinese government in fighting the British military and capital might invested in the free trade of opium: “I am quite confident that the attempts to ban opium will wither in the face of growing demand. It is not within the mandarins’ power to withstand the elemental forces of free trade.”

Dent also informs that the traders would not be able to smuggle opium to Canton without the help of “local allies – everyone is paid off on the way, the customs men, the mandarins, everyone.” The corruption and involvement of the local Chinese officials show that the collaboration of capitalists with local associates can always manage to make the borders of a country porous for the smuggling of opium and the development of free trade.

The intensification of eco-materials rifts by the East India Company’s opium cultivation and trade leads to a new system of decentralized capitalist market, and the trilogy portrays this rising system as indifferent and dehumanizing which ensures profit by dispensing with even the very people who promote it. The rise of Bahram Modi as a free trader, followed by the ruin of his business and his ultimate death, exemplifies the policies of ruthlessness and racial discrimination implicit within the trade of opium. *River of Smoke* portrays that the merchants of the British East India Company not only cause widespread drug addiction in China but also refuse to obey the restrictions as well as the ultimatums given by the Chinese authority in Canton, leading to warfare that exposes another ugly truth of the trade that the non-European traders are dispensable. The Chinese authorities gradually crack down on the smugglers and

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32 *River of Smoke*, 189.
33 *River of Smoke*, 377.
34 *River of Smoke*, 229.
traders, and High Commissioner Lin demands the surrender of all opium in the ships of the foreign traders in Canton if they want to escape. The British soldiers and traders feel that the profits from the trade with China far outweigh the gains from war, so they decide to wait till they are repaid for the loss incurred due to the seizure. Bahram is distraught at this because he hardly has time to make his investors wait, and he also learns that the Chamber might sacrifice Indian traders like him to the demands of the Chinese who would not dare punish any British citizens. The British traders and their Chamber in Canton support Bahram for as long as they can afford, but they also withdraw their support to safeguard only their own interests when the Chinese authorities crack down on opium smuggling. These worries ultimately lead to Bahram’s late opium addiction, poor health, and death. Ghosh represents the character of Bahram Modi both as a pioneer of mercantilism and also as a victim of free trade; the East India Company first exploits traders like Bahram to develop the routes and structure of opium trade and then dispenses with them when they are no longer necessary. Bahram’s case also shows the racial discrimination practiced by the imperial agents who protect the white traders at the expense of other traders.

Ghosh demonstrates that the ruthless and racist ideologies of free trade create a vicious cycle, in which the proponents of such ideologies cultivate more and more amoral traders who sacrifice their virtues to corrupt means that yield them profit. The experienced practitioners of the trade like Mr. Burnham represent the ruthlessness of the trade as divine rights to the newcomers like Zachary Reid, creating a split between their kind, softer human traits and their corrupt engagement in the trade that summons a different set of traits including cruelty, racism, and deceit. Ghosh’s portrayal of Zachary Reid reflects how a likable youth learns to hide his racial identity and capitalize on the norms of the opium trade that promote racial hierarchy. Zachary, who in the beginning does not believe that “slavery is freedom,” ultimately gives into
the amoral free trade policies of Burnham and the East India Company and turns out to be more exploitative than even Burnham. Unlike the case of Kalua whose “lowly” complexion, class, and caste cause his displacement and victimize him to prejudices and torture, Zachary successfully hides his “quadroon” identity to pass for a white male and gain favors from others. On the *Ibis* he earns the respect of coolies and lascars including Serang Ali, the leader of the lascars, who shows him great honor from the beginning and teaches him to dress like a respectable sahib. Besides, Zachary’s dominant traits of good faith and sympathetic nature earn him the support of powerful people everywhere he goes. However, he begins to prioritize his own interests and tolerates a lot of violence against the coolies and convicts on the ship. Kesi Augustine explains this dichotomy in Zachary’s character as his adopted behavior to pass for a white superior being who “must continue to degrade the ship’s laborers, especially under the watch of his racist ship owner Ben Burnham and the first mate Mr. Crowle.” This racist strategy of tolerance helps Zachary win the favors of those in control of the ships and the trade, whose good reports even clear his name from the trial on the commotions and killings on the *Ibis*.

The paradoxical sanctification of the free trade, which approves the goal of end profit by any corrupt means whatsoever, motivates the new recruits like Zachary to sacrifice their virtues and even resort to acts like blackmailing others. Zachary’s greatest opportunity comes with a new realization when he starts to gain sexual favors from Mrs. Burnham: “She had opened a

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35 *Sea of Poppies*, 73.

window into a world of wealth and luxury where the finest and most voluptuous pleasures were those that were stolen.”

His ambitions and newly-conceived realization about life, that he doesn’t want to stay as “one of the deserving poor any more,” prompts him to join the opium trade. Baboo Nob Kissin, a clerk of Mr. Burnham to whom Zachary goes for some advice, realizes that Zachary is “in his mission of unshackling the demon of greed that lurks in every human heart” and so tells him that “opium is the solution.” With Baboo’s guidance, he invests his money in the Opium Exchange to buy chests of opium at auctions in Calcutta and sell them abroad to make profits. He is also initiated into the creed of free trade by Mr. Burnham who predicts that China’s resolve to stop the opium trade will not be much of a threat to their business since the British Royal Navy’s warships will protect their interests and they will be able to sell their drugs offshore, creating new business zones and making unprecedented profits. Zachary’s switching of the profession from an employee on a ship to a trader of opium causes drastic changes in his personality as well. He starts to promote his trade by blackmailing Captain Mee, commander of the British sepoys on the Ibis, and Mrs. Burnham with his knowledge of their earlier relationship. Zachary also takes advantage of Burnham’s fondness for him by pressing demands to be his partner. Zachary’s character, thus, helps Ghosh show how people slowly transform into depraved traders of opium.

Ghosh’s portrayal of the ship Ibis renders a microcosmic image of the violence and eco-material rifts caused by the colonizers, in which the crew, laborers, and the convicts reflect the hierarchies and discrimination within the opium trade. The ship carries an assortment of

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37 *Flood of Fire*, 249.

38 *Flood of Fire*, 258.

39 *Flood of Fire*, 258.
displaced, surplus materials and indentured laborers, now needed elsewhere. The *Ibis* duplicates the hierarchies of the overall colonial trade of opium: the Captain is a white British and the most privileged one on board, and the most unfortunate ones are the subaltern coolies, women and convicts who are being shipped off to other plantations and penal colonies. Although the oppressed group enjoys their moments of freedom and ultimately put up their resistance in the end, their journey on the *Ibis* is generally much harder than the officers who treat the subaltern group as slaves. We come to learn that the *Ibis* has switched its operations from trading slaves to transporting laborers, opium, and convicts, which is a readjustment from the old mode of transporting slaves to the new mode of transporting surplus materials and labor. Maintaining the hierarchical order of people on board the *Ibis* is as important as it is for the empire, which is evident from the words of the white Captain of the ship, Mr. Chillingworth. He reminds his mates about the importance of punishing Kalua who has run away with Deeti, an upper-caste widow: “The day the natives lose faith is us, as the guarantors of the order of castes – that will be the day, gentlemen, that will doom our rule.” The convicts on the ship are treated more cruelly, like a herd of oxen; Bhyro Singh, the subedar in charge of them, “would loop their chains around their necks, in such a way that they were forced to stoop as they walked.” Bhyro also treats Raja Neel as “misbegotten, befouled” because “he was a fallen outcaste” who has lost his title as a zamindar and disgraced himself. The food and water given to the convicts and coolies are minimum, which keeps them starved and weak. They often fall sick, and they recover so slowly that it demoralizes others about the unpredictable nature of the voyage. The women are allotted

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40 *Sea of Poppies*, 442.
41 *Sea of Poppies*, 352.
42 *Sea of Poppies*, 353.
the damp, cramped places on the Ibis, and “would be expected to perform certain menial duties for the officers, guards and overseers.” And they must always remain veiled. The restricted, subservient condition of the women reflects their alienation and insignificance on the ship.

Just like the material influence of opium, the allurement of serving as a sepoy or soldier with the East India Company is another “drug” that can cause the rift of body and identity from its original place, and Ghosh draws the character of Havildar Kesri Sing, Deeti’s brother, as a perfect example of that. Kesri’s transformation into a “true” company soldier demonstrates how sartorial hegemony, as well as the hierarchical conceptualization of the body in which the uniformed body dominates the natural, can transform people’s traits as well. Like most other young men in his village, Kesri dreams of joining the force, and he is held in high esteem once he is selected as a soldier. However, the transformation from a recruit to a soldier takes the hardest of trainings that even include terrible beatings and insults from Subedar Bhyro Singh, the leader of the troop of Kesri Singh and others. Bhyro renders the impression that the sepoys must shred their untrimmed heroism and be trained as company soldiers: “The entire army is like one man, one body, obeying a single head; every Company sepoy has to learn this by doing drills.”

This training towards the construction of a new “body” includes a change of dress code. Kesri and others must give up wearing string-tied loincloths under their uniforms and learn to wear underpants. The hegemonic training and clothing remove the body from its origin and bonds to such an extent that Kesri finds “the galis of the village he had grown up in…chaotic and dirty” and he finds “the oppressive hierarchies of military rank…more bearable.” It is rather the

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43 *Sea of Poppies*, 349.
44 *Flood of Fire*, 71.
45 *Flood of Fire*, 127.
uniform of the Company sepoy, than the natural body, that begins to define Kesri and his sense of belonging.

IV. Deeti, sati, and the female body: gendered rift, and the patriarchal imposition of voluntariness

The *Ibis* Trilogy portrays the characters of Deeti, Paulette, and some other South Asian women as instances of women’s bodies that are oppressed directly or indirectly as part of the hierarchical control within the British Empire’s opium industry. Deeti and other women are subjected to a type of gendered rift, which reflects the gendered aspect of eco-material rifts and is a complex oppressiveness in which patriarchy, colonization, and gendered violence combine to claim authority over women’s body and their displacement. The representatives of the patriarchal and caste-based societies of India, whom the agents of the British East India Company empower for their benefit, decide Deeti’s fate from the very beginning of her marriage to an opium addict. Her near-death experience of embracing sati, the old Indian custom of the immolation of a widow on her husband’s funeral pyre, is an example of the helplessness of women like her who are offered extreme choices of violence on their bodies, and the influence of opium and its trade is deeply ingrained in the whole process. The dispersal of these women from their roots, in other words, the control and extraction of the female body, results from the endorsement of gendered violence within the dominant patriarchal and capitalist ideologies that promote the imperial opium trade. Stacy Alaimo puts forward the idea of “trans-corporeality of the body” and argues that “the biological body” cannot be understood in isolation from “its evolutionary, historical,
Deeti’s story in Sea of Poppies renders a strange, gendered aspect of opium cultivation that binds a woman’s body to choices of violent fate. We can call Deeti’s decision to embrace self-immolation an “imposition of voluntariness” on her. It is so because the patriarchal, religious practice of women’s subservient existence, which benefits the opium production, also forces her to choose sati. The British along with the local reformers played a pivotal role in enacting a legal ban in 1829 on the horrific practice of sati in India. However, the colonizers continued to exploit the practice of sati to discriminate against women and control their bodies, just the way they perpetrated other inequitable treatments of race, class, and caste for the sake of their political and capitalist interests. At the onset of her marriage to Hukum Singh who works at the local opium factory, Deeti learns that opium is his “first wife” and that opium addiction has

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46 Stacy Alaimo, “Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of nature,” Material Feminisms, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) 238. Alaimo also notes that the formulation of the female body is predicated on the binary of nature and culture, so there is a tendency of viewing the materiality of the body as excluded from the materiality of the world.
made him infertile.\textsuperscript{47} In the subsequent events, Deeti is drugged and then impregnated by her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh, with the consent of her mother-in-law who wants an heir. Deeti’s rape is a coordinated instance of violence by a few quarters: the effect of opium sedating her, an exercise of patriarchal violence by Chandan Singh, and the consent of local matriarchy that considers the birth of a child more important for their family than a woman’s right to her own body. Deeti soon learns of their extreme debt incurred from the loans her husband took for the cultivation of poppies, and Chandan makes repeated sexual advances to Deeti and tries to convince her that her only option is to have a son with him so that the property passes on to the son after her husband dies. Deeti realizes her helpless situation but also feels that her body would rather prefer to burn in a fire than surrender to the more loathsome option that the patriarchy offers: “by this time her loathing of her brother-in-law had reached such a pitch that she knew she would not be able to make her own body obey the terms of the bargain, even if she were to accede to it.”\textsuperscript{48} Barnali Sarkar aptly argues that it is the patriarchal order of the society, “which religion and imperialist patriarchy have instilled into” men like Chandan Singh, that pushes Deeti to consider self-immolation as her best choice.\textsuperscript{49} The colonial opium traders clearly benefited from the helplessness of women like Deeti who were forced to give up their lands, and the

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Sea of Poppies}, 31.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Sea of Poppies}, 145.
\textsuperscript{49} Barnali Sarkar, “Murderous Ritual versus Devotional Custom: The Rhetoric and Ritual of Sati and Women’s Subjectivity in Amitav Ghosh’s \textit{Sea of Poppies},” \textit{Humanities} 3, no. 3 (September 2014): 289. Sarkar argues that Ghosh adds a subjective perspective to the often polarized views of sati, those of the self-sacrifice of a virtuous, religious widow and the act of sati as a murderous custom. Ghosh rather represents how patriarchy, which feeds the idea of the raped body of a woman as unholy, forces a woman like Deeti towards this choice.
imperial concessions to sati upholding the religious image of virtuous women helped the process. Ghosh demonstrates that Deeti’s fate is integrally tied to the patriarchy and hierarchy within the colonial cultivation of opium, which imposes on her the voluntary choice of self-immolation.

Deeti’s rescue by an “untouchable” man and her subsequent union with him in *Sea of Poppies* allows Ghosh to offer an interesting shift from the imposition of sati on the body of women to a natural, “earthly” idea of body that defies the imposition. The relationship between an upper-caste woman and a lower-caste man counteracts the impending violence imposed by the artificial orders of society. The narrative of the novel offers a detailed description of the preparations taken for the imminent burning of Deeti’s body which has been intoxicated with more than a usual amount of opium. The pyre is made with “a great mount of wood” and “not only was it far larger than was necessary for the cremation of a single man, it was surrounded by a profusion of offerings and objects, as if it were being readied for some larger purpose.”50 Kalua sees her from a distance as she is being carried to the pyre: “she was slumped over, barely upright: she would not have been able to stand on her own feet.”51 She is “half dragged and half carried” to the pyre and “made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband’s corpse,” followed by “an outbreak of chanting as heaps of kindling were piled around her, and doused with ghee and oil to ready them for the fire.”52 Kalua rescues Deeti by intervening in the process, taking the crowd by surprise and using his immense strength to whirl the whole platform at the crowd to keep them at bay and then rushing away with Deeti towards the river. Away from the village, their mutual love for each other surfaces and they crave warmth from each other’s bodies. Deeti

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50 *Sea of Poppies*, 161.
51 *Sea of Poppies*, 162.
52 *Sea of Poppies*, 162.
makes a little ritual of their marriage before “she crept into his arms again and was swept into the embracing warmth of his body, as wide and sheltering as the dark earth.” The narrative equates Kalua’s body with the protective earth, which indirectly implicates the artificial orders of the society that subject the bodies of Deeti and Kalua to torture and humiliation.

The union of the bodies of an upper-caste widow and a lower-caste man helps Ghosh not only stage a defiance of the age-old customs but also expose instances of racial and gender violence that the opium industry has perpetuated. Deeti becomes a total outcast when she escapes from the village with Kalua, a low-caste oxcart driver whose complexion has earned him the name Kalua, meaning “Blackie.” His complexion and caste yield him hatred and torture everywhere he goes. The union of Deeti and Kalua, thus, is a scandalous union of an upper-caste widow and an “untouchable” Dalit man and so, they board the *Ibis* not only to cling to each other for their survival but also to escape the wrath of patriarchy that chases them even on the ship. Deeti boards the *Ibis* as an indentured laborer mainly to stay alive: “She embraces indenture not out of any positive feelings of identity, affiliation, adventure, or achievement but because it represents the best of the worst possible choices: concubinage, sati (immolation on her husband’s pyre), or death by starvation. Indeed, Deeti’s embrace of indenture is a manifestation of her ultimate choicelessness in life, which has as much to do with the operations of colonial political economy as with those of caste and gender.” Deeti herself asserts that opium is no less responsible than the prejudices of caste and gender for causing their displacement. On the *Ibis*, she accidentally finds a poppy seed under her thumbnail and realizes “that it was not the planet

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53 *Sea of Poppies*, 165.

above that governed her life: it was this minuscule orb – at once beautiful and all-devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful. This was her Shani, her Saturn.”

River of Smoke begins with an elderly Deeti risen to the position of the matriarch of a clan in Mauritius called the Colvers, but the novel also offers a glimpse of the continuation of her struggles as she serves out her term as an indentured coolie on the island. Kalua becomes Maddow Colver as he converts to Christianity, a common practice that is seen even today in South Asia as the Dalit people often change religion to evade the discrimination and oppression of the hierarchical caste system.

Ghosh’s portrayal of Deeti’s story not only exposes the misogynistic ideology of opium traders but also shows how a member of the oppressed can rescue a woman by challenging the hierarchical order. Through this, Ghosh imagines a bond of empathy across the members of the downtrodden and counters the image of saviors that the colonizers often assume for themselves. Barnali Sarkar critiques the incident of Deeti’s impending sati in the light of Gayatri Spivak’s explication of the British role in abolishing the custom. According to Sarkar, Spivak explores the “misogynistic ideology knitted into the fabric of Indian society” that represented sati of women as just an extreme religious ritual that the Indian society nurtured; Spivak argues that people do not grasp the role of the local patriarchy and the British complacency implicit in the custom. Spivak notes that the British are often credited for abolishing the rite as part of their civilizing

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55 Sea of Poppies, 415.

56 Sarkar, 286.
mission, which implies “[w]hite men saving brown women from brown men.” Sarkar goes even a bit further to argue that Deeti’s rescue is more of “the saving of a ‘brown woman’ from the fire by a ‘brown [native] man’ in the context of Spivak’s disquisition on the West’s perception of the abolition of the practice of sati.” Deeti’s story, thus, exposes a deceitful gap between what the British civilizers preach through law and what they practice for their selfish gains. We do not see the appearance of any of the representatives of the East India Company to save Deeti although her decision to embrace sati has already created a lot of stir in the region; we rather see Kalua, whose status in the society is even lower than that of the common “brown men,” going to great lengths to rescue her.

The trilogy reveals how the patriarchal stakeholders of the opium industry oppress women irrespective of their class and racial identity. Ghosh sketches the character of Paulette as opposite to that of Deeti to the extent that Paulette’s oppression happens in the guise of protection within the patriarchal, white supremacist atmosphere of the colonies. Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” argues that the usual interpretations of practices and customs like sati do not include “the testimony of the women’s voice-consciousness;” such interpretations hardly consider that women may perceive the patriarchal authorities, be it the British or the local elites, as oppressive because they treat women “as object of protection.” If we juxtapose Deeti’s story with that of Paulette in the trilogy, we can see how these two women

58 Sarkar, 290.
59 Spivak, 297, 299.
consider themselves oppressed under the same logic of British colonial rule that pushes Deeti to sati but apparently protects Paulette, the orphaned daughter of a French botanist. However, Deeti and Paulette ultimately embrace the same fate of a drifting life. Mr. Burnham is indirectly responsible for Deeti’s fate because of his involvement in the growing poppy cultivation in Deeti’s village; it is again Mr. Burnham who takes Paulette into his household before he completely subdues her with his strict, patriarchal control. Paulette’s father’s words explain why her body, separated from its natural setting and thrown into the center of the Empire’s dirty business in Calcutta, is under the threat of demolition: “If she remains here, in the colonies, most particularly in a city like this, where Europe hides its shame and its greed, all that awaits her is degradation: the whites of this town will tear her apart, like vultures and foxes, fighting over a corpse. She will be an innocent thrown before the money-changers who pass themselves off as men of God.”60 Paulette offers more information on how the men around her have always exercised control. Her father first brings her into his world of plants, and then the Burnhams set her inside their palatial house as a mere showpiece and train her in their own values and lifestyle of an aristocratic household. She is trained to be an ideal, white lady so she can be married off to a wealthy gentleman—an arrangement that she loathes.

Paulette’s escape from her subjugation resonates with both her displacement as well as freedom. She becomes part of the materials and labor rifted from their origin and transported by the Ibis. But the escape also becomes her choice for freedom and evidence that she perceives the oppressiveness of the male world in the same way as Deeti does because, just like Deeti, she disguises as an indentured, elderly coolie to board the Ibis and flee from male domination. The

60 Sea of Poppies, 125-26.
voyage in *Sea of Poppies* takes Paulette through the familiar vegetation of the Sundarbans along the Bay of Bengal which brings back her memories of accompanying her father in his work and learning about plants and trees. She now feels that she has been uprooted, almost as if she was a plant herself: “Now, watching the familiar foliage slip by, Paulette’s eyes filled with tears: these were more than plants to her, they were the companions of her earliest childhood and their shoots seemed almost to be her own, plunged deep into this soil.”61 In *River of Smoke*, Ghosh shows Paulette getting an opportunity to board the ship *Redruth* and go from Mauritius to China to assist Mr. Penrose, her father’s acquaintance, in collecting plants. Her preference for displacement over the comforts of the Burnham household reflects the severity of her oppressed condition and also validates Spivak’s insistence on women’s own perspectives and consciousness for a proper understanding of the nature and severity of their subjugation.

**V. Conclusion**

In the *Ibis* Trilogy, Ghosh attempts a multifaceted representation of how the colonial opium cultivation and trade in South Asia caused a massive amount of material rifts that completely transformed the ecology of local farming and plantations and instituted a discriminatory capitalist system of trade. Ghosh sketches the lives of a diverse cast of characters to show that the colonial production of opium increased the revenues and power of the British Empire at the expense of individual people who were evicted from their lands and turned into exportable, cheap labor. In addition, Ghosh weaves a complex narrative of how the political, economic, and social implications of dislocation, indenture, and exile reconstituted individual

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61 *Sea of Poppies*, 350.
lives in diverse ways, ranging from the creation of forced labor to that of framed convicts. Pitted against the life-altering mechanisms of the British colonizers are the bonds that the oppressed characters create on the *Ibis* and other ships; these ships serve as vehicles for passages as they also offer a space for the diverse characters to collaborate, resist different modes of oppression, and forge new dreams and identities. Rudrani Gangopadhyay rightly observes that the ship *Ibis* is “home to as colorful and disparate a group as the British Empire can muster, and an unlikely dynasty is born of it, spanning continents, races, and generations.”

The *Ibis* becomes a microcosm of a future new world, with a multicultural crew of different classes and genders from various locations forming new alliances on the waters of the Indian Ocean, supposedly free from the extremities of the laws of the land. This ship allows Deeti and Kalua to stay together and form their own “natural” family, in contrast to Deeti’s earlier family on the land which itself has exercised the worst oppression on her body. It is also on the ship that Kalua, Raja Neel, and others revolt against the hierarchical order and flee in search of new places like Mauritius which finally allow them to break the shackles of class and gender discrimination. The movement of Ghosh’s characters, therefore, also forges a connection between the local and the global: Ghosh’s reconstruction of the past indicates that the violence against people and environments on a global scale today grows from the past colonial oppressions.

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62 Rudrani Gangopadhyay, “Finding Oneself on Board the *Ibis* in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1-2 (2017): 59. Gangopadhyay views that the diverse crew on the *Ibis* are set off to a new beginning since their rootlessness will force them to forge new destinations and identities for themselves. She also extends that these characters on the vast watery world of ocean now strive to achieve their identity and a sense of belonging which the land has snatched from them.
Chapter 3

Return of Toxicity and Deformation of the Human Body: Disaster as Eco-material rifts in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*

“…guilt is just a feeling, you can choose not to feel it, how else do the Kampani bosses sleep?” (*Animal’s People* 118)

I. Introduction: Disaster as eco-material rifts in *Animal’s People*

Indra Sinha’s novel *Animal’s People* (2007) fictionalizes the far-reaching deadly effects of the chemical gas leak from the Texas-based Union Carbide Corporation’s pesticide plant in Bhopal, India in 1984. Besides Sinha’s pivotal representation of the catastrophic event, numerous scientific, historical, critical, and environmental studies have tried to capture the magnitude of the disaster by offering their respective, disciplinary perspectives. Christopher Hill’s book *South Asia: An Environmental History* includes a brief history of the construction of the Bhopal plant, the causes and effects of the disaster, and the farcical attempts for justice that followed:

Union Carbide, an American chemical corporation, had built a pesticide plant in Bhopal in the early 1970s. Although the plant had stopped production in the early 1980s, the remaining supply of chemicals lodged at the plant had not been destroyed. On the night
of December 3, 1984, faulty faucets allowed a large amount of water to mix with the abandoned chemicals, forming a huge poisonous cloud over the city. Immediate deaths were estimated to be between 3,000 and 15,000; total deaths will not be known for decades, because people are still succumbing to the effects. The chief executive officer has been charged with manslaughter but has never been extradited from the United States. Union Carbide originally blamed the leak on Sikh terrorists; when this charge was ridiculed and subsequently disproved, the company made a partial settlement with some of the victims, which amounted to between $300 and $500 per compensated individual...when the cleanup gradually began, it was discovered that Union Carbide’s waste had been seeping into the wells and groundwater, which had led to severe mercury poisoning...

In his very brief account, Hill successfully captures not only the scale of the tragedy but also the transfer of blame and the attempts to evade culpability on part of the perpetrators in the months and years after the explosion. Hill’s entry on the Bhopal disaster holds an underlying claim that the history of the Bhopal disaster will not end anytime soon, mainly because the toxicity unleashed into Bhopal’s air and water, as well as into the bodies of people, will continue to augment the number of lives affected by “the largest industrial accident in the history of the world.”

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1 Christopher V. Hill, *South Asia: An Environmental History* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2008) 195. Hill claims that the Bhopal disaster is an outcome of the overall post-independence industrialization drive that India accommodated to strengthen its economy, causing damage to its social and environmental ecology.

2 Hill, 195.
Set about nineteen years after the night of the Bhopal disaster, Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* portrays how the disaster has converted the novel’s setting Khaufpur, Bhopal’s fictional counterpart, into a toxic wasteland and transformed Animal, the narrator and “human” protagonist of the novel, into a borderline entity between human and animal. Animal is now a nineteen-year-old orphaned boy who lost both of his parents on the night of the explosion and who walks on all fours because of his bodily transformation. The main narrative strand of the novel is the transcription of Animal’s story that he tapes on a recorder given by an Australian journalist. Animal refuses to call him himself a human, enjoys playing little tricks and using profanity on others, yet emerges as a sympathetic character. He works as an informer for the group of activists who fight at the court for justice for the victims of the Bhopal disaster and demonstrate outside the court to create awareness and force local elites to stop supporting “the Kampani,” the fictional name for the Union Carbide Corporation. The movement is led by Zafar, an educated, morally upright youth who is also the boyfriend of Nisha, the love of Animal’s life. When an American doctor, Elli, comes to Khaufpur and opens a clinic to treat the victims, the activists employ Animal to spy on her to find out if she is secretly working for the company. Animal’s spying activities intersperse with his overpowering fantasies about Elli, Nisha, and other women, but he also shows his caring side for them. Animal cares like a son for Ma Franci, the elderly French nun who suffers from dementia and is revered in the whole city for her care and sacrifice for the people of Khaufpur. Elli befriends Animal and promises to treat him in the US. In time, the local activists become successful in summoning company lawyers through the local court, but the lawyers’ secret meetings and settlements with the local politicians create an upheaval and lead to clashes and an incident of fire at the deserted factory site, which unleashes more poison. Animal’s wrath leads him to the middle of the chaos, and he loses his
Alam consciousness due to a head injury. He survives, and so do Zafar and others who undertake a fast unto death to force their demands for justice. Elli is proved innocent, and the novel ends with Animal’s decision to not go to the US for his operation as it would weaken him physically. Throughout his narrative, Animal frequently accuses the journalists and other Westerners of not empathizing with victims like him but chasing him for his value as a spectacle and as an authentic storyteller with a rare experience. Animal, thus, paradoxically remains both a spectacle consumed by the West and the West’s reliable source of insight.

*Animal’s People* portrays an extreme industrial disaster that summons the overall history of material rifts in the region, a history that features the political shift of rule from the colonial to the corporate globalization of neo-colonialism in the subcontinent. The spatial and temporal continuities of environmental transformation are closely associated with this shift of global power which marks the changing faces of the power nexus that cause the ecological rifts in South Asia. For instance, the forced or voluntary movements of marginal people and crops under the dictates of the British Empire have now been replaced with the extraction of resources and profit through the ruthless operation of transnational corporations. The scenario of the Union Carbide plant disaster in *Animal’s People* is, therefore, premised upon the shift of power leading to the rise of corporate capitalism in South Asia. If we consider the injection of toxicity into the South Asian environment as the worst development of material rifts as represented in the novel, we get the idea of an interesting cycle of ecological rifts happening over time in postcolonial South Asia. In this cyclical or recurring rift, the extraction of vital elements in the form of the exportation of crops and labor in the earlier times is now substituted by the unleashing of toxicity—a cycle that parallels how the modus operandi of extraction from the colonial times in South Asia to its current period of corporate capitalism has evolved. This cycle thus begins with
an initial disruption of ecosystems and gradually reaches an advanced stage of violent
toxification of certain sites, although this cycle is not always so easily measurable. The toxic
chemicals unleash an immediate, deadly effect on the site, but Animal’s People also shows that
the toxicity from the gas leak lingers everywhere and indefinitely, affecting generally the bodies
of the poor who are most exposed to the poisoned environment. Stacey Balkan refers to critics of
neoliberal capitalism, such as Neil Smith and David Harvey, to claim that “the uneven
topographies of global capitalism have long demanded a tacit acceptance that third world toxicity
is the necessary cost of global development and, consequently, first world prosperity.” Balkan
argues that the West has for centuries capitalized on such global disproportionateness in terms of
adversity and prosperity. Global capitalism today thrives on such new modes of material
extraction that allow them to export toxicity and sustain the logic of disproportionate
distribution.

Animal’s People represents the Bhopal disaster as an example of eco-material rifts which
mostly affect the environments and bodies of subaltern people through toxicity. The depiction of
a poisoned ecosystem and deformed human body in the novel exemplifies the postcolonial
intensification of what Marx conceptualized as “metabolic rift.” Marx explains that the capitalist
exportation of crops and food causes the loss of soil nutrients because the consumption of
materials happens miles away from their land of origin and the process doesn’t allow the wastes
to return to the same soil. Sinha’s novel offers a significant new dimension of “eco-material
rifts,” a term that I formulate by borrowing from Marx’s concept of metabolic rift to address

3 Stacey Balkan, “A Memento Mori Tale: Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People and the Politics of
more recent and difficult to remediate modes of material rifts. The postcolonial rifts in Animal’s People reflect an exhaustive process, in which the release of toxic chemicals marks the latest stage of material subtraction in the postcolonial sites which have already undergone a series of rifts since colonial times. As I have discussed in my earlier chapters, the British rule of South Asia, and the Partition of India following the rule, caused a more direct process of material extraction. For instance, the colonizers employed soldiers, companies, and local administration to supervise the flow of profit, which led to the transportation and displacement of subaltern labor, crops, and commodities such as opium. However, corporate capitalists orchestrate their mode of extraction in postcolonial locations through projects that keep them less directly involved yet generate more risks for the local environment and people. Corporate projects such as the Bhopal plant produce pesticides or cause “toxic” disasters that destroy normal ecosystem function and impede the production of nutrients that support lives. Animal’s People demonstrates that the sites corporate capitalists select for their risk-ridden projects are inhabited by impoverished people considered “disposable.” The protagonist and narrator of the novel, Animal, exemplifies that the toxic outcomes of such projects mostly affect the marginal people by disrupting the usual development and functioning of their bodies. The toxification of a postcolonial site that extends even to the bodies of the poorest inhabitants indicates the far-reaching deadliness and selective nature of the recent versions of eco-material rifts as represented in the novel.

Animal appears as a direct victim of the disaster, but his narrative perspective resists this victimhood and asserts his agency. The narrative frame of Animal’s People filters the readers into a subaltern world represented by Animal, and this frame declaredly negates the mediation of the author as well as the reporter who records Animal’s story. Animal initially refuses the offer
from the Australian journalist to record his story because he has a deep suspicion about the ability of outsider people to understand his positionality. He says to the journalist: “rights, law, justice… sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don’t mean the same.” Animal repeatedly indicts journalists and activists who consider the sufferers of the disaster as spectacles and try to extract stories for the consumption of readers around the world. He bluntly says that journalists are like “vultures” who “come to suck” his stories “so strangers in far off countries can marvel there’s so much pain in the world” (5). Sinha also adds an editor’s note which claims that “the story is told entirely in the boy’s words as recorded on the tapes;” only the Hindi language the boy spoke has been translated into English. Sinha uses this frame to justify that his subaltern protagonist speaks authentically without mediation and resists the outsider imposition of narrative on his story. Animal’s resilience amplifies the impossibility of the West understanding the subaltern people and their stories, which Animal himself articulates: “How can foreigners at the world’s other end, who’ve never set foot in Khaupur, decide what’s to be said about this place?” (9). This subaltern angle also foregrounds how the aftermath of the disaster has become an endless period of health hazards and uncertainty of justice for the subaltern people, whereas the perpetrators keep trying to misrepresent the situation, avoid paying compensations and seek exoneration from culpability. Overall, Animal’s People represents the subaltern as victims who also possess the ability to understand the power and political dynamics of the disaster, assert their agency, and demand justice.

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II. From colonialism to corporate capitalism: globalization of disasters, and the intensification of eco-material rifts in South Asia

Examining *Animal’s People* through the lens of eco-material rifts can illustrate the historical and geographical continuities of environmental disasters in South Asia, especially how neoliberal capitalists thrive on projects detrimental to subaltern communities and their environments. Rob Nixon claims that environmental writers are capable of “finding imaginative forms that expose the temporal dissociations that permeate the age of neoliberal globalization,” and he hails *Animal’s People* as one such novel whose “fictional reworking of the Bhopal disaster, offers a powerful instance of a writer dramatizing the occluded relationships of transnational space together with time’s occlusions.” Nixon argues that the novel represents the Bhopal disaster as a signifier of the widespread ecological threats created by the nexus of corporate capitalists and a violent political system; in doing so, the novel shows how such local disasters, which have long-term consequences, are caused by foreign agents such as the owners of the US-based Union Carbide Corporation. To Nixon, the novel exposes the spatial gaps between countries and even within the country, especially in terms of the subaltern and the privileged groups occupying separate spaces. Such spatial gaps, he argues, help the corporations to operate discreetly while the burden of ecological disasters falls squarely on the poor. Sinha, thus, shows how neoliberal capitalists try to occlude the truth that industrial disasters have long-term consequences and that they are not just local accidents without global connections and implications. From the perspective of eco-material rifts, the Bhopal disaster is a violent culmination of the long-standing, discriminatory circulation of materials and profit between

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colonized spaces and the spaces from which the imperial authorities operate. The novel not only explores the transnational operations of the corporate projects that benefit a certain class and exhaust the spaces of the impoverished population, but it also explores the history and political continuities of rifts, especially a history of capitalist onslaught that has led to a moment of unprecedented ecological disintegration.

*Animal’s People* demonstrates how the continuities of global ecological risks yield catastrophic disasters for the environments of marginal people, while the novel’s subaltern angle of eco-material rifts also shows an overlap of the concepts of risk and catastrophe. Molly Wallace elaborates that the discriminatory operations of capitalist consumerism have brought the whole world under risk, causing catastrophes like the Bhopal explosion. Such catastrophes, she argues, indicate the prevalence of risk in different times and places in different forms: “catastrophe in risk society does not seem to happen everywhere all at once…It happens here—in this incidence of mercury poisoning—and there—in that toxic spill.” Wallace distinguishes between risk and catastrophe by defining the Bhopal explosion as a catastrophic accident which exposes the operations of environmentally-detrimental practices that make our world more and more volatile. In other words, corporate projects increase ecological risk by producing chemical pesticides and dumping industrial wastes, a practice that often leads to catastrophes such as the Bhopal disaster. The novel, however, adds a subaltern perspective to the concepts of risk and catastrophe, which shows how the catastrophic phase lingers indefinitely for the subaltern people. The aftermath of the disaster turns into an extended period of material rift for them, in which risk and catastrophe overlap and promote each other. The toxicity spreading through the

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air and the water system, the ongoing and deteriorating health hazards, and another round of fire and explosion at the factory—all mark a prolonged phase of catastrophe. This phase of catastrophe alternatively means another round of risk for the future generations who inherit the toxicity and health issues.

The poisoned landscapes of Khaufpur and the toxified bodies of its subaltern inhabitants promote the image of an apocalyptic world in the novel, an image which two of the characters, Animal and Ma Franci, frequently emphasize. Their perspectives in the novel add a subaltern angle to the ecocritical discourses that connect toxicity with apocalypse to highlight how toxic spills have increased global ecological vulnerability. This subaltern narrativity of the novel builds on an ecocritical conversation generated by the likes of Ulrich Beck, Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Rob Nixon. Buell terms such ecocritical conversation that addresses toxicity as “toxic discourse” which, according to him, “can be sweepingly defined as expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency.”7 Heise takes up the same issue of “toxic discourse” by referring to Buell and explains how different genres of risk narratives employ different rhetorical and representational tools. Both Buell and Heise use the example of apocalyptic narrative as a popular form of risk discourse which “addresses the fate of the world as a whole: it is a particular form of imagining

7 Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001) 30-31. Buell observes that the discursive practices on toxicity are not as common as the way other disciplines, such as medicine, political science, and sociology, have addressed the concerns over the increase of toxicity in our environment.
the global.” According to Heise, apocalyptic narrative “paints the dire pictures of a world on the brink of destruction as means of calling for social and political reforms that might avert such ruination.” Sinha’s novel is not an apocalyptic narrative as a whole, but it adds an angle from the perspective of its subaltern characters which asserts that the sites of the subaltern people are already under apocalypse. We can call this a type of “subaltern apocalypse,” stressing that the idea of apocalypse is not the same for all classes and locations. Ma Franci, a Catholic nun, asserts her biblical understanding of apocalypse by repeatedly claiming that Khaufpur is under apocalypse and that the whole world will be affected soon. Her claim about the apocalypse establishes a Biblical parallel of the spread of risks globally, in which the poor in Khaufpur are affected first. Likewise, Animal offers his prophetic pronouncement in the last two sentences of the novel: “We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us” (366). Animal here echoes Ma Franci’s Catholic belief in the apocalypse, and this assertion indicates that the increasing number of “Animals” as outcasts is an inevitable outcome of the onslaught of neoliberal capitalism that disregards the lives and environments of people living on the margin. The insertion of a subaltern angle of apocalypse in Animal’s People shows that the marginalized population can offer their narratives on how the corruptions and discrimination of a global political system affect them. Overall, Sinha represents how all disasters such as the Bhopal case are interconnected by the mantra of the globalization of risk, which costs certain communities

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9 Heise, 141. Heise contrasts apocalyptic narrative with biblical apocalypse by saying that apocalyptic narratives are cautionary tales that, unlike their biblical counter version, circulate the idea that we can actually prevent the world from ending.
and locations dearly and favors the elites who own the corporations that produce toxic substances.

The discriminatory ecological disasters in postcolonial regions are the effects of "ecological imperialism," to borrow the term from Alfred Crosby, which explains that such demolition of indigenous environments began during the time of European colonization. The extraction has gradually become more and more intensified in recent times because of the growth of “material demands, and therefore the pressures for resource extraction” coming from the industrializing centers. After the decolonization movements gained momentum around the world in the wake of WWII, the US concentrated economic and military power and began to exercise a new mode of control over the rest of the world. The post-World War II period, which also marks the post-colonial period in South Asia, saw a rapid growth of industrialism promoted by the open market policy of neoliberal capitalism. One reality that forces the newly independent nation-states to open their borders to the ruthless operations of transnational corporations is the burden of the loans they borrow from the World Bank and the IMF, transnational bodies that actually serve the interest of corporations and the global rich. What paved the ground for the industrial disaster in Bhopal, according to Balkan, is the fact that the then Prime Minster of India, Indira Gandhi, gave in to the global capitalists and their local cohorts, “[f]ollowing the

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11 Peter Christoff and Robyn Eckersley, *Globalization and the Environment* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013) 42. The authors further elaborate that such demands for extraction gradually targeted more spaces in the other locations in the guise of globalization.
trenchant debt crises of the 1970s, and in compliance with the World Bank.” Christopher Hill explains how the hasty development projects and poor governance in India were responsible for the industrial onslaught. He cites the central government’s control over local rivers, lands, and forests as the main background for industrialization and environmental damage in independent India. The government constructed a massive number of river dams all over the country despite warnings and resistance from local people who tried to point out the adverse effects on water flow and irrigation. Hill remarks: “The link between multipurpose dams and industry has had profound effects on the environment and Indian society as well…the benefits of those projects have often favored industry over agriculture.” The development initiatives through industrialization coupled with financial debts made India and other South Asian countries vulnerable to invasive capitalism in the form of corporate industrialism. By now, the US has become the main beneficiary of global capitalism. Transnational financial organizations, which are largely controlled by the US, supervise the country’s capitalist interests overseas. The aftermath of the chemical disaster in *Animal’s People* demonstrates such discriminatory dynamics of global capitalism in which the US-based Union Carbide Corporation’s project causes the near annihilation of an Indian city.

12 Balkan, 115. Balkan states that the free trade opportunities transformed the agricultural sector and, accordingly, saw projects like the pesticide plant in Bhopal on the rise due to relaxed rules and tax policies.

13 Hill, 194. Also see Nixon, *Slow Violence*, chapter 5. Nixon offers a similar argument that developmental projects such as the megadams in the modern nation-states hardly see the interest of the people in the margin. These constructions rather affect the ecological dynamics of subaltern communities by displacing them, thus resulting in the creation of more refugees due to the paradoxical nature of such developmental initiatives that increase the capitalist profit.
The development of global corporate aggression has reached such a stage that the installation of risky projects that cause environmental crises has become part of the practice. Neoliberal globalization operates through selective globalization, in which not all aspects of human life and society are equally globalized. Postcolonial spaces are marked by such uneven globalization whose capitalist development is associated with selective globalization of environmental risks. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee views postcolonialism as a particular stage in the history of global capitalism that unevenly affects various locations of the world because of the capitalist system’s “tendency to overaccumulate and concentrate capital in one zone at the same time as it empties another of it.”

Mukherjee considers that the global and the local sources of power create a nexus to turn human and nonhuman entities of postcolonial locations into extractable resources, commodities, and cheap labor, and maintain the formation of postcolonial environments as more targeted zones for material extraction than those of other locations. In a similar vein, Molly Wallace examines the Bhopal disaster as an example of the differential capitalist interventions in different locations. She refers to a whole host of critics to elaborate on the discrepancy, especially to Ulrich Beck’s famous articulation that the world we inhabit is a place marked by an uneven distribution of wealth and risks. Bhopal bears witness to such unequal distribution of environmental risks. The disaster readily affected a segment of the marginalized population in India, which added to the already existing slow poisoning of their densely populated habitats by the insecticides and other products produced by local and multinational companies. Wallace addresses these two forms of toxification, the long-term and

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15 Wallace, 67.
the instantaneous, and considers the Bhopal explosion as “just the most obvious manifestation of a less visible but no less insidious poisoning of the planet more generally.” In other words, the Bhopal disaster is a sudden toxic outcome of slow poisoning that happens regularly in the form of unregulated activities by the industries, such as the dumping of chemicals into water or harmful gas emission into the air.

Postcolonial locations have come to be the worst victims of environmental disintegration by multinational corporations, but not all classes of people in postcolonial locations are affected to the same degree. Corporate capitalism’s short-term, profitmaking projects such as the Bhopal pesticide plant induces long-term environmental threats which are most damaging to the poorest of the population. Rob Nixon brands the unequal globalization of disasters as “[t]he outsourcing of environmental crisis, whether through rapid or slow violence,” which, according to him “has a particularly profound impact on the world’s ecosystem people.” The surroundings of the pesticide plant in Bhopal were slums full of the most impoverished population of the town, many of whom died on the night of the accident. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha term these displaced, working-class people as “ecological refugees” as they also observe that “around the Union Carbide plant was a shantytown full of ecological refugees.” These “ecosystem people” or “ecological refugees” refer to the working-class people who are dependent on their surrounding environment for survival. These people also stay at the receiving end of the toxic

16 Wallace, 65.
17 Nixon, 22. Nixon borrows the term “ecosystem people” from Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha to refer to the people, who are dependent on the surrounding resources for survival, as the worst victims of such environmental crises.
outcomes from the corporate projects that serve the interests of “a globalized ruling class” composed of the global elites.19

III. The narratives of a lingering apocalypse: “absentee corporate colonialism” and the subaltern quest for justice

Sinha offers Animal’s narrative to measure the deadliness of the disaster from the perspectives and ethos of subaltern characters who not only embody the deadly poison of corporate capitalism but can also be the truest critics of a global system built on an unequal distribution of capital, access, risks, disaster, culpability, and justice. In the novel, Animal appears both as a narrator of the Bhopal disaster and as a victim fighting for his rights. He frequently says that the accident has turned the people of Khaufpur including him into storytellers. Anita Mannur argues that people like Animal are valued for the wrong reason of adding to the spectacle, not for their sufferings:

In this environmental and humanitarian crisis characters like Animal are prized for the dramatic value they bring to stories about human suffering. Animal is continually photographed for magazines and news stories for the shape of his body, but there is no deep transformative understanding of what this disability means.20

19 Mukherjee, Postcolonial Environments, 6.
Mannur in a way echoes what Animal himself says to Elli that the outsiders like her do not have respect for the suffering people but they “are fascinated by places like this. It’s written all over you, all you folk from Amrika and Vilayat, jarnaliss, filmwallass, photographass, anthropologiss” (184-5). Animal’s value as a spectacle and a storyteller offers an important development in the capitalistic logic of extraction, that even after Animal’s subjugation to exhaustive toxicity he can still offer stories as consumable materials for the readers of newspapers and novels.

Sinha’s overall representation of the Bhopal disaster from Animal’s narrative standpoint reflects a rift of empathy and understanding between the marginal victims of the toxic disaster and the representatives of the Global North—a rift that further worsens the repercussions of the disaster and delays justice. Animal addresses his invisible listeners, in other words, his readers, as “eyes” throughout the novel— the global elites “who float far above the lived experience of poverty in the global south.”21 Their invisibility bothers Animal because they don’t see Animal as well. Animal’s frequent addressing of these “eyes” is his appeal to the cosmopolitan readers to genuinely see their invisibility to the rest of the world, including the Kampani and the justice system. He further points out that the reason for the Global North’s lack of empathy is not just “because no one has ever mangled you, but chiefly because you don’t speak our language” (156). Elli’s story in the novel shows the essential condition of the sympathetic representative from the Global North who must overcome a lot of obstacles and distrust before she can strike a bond with the locals. Elli has decided to be a doctor after witnessing her mother’s slow death from a

disease, which has also made her sympathetic toward the sufferings of people. Her plea to her ex-husband Frank, who is one of the Kampani lawyers, establishes the idea that empathy is created by knowing people, understanding their language, and spending time with them: “You must stop this deal…if you had spent any time among these people, you’d understand” (323). She explains to Animal that the Kampani representatives are not her friends and it is her moral outlook that aligns her with the victims of Khaufpur.

Animal’s voice offers a powerful representation of individuals and their agency against the capitalists’ wholesale treatment of Khaufpur and its people as “disposable.” Bhopal’s fictional counterpart, Khaufpur, consists mostly of congested living places of impoverished people, as we come to learn from Animal’s description of what he sees from his vantage point: “from here you can see clear across Khaufpur, every street, every lane, gully, shabby alley. That huddle of roofs…Lanes in there are narrow” (31). Animal’s narrative immediately raises some pertinent questions: “why did the Kampani choose this city to make its factory? Why this land?” (32). These questions that stay on Animal’s mind later help him realize that the choice of Khaufpur for the project is related to the type of people who live here—the impoverished, illiterate people who are incapable of fighting with the Kampani people and lawyers for their justice. Animal’s narrative, however, represents the victims of the disaster as individuals who resist the Kampani’s efforts to see them as a disposable community. One of the poorest characters, Shambhu, has developed lifelong breathing difficulty and needs a regular oxygen supply to breathe properly, but he refuses to receive treatment from Elli’s clinic. Ma Franci is a French nun who used to take care of the kids including Animal at an orphanage before the disaster has wiped out her recent memories including her knowledge of the local language: “She’d gone to sleep knowing it [Hindi] as well as any Khaufpuri, but was woken in the middle
of the night by a wind full of poison and prophesying angels” (37). Yet, she refuses to leave for France like many other affected nuns and stays with the Khaufpuris. The disabling of Ma depicts her loss of language as one of the worst outcomes of the disaster. It reflects that the extent of rifts can be as far-reaching as the stripping of linguistic ability. Animal’s accounts of the resistance of many sufferers like himself thwart the narrative of the perpetrators which does not acknowledge the diverse health hazards caused by the explosion.

The subaltern characters in Animal’s People point out how corporate capitalists operate their environmentally detrimental projects from a distance to avoid culpability for disasters. Animal and other characters raise their voices against the political corruption and the justice system that allow the Kampani people to earn profit from a distance while evading accountability for their crimes. Corporate capitalism has developed as a system of material extraction which is ruthless but, unlike the colonial era, it doesn’t usually require the deployment of soldiers for controlling the local population and extracting profit. The system of operation keeps the powerful, privileged elites who own the corporations out of the scene and engages the local power for the smooth operation of projects. Rob Nixon calls this system “absentee corporate colonialism,” and explains the process of operation as “the transnational off-loading of risk from a privileged community to an impoverished one.”22 Nixon argues that the process helps corporate capitalists ensure a safe flow of profit for themselves and export risk to other countries. The opportunity to enjoy more profit but stay physically distanced from the site of operation makes the perpetrators, who often stay unnamed and unidentifiable, less worried about the consequences of risks and more aggressive in making profits at the expense of local people and

22 Nixon, 52, 46.
their environment. In the novel, the trial for the justice for the victims is a glaring proof of how the powerful companies transport risks to disposable sites but prevent the justice system from summoning the culpable parties to a “third world” court, a farce in which local governments and the justice system blindly favor the capitalists. From Animal’s narrative, we come to know that “the case against the Kampani had been dragging on endless years” (33), and the problem is “that the Kampani bosses were far away in Amrika, they refused to come to the Khaufpuri court and no one could make them” (33-4). About seventeen years after the actual Bhopal disaster and at the turn of the new millennium, the Union Carbide took a drastic measure that exemplifies a new ploy by the transnational corporations to escape accountability for their actions. Amidst the legal processes as well as local and global protests, the Union Carbide Corporation sold itself out in 2001 to Dow Chemical, another US-based multinational chemical company. This face-changing modus operandi of corporations has helped both the companies to complicate the issue of culpability for the deadly disaster.

Animal in his narrative indicts the local politicians and lawyers who help corporate capitalists run their projects and avoid liability for any disastrous outcome. We learn that the local politicians have “been in the Kampani’s pocket from the beginning” and they “would ride in Kampnai limos, never looking to right or left” (112). Corporations form alliances with local powerful elites who are not directly affected by the disasters. Mukherjee observes:

When an Indian pesticide factory leaks lethal gas that kills and maims thousands, its victims find out that it is owned by an American concern who are not answerable to an Indian court and whose pitiful compensation offer is deemed adequate by Indian politicians and judges (later discovered to be ‘friendly’ to the company) who are
themselves unaffected by the accident—such is a portrait in miniature (each passing day yields a million different ones) of neo-colonialism.\textsuperscript{23}

The new and vulnerable governments of postcolonial nation-states are often forced by supranational monetary organizations like the World Bank and IMF to comply with corporate demands, or the officials and politicians are bribed into a corrupt alliance with the corporations. When the court finally issues a summons and the Kampani lawyers arrive in Khaufpur, they meet the top politicians to strike a deal outside the court. They manage to cancel the hearing date and exercise their power to transfer the existing judge. A local newspaper, the \textit{Khaufpur Gazette}, addresses this likely settlement as “something rotten in the wind…Not just the smell from the factory. This is the stench of a deeper evil” (261). The Chief Minister tries to pacify the growing protests of people who have already lost their faith in him. The local compliance to the Kampani begins with the corruption of the Chief Minister himself and gradually affects the grassroots police force who suppresses the protest by beating people up. It is also surprising that a local lawyer represents the Kampani at the Khaufpuri court, as Animal exclaims: “what a twisted nain rabougri is this from our own city to take the side of the Kampani?” (53). The Kampani lawyers and their local power in the guise of the leading politicians use force to pacify and control the protests, as they also try to convince people by saying that they are “here to offer generous humanitarian aid to the people of Kahufpur” (306). The Kampani representatives and their local allies successfully postpone several hearings at the court, while Animal informs us that a new judge needs to be appointed and “the Kampani’s still trying to find ways to avoid appearing” (365). Animal and others reject the Kampani’s false offer of humanitarian support and keep

\textsuperscript{23} Mukherjee, \textit{Postcolonial Environments}, 6.
demanding the Kampani’s accountability at the local court. This resistance of the subaltern characters in the novel demonstrates how they overcome a sense of victimhood and represent themselves in the fight for justice.

The narrative of Animal’s People exposes the bottomless corruptibility of corporate capitalists who can stoop down as low as needed to save their profit and image. The novel presents us with a very shocking revelation that the Kampani deliberately intervenes in the medical research and treatment processes to hide the fact “that the illnesses could pass to future generations” since the Kampani “was afraid of this knowledge getting out because it might cost them in a court case” (112). These instances reveal a strange parallel between the way the orchestrators first narrate the disasters as isolated accidents and then declare the health hazards as temporary. Zafar eloquently condemns the Kampani’s hiding of medical information and calls them terrorists: “Terrorists are those who cause terror, who endanger innocent lives, who don’t respect law. The only terrorists in this case are those who run the Kampani” (283). The distrust of the Kampani reaches to an extent that the ailing people even refuse to receive any treatment from Elli because they suspect her of having connections with the Kampani. The Kampani’s limitless corruption in the novel explains people’s distrust of the activities of transnational corporations (TNCs) in postcolonial locations. Such general suspicion occludes some of the TNCs’ good service in the Global South, especially in the field of disease control. Leslie Sklair gives the example of how DDT, a banned pesticide, was used in the past to control the spread of malaria that would kill thousands of people, thus “suggesting that in the area of environmental
pollution some types of TNCs actually have a relatively good record in the Third World.‖24

However, the overall risk of the slow poisoning of land and bodies from the use of pesticides, coupled with the devastation caused by the likes of Bhopal disaster, far outweighs TNCs’ role in killing insects and their service in disease control, especially if we consider their general motive of profit at the cost of health.

*Animal’s People* depicts some reappearance of greenery in the deserted site of the factory, which demonstrates nature’s resilience against toxicity and indicates a “post-rifts” situation. This greenery appears in the most poisoned part of Khaufpur that Animal calls “death factory.” Animal describes: “Look inside, you see something strange, a forest is growing, tall grasses, bushes, trees, creepers that shoot sprays like fireworks” (29). David Arnold terms this as “the reappearance of jungle” that indicates “nature’s continuing hold over the Indian city” and its tropical climate.25 However, unlike the rampant vegetation of the fertile Indian soil that Arnold discusses, the greenery in the novel appears only in a remote corner of the city. Animal suspects that the lingering toxicity might not allow any lives to sustain there: “No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can’t survive here. Wonderful poisons the Kampani made, so good it’s impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they’re still doing their work” (29).

Neel Ahuja, like Arnold, views the greenery as life’s resurgence:

24 Leslie Sklair, *Globalization: Capitalism and Its Alternatives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 191. Sklair, however, acknowledges that Bhopal disaster is a glaring example of tragedies orchestrated by the TNCs.

…mass death extinguishes some particular *lives* without ending *Life* as a broader ecological process; Life remains resilient, insurgent against apocalyptic landscape. The narration of the resurgence of life at the site of the abandoned factory entangles Animal – whose name reflects how environmentally produced disability threatens capitalist processes of anthropomorphism – with those very species repopulating the site of disaster.²⁶

Ahuja argues that the connection between Animal and the greenery signifies an alternative mode of life that resists the capitalist onslaught into the subaltern space. This mode of life gains meaning in Animal’s own terms and in his sphere of life, and this resurgence does not conform to the capitalist narrative that hierarchizes entities and assigns Animal a lower agency along with the animals because of his disability. It is hard to predict if the resurgence of plants from the toxic soil is a sign of the natural return of soil fertility or if it is a paradoxical reminder that the poisonous chemical will continue to suppress soil fertility. In any case, the appearance of greenery on the poisoned land adds a new dimension to the soil’s worsening metabolic rift in the era of corporate capitalism. This new dimension indicates the greenery’s significance as a possible revival of fertility or, in other words, a “post-rifts” condition hidden within Animal’s world.

IV. From toxic rifts to the formation of borderline identity: Animal’s narrativity and his *posthuman* agency

*Animal’s People* portrays the physical, psychic, and moral attributes of Animal as the outcomes of the material rifts embedded in the Bhopal disaster, but Animal’s uncompromising voice refutes the imposition of western humanist discourse on his ability and agency. Animal’s metamorphosed body reflects how “the web of transnational forces that permeate and shape the local” also transforms human bodies into an irreparable, borderline human-animal state.27 Despite his body’s victimization by the transnational processes of material extraction, Animal, however, celebrates his liminal identity and validates his agency. He emerges as a master narrator in the novel who defies his victimhood and preserves his subaltern narrative against the outsiders who try to steal his stories for the consumption of western readers and media. In the course of the novel, Animal validates his liminal identity by suppressing his desire and others’ attempts to groom him as a “human,” and this validation defies the traditional, universalist humanism that hierarchizes entities in terms of their class, regions, and ability. Animal’s acceptance of his body and his refusal to conform to the traditional definition of humanism gives his identity a posthumanist turn. His liminality and his consciousness as a narrator also reflect his mode of resistance against corporate capitalists who not only cause a violent alteration of his body but also try to impose a western narrative of humanitarianism and justice on his subaltern world.

27 Nixon, 52. Nixon also postulates that Sinha’s manifestation of the transformed body of his narrator-protagonist not only asserts his novel’s local materiality but also exposes the economic connections of transnational capitalism that mold such local materiality.
Animal’s liminal existence or borderline identity combines both the bodies and consciousnesses of human and animal, and Animal embraces this transformed subjecthood and defends it with his narrative perspective. He refuses to see himself as a victim and resists the offers of human rights and speeches on his superior morality by Zafar, Elli and others. He chooses to dwell in an essentially different material world in sync with his physical and psychical conditions which the traditional humanitarian ideas cannot fathom. His liminality costs him this alienation, but it at the same time keeps him deeply involved in and separated from the human society. His liminality is understandable from his own words towards the end of the novel when he reflects that the attempt to turn him into a “human” again through an operation would cause him more loss:

…if I have this operation, I will be upright, true, but to walk I will need the help of sticks. I might have a wheelchair, but how far will that get me in the gullis of Khaufpur? Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back, I can climb hard trees, I’ve gone up mountains, roamed in jungles. Is life so bad? If I’m an upright human, I would be one of millions, not even a healthy one at that. Stay four-foot, I’m the one and only Animal.

(366)

One hard part or a tragic undertone of Animal’s condition is that he is the only person who can fathom his liminality whereas all other characters, who care for him and want him to walk upright again, do not realize the cost. He understands that reverting to an upright human body would shape his agency on others’ terms. Jennifer Rickel claims that Animal’s portrayal is a deconstruction of “the binary between the “human” and “inhuman” that defines the “universal”
subject of human rights.” Rickel argues that Animal’s refusal of treatment indicates that he does not consider the identities of humans and animals as opposites; he rather welcomes the traits of both identities. Animal evolves through his narrative in the novel, from someone who initially considers treatment to someone who ultimately refuses the idea. This change shows Animal’s coming-of-age realization that the ideas of victimhood and justice are not universal, and that he must voice the rights to his own identity. He also realizes that the proposed treatment would further weaken him and shape his agency in traditional, humanist terms, which would also curb his “animal” abilities.

The infusion of chemical into Animal’s body reflects the far-reaching toxicity of the disaster and reshapes his bodily materiality into a liminal form. The effect of the disaster manifests badly much later when he turns six, and the description of his body’s painful transformation sounds like that of a movie scene where a failed scientific experiment violently converts a human into a hybrid animal/machine. Animal describes: “The pain gripped my neck and forced it down…a devil rode my back and chafed me with red hot thongs. The burning in the muscles became a fever…after that my back began to twist…When the smelting in my spine stopped the bones had twisted like a hairpin, the highest part of me was my arse” (15). In the aftermath, Animal’s legs grow weaker and he begins to move and run on all fours like an actual animal. Justin Omar Johnston observes:

Animal’s body is wrenched by the leakage of industrial heat into living bodies, a metallurgical fever that softens and recasts the vertebrae’s structure from the inside out.

This posture represents a new kind of “factory life”: it is not a matter of long hours of repetitive labor producing a “burning in the muscles” but of the factory living as a chemical prosthetic, traveling within Animal, touching and burning his hidden interior, neurological, and genetic self.\textsuperscript{29}

Although some chemical seemingly gets injected into Animal’s body on the night of the disaster, it is the residual toxicity in his body that later causes him to go through the drastic material revision as we understand from the vivid description in the novel that Johnston also explains. We can call this transformed body a borderline formation, which mirrors the overall process of material rift in postcolonial spaces: replacing the vital elements of the body through unleashing toxicity. His bodily transformation is analogous to the larger processes of eco-material rifts in postcolonial locations. The process of material extraction begins with the colonial dispersal of eco-materials and develops into the postcolonial mode of corporate capitalism which is responsible for unleashing toxicity from the risky chemical projects. Animal’s body replicates the typical subaltern body from the postcolonial South, a body that is displaced as indentured labor during the colonial era and toxified as unwanted labor in the era of corporate globalization.

Animals’ body coevolves with his surroundings and defies the normative idea of an able human body. New material ecocritics, such as Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Serenella Iovino, and

\textsuperscript{29} Justin Omar Johnston, “A Nother World” in Indra Sinha’s \textit{Animal’s People},” \textit{Twentieth-Century Literature} 62, no. 2 (June 2016): 118. Johnston claims that the transformation of Animal's body has a significance which is more than metaphorical, given that the casualties and other harms from the industrial catastrophe in Bhopal can hardly be overstated. He provides a significant amount of data of the various forms of health hazards that followed the catastrophic event.
Serpil Oppermann, advance a posthumanist definition of bodily materiality contrary to the traditional idea of a bounded, perfect human body. Animal’s agency subscribes to their definition of posthumanist agency:

[Agency] is not to be necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and human intentionality, but it is a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism. From this dynamism, reality emerges as an intertwined flux of material and discursive forces, rather than as complex of hierarchically organized individual players.\(^{30}\)

The posthumanist, material turn of ecocriticism holds that agency is not a fixed phenomenon under human terms and conditions but is always emerging in relation to the material surroundings and associated narratives. Animal’s materiality emerges in collaboration with the toxicity of Khaufpur as he navigates his agency through a set of socio-political discourses actively shaping and contesting the reality of Khaufpur. Animal overpowers the discourses of humanity that try to offer him moral superiority and an ideal human form, and he also actively resists the counternarratives that try to portray him as a deformed victim in need of some monetary compensation. In the process, he develops a narrative of his own agency, and his materiality and consciousness stretch beyond the usual human interactions. His bodily materiality becomes perfectly suited to the toxicity of the place, especially within the ruins of the factory where most lives other than animals such as poisonous snakes cannot survive: “In these

\(^{30}\)“Introduction.” *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014) 3. Iovino and Oppermann argue that the interplay of various agentic particles and discursive elements gives bodies a unique spatiotemporal and discursive uniqueness.
dry grasses that Zafar said were a danger to the city I used to make my sleeping nest. On warm
nights I could dream in comfort under the stars with no insects to trouble me” (30). Animals’
posthuman identity shapes his consciousness and helps him interact with the nonhuman world to
a much greater degree than it is with the other characters of the novel. In his delirium detailed in
the end pages of the novel, he carries orderly conversations with animals and plants which reflect
his unconscious that feels at one with the nonhuman world. His conscious conversations with
deaf fetuses in clinics and his relationship with the dog Jara, his best friend, are further instances
of his special bond with the nonhuman entities.

Animal’s posthumanist body extends beyond the bounds of a biological body, and its
materiality originates from a forced, toxic transformation that associates him with the nonhuman
world. From these angles, Animal’s materiality mirrors the alternative material formulations
forwarded by the concepts of Donna Haraway’s “cyborg” and Monique Allewaert’s
“parahuman.” The discourses and texts of Anglo-European colonizers from the seventeenth
through nineteenth-century represented “African-descended human beings as constituting a kind
of interstitial life between humans, animals, objects, and sometimes even plants;” Monique
Allewaert terms them as “parahumans,” who “were not legally or conceptually equivalent to
human beings …[but] beside the human.”31 Allewaert argues that the intense labor conditions
forced the slaves to develop an intimate relationship with the nonhuman world, and the
colonizers viewed their bodies as inferior and interstitial between human and nonhuman. The
enslaved people, however, celebrated their agency and bodies, an ownness of body that Animal
reflects as well. Animal’s body reflects a postcolonial context of the forced yet intimate

31 Monique Allewaert, Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the
associations with the nonhuman world like Allewaert’s “parahuman.” Like the “parahuman,” Animal cherishes the materiality of his body and defends his agency against the counternarratives that view his body as incomplete. Animal also strikes as a reflection of Haraway’s posthuman “cyborgs” that are “hybrids of machine and organism” and productions of a discriminatory capitalist system. Haraway claims that the repressive socio-political realities under the capitalist logic shape the materiality of the female body in an extended, hybrid form of machine and organism. Animal’s metamorphosed body renders a more direct image of the “cyborgian” type; he possesses a hybrid body formulated by the infusion of toxicity under the dictates of corporate capitalism. The portrayal of Animal’s materiality, thus, renegotiates a long history of the subaltern body’s subjugation and evolution under repressive socio-political conditions.

Animal’s negotiation of sexuality helps him embrace his identity and assert his agency. He overcomes the ambivalence of his sexuality which arises from a tension between his physicality and his moral outlook, and this negotiation of his ambivalent sexuality reflects his defiance of the universalist prototype of human sexuality. Animal’s obsessiveness with sexuality has a link to the transformation of his body in the aftermath of the toxic disaster. The alteration of his body and the laborious struggle for survival has left Animal with a muscular body with very strong arms and a voracious sexual appetite. He reflects, “I think unless I do something I will die, this desire will devour me” (57). Johnston engages with the ideas of human gait and sexual repression from Freud’s seminal work Civilization and Its Discontents (1930) to argue that Animal’s posture has a direct link to his sexuality. Freud explains human’s erect gait as a

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departure from animal sexuality because of the distance created between the human nose and genitalia, a sensory phenomenon that Animal frequently mentions to define his own animality in the novel. Freud claims that the new erect posture “lifts the head upward, directing the human gaze outward into the world and away from the abdomen” which is a necessary repressive condition for the civilization to sustain. Animal both subscribes to and defies the Freudian status quo. Animal says, “[t]he world of humans is meant to be seen from the eye level…I’m staring into someone’s crotch” (2). His sensory proximity to the human abdomen evidently drives him to frequent thoughts of sexuality, but his suppressed morality often resurfaces for him to question or confuse his own voracious sexual desire for Nisha and others: “Animal mating with human female, it’s unnatural, but I’ve no choice but to be unnatural” (78). Moreover, Animal’s instincts and habits have developed in a unique condition associated with the chemical disaster and its repercussions, which lends him a first-hand experience and realization of the bitter politics of discrimination and injustice that affect different people and locations differentially. Animal bears “the legacy of racial and cultural oppression that continues to haunt a universalist conception of humanity” coded into Freud’s formulations of sexuality. In the end, he chooses to retain his voice and agency by holding onto his physical form, and this means sacrificing his sexual desire for Nisha. Animal, thus, overcomes the challenges of his sexuality to assert his posthuman agency. It marks a departure from the universal humanist concept of

33 Johnston, 121.

34 Johnston, 121. Johnston further elaborates on Freud’s generalization of sexuality by referring to Edward Said’s argument that Freud’s ideas of science and humanism are essentially Eurocentric and imperialist.
sexuality, straddles both human and animal identities, and yet defies the binaries of Animal and human sexuality.

Animal’s narrative perspective reflects a complex moral outlook which helps him survive the challenges of his transformed body and defend his agency. Animal at times displays a twisted morality followed by harmful actions while he tries to hide his humanity, but he also turns out to be a caring and helpful “human” being. He adulterates Zafar’s tea with medicine to curb Zafar’s desire so that he does not get physically intimate with Nisha. He hates to call himself human and a friend to anyone, but he helps Zafar in his activism against the Kampani and helps Elli in her efforts to make her clinic function. He suppresses his admiration for Zafar and continuously relays profanity in his mind about him. Animal’s moral vision or worldview develops as his survival mechanism because it helps him cope with others’ scornful comments about his shape and lack of work. He curses Zafar at his intention to help others, an intention or goodness he couldn’t afford growing up on the street: “I’d been on the streets for years and was as hard-hearted a little cunt as you’ll find anywhere” (38). The assertion of his twisted sense of humor and moral vision helps him sustain the reality of his life and body and claim his unique agency: “if I agree to be a human being, I’ll also have to agree that I’m wrong-shaped and abnormal. But let me be a quatre pattes animal, four-footed and free, then I am whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal” (208). It is evident from his own words that assuming the identity of a “different kind of animal” with his “own proper shape” gives him convenience and some sort of completeness as an entity. Animal’s powerful narrative represents the idea that each entity is a unique agent, and this point of view challenges the outsider perspective that sees him as a deformed body and offers to “treat” him.
Sinha demonstrates how Animal’s liminal identity accords him a superior adoptability, which enables him to reclaim his agency and stretch his world beyond the human. Animal’s re-materialized body, his animal sexuality pitted against his human predilections, and his unique moral vision keep him suspended between the dual performances of a human and an animal; his intelligence and care earn him respect among the likes of Zafar, Nisha, and Elli who insist on his human excellence whereas his animal instincts and habits are impositions and choices that help him survive well by evading human responsibilities. Pablo Mukherjee observes that “[i]f hunting for food and incessant but lonely sex mark Animal’s nonhuman nature, his linguistic prowess and capacity to imagine the minds of other humans endow him with exaggerated ‘human-definitive’ capacities.”35 Animal has the capacity to speak a few languages including fragmentary French and English, he goes on well with a range of people from different classes, and he can even befriend the American doctor Elli who appreciates his intelligence and virtues. In the novel, Zafar constantly admires Animal’s intelligence and engages him to spy on Elli to find out if she is working for the Kampani, while Elli too trusts Animal to convince people to come to her clinic for treatment. He shares a bond of empathy and imaginative communication with the nonhuman world, and he can climb trees and peep into other people’s lives as if he is omnipresent in Khaufpur. Mukherjee calls Animal’s superior adoptability to the adverse situation his “transpersonality,” which is the “combined ability of linguistic precocity and intense recognition of the inner life of others.”36 Animal’s liminal identity, therefore, enables him to

36 Mukherjee, 226.
navigate across human and nonhuman lives as much as it affords him a special understanding of and power over others’ personal lives.

Animal’s identity as a social pariah not only disallows others an understanding of how to rehabilitate him, it also reflects his lack of access to human rights and beguiles the question of environmental justice. The toxification of the overall ecology of the fictionalized Bhopal has affected the whole impoverished community living there, and the existing activism by Zafar and treatment by Elli are attempts to remediate their loss to some extent. According to Mukherjee, Animal’s loss makes him “one of the thousands of the disabled victims…exposing the horrendous logic of global corporatism that recognizes only the powerful and the privileged as capable of hearing signs of humanity—including practices such as rights and justice.”

However, justice for Animal can hardly be ensured in human terms because of his unique agency which seems irreversible. His deformity and alienation exemplify a loss that cannot be compensated for and reflect the general scenario that the accumulation of capital in the Global North promotes the evacuation of human rights in the Global South. Stacey Balkan argues that Animal is the needed outcast of a global system that sees to the end of human ideologies as well as the subaltern body: “He is the grist of the economic system of global/late capitalism—as the erstwhile hands of empire; and he is likewise its excrement—that is, its logical product.”

Animal, however, stages his own defiance against the discriminatory global system that, according to Balkan, tries to reduce the subaltern to the status of disposable entities. Corporate

37 Mukherjee, “‘Tomorrow There Will Be More of Us,’ 230. Mukherjee alternatively claims Animal’s ability to survive through his own accord as his “transpersonality” that defies the logic of corporate capitalism.

38 Balkan, 119.
capitalists might have toxified his habitat and his body, but he refuses to give away his power of storytelling and the materiality of his body.

V. Conclusion: resistance of the subaltern narrative

Not only does Animal’s People depict how marginal people negotiate the persistent, toxic effects of eco-material rifts caused by corporate capitalists, but the novel also incorporates a subaltern mode of environmentalism through Animal’s resistance and uncompromising voice. The subaltern environmentalism of the novel is a fictional demonstration of “the environmentalism of the poor,” a concept formulated by Gadgil and Guha and further developed by Rob Nixon.39 Gadgil and Guha maintain that “the environmentalism of the poor” originates from the conflict between elites “who have gained disproportionately from economic development and ecosystem people whose livelihoods have been seriously undermined… [due to] degradation of the environment.”40 Gadgil and Guha also observe that these environmental movements are usually led by Gandhians and Marxist politicians. In Animal’s People, the character of Zafar, who leads the nonviolent protests against the Kampani, hails from the middle class and combines Gandhian and Marxist ideologies. However, it is Animal who emerges as a

39 Nixon, 128-136. Rob Nixon mentions India’s Chipko movement (tree hugging) of the 1970s and Kenya’s Green Belt Movement of 1977 as examples of the poor’s environmentalism against deforestation, which aim to safeguard the poor’s coexistent living with their surroundings against the national, colonial, and neocolonial forms of ecological violence.

40 Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, 98. The writers claim that this mode of environmentalism is distinguishable from the elitist modes of environmentalism of the capitalist Western societies that largely neglect the issue of environmental justice for the poor.
true subaltern representative who supports Zafar’s movement but also offers his own voice and activism. Animal and other Khaufpuris bear explicit signs of the effects of toxicity, which reflect the postcolonial trend of discriminatory violence against the environment and the bodies of the poor. However, Sinha shows how the subaltern can also become voices of resistance against such forms of violence. Animal’s uncompromising narrative, as well as his subversion of outsider narratives and humanitarian efforts, demonstrates how the subaltern can speak truth and justice to power, which is a significant achievement of the novel in comparison to the non-fictional accounts of the Bhopal disaster.
Chapter 4

“Plung[ing] into the murky backwaters of the Bengali consciousness:” Psychological Rifts, and Numair Atif Choudhury’s *Babu Bangladesh!*

“And in the arsenic green of Bangladesh, who knows what shape truth may take?”

(*Babu Bangladesh!* 274)

I. Introduction: Psychological rifts

Narrated from the year 2028, Numair Atif Choudhury’s novel *Babu Bangladesh!* (2019) documents an unnamed narrator’s efforts to piece together a biography of the protagonist, Babu. The narrator alternatively reflects on Bangladesh’s genesis and development through a history of bloodshed, heroism, cultural diversity, corruption, colonial legacies, and loss of biodiversity. Choudhury’s genre-defying narrative blends digressive accounts, researched footnotes, narratives of Babu’s life, and descriptive histories of Bangladesh, but it mostly resorts to a magical realist mode, quite in keeping with the country’s “uncanny” political developments shaped by domestic and international interests. The narrator justifies: “it must be admitted there is little separating the
fantastic from the quotidian in Bangladesh.”¹ Babu’s birth coincides with the country’s birth in 1971, following a nine-month-long, bloodstained Bangladesh Liberation War against the then-West Pakistani army and their local collaborators. In one of the most gruesome scenes of war devastations portrayed in the novel, Babu’s parents walk through the capital city Dhaka before dawn and hours after they had conceived Babu. The couple witnesses how the beginning of the war has already altered the landscape of Bangladesh into a surreal, unrecognizable place:

> Amongst the still smoking buildings, they detected obese dogs nibbling livers from corpses. The streets were overrun with jackals, monitors, mongooses and buzzards. Radios could be heard playing music from inside mass graves. They saw a cow stumbled by wildly, the naked corpse of a woman spread-eagled on its back…They walked past buses full of passengers that had been burned alive…As they walked, they were challenged by crows everywhere, crows that stood waist-high with red-flecked beaks, with round eyes rolling like orange and black tigers. They observed how bookshops had been torched and temples mortared, and as they walked on, they saw pink rivers outside the city bellyful with bodies. They trailed cadavers that had crawled into the fields on all fours, like lesser apes. After being bayoneted, these lay open like jackfruit among the stalks and plants. And everywhere there were buzzing flies, flies too sated to take to the air. (187-88)

The overall ecology of the ruined landscape contains traces of violence in diverse variations: innumerable bodies of people shot or tortured to death, bodies of murdered women with marks of

sexual violence, animals and insects harmed, and the whole ecosystem contaminated appallingly. The representation of such horrific images, however, serves a dual purpose. First, Choudhury sums up the unimaginable extent of violence that Bangladeshis have endured during the war. Secondly, traumatic memories of mass violence usually go down into the population’s collective unconscious and, thus, the walk of Babu’s parents becomes a figurative tour for the readers into the depths of the Bengali unconscious carrying the traces of a violent past. Psychologists define our unconscious as a reservoir of elements that we consciously block away because they are “potentially painful aspects of our early experience and produces an entirely separate place in our psyche.” Therefore, the novel’s representation of the very images of such a war-torn landscape appears to be a display of certain contents of the Bengali unconscious in their externalized, material representation. Choudhury frequently refers in his novel to the fact that the collective Bengali unconscious develops from the country’s complex history of diverse cultural influences and violent encounters, and he uses this concept to shape the novel to a large extent.

In the novel, the narrator proposes to chart the life and political career of Babu as a means of demonstrating the effects of Bangladesh’s complex history of double colonization on the Bangladeshi identity. Choudhury represents the violent killings of people and annihilation of the environment during the Liberation War as legacies of the British colonization of the Indian Subcontinent. At the same time, he demonstrates that the effects of the war have a very powerful regulatory presence in the collective Bengali unconscious. The novel captures examples of violence in independent Bangladesh—such as plundering of the environment and religious establishments of indigenous people, and rape and murder of religious minorities—which, to a

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great extent, replicate the violence experienced during the British and the Pakistan era. The narrator affirms that knowing Babu is one of the numerous possible ways of understanding Bangladesh and that it allows us a glimpse into the political and ecological consciousness of the nation. Babu’s growth as a thinker and politician in the novel resembles the turbulent history of the formation and development of the new nation, but Babu also appears as the (Bangladeshi) environmental everyman—an environmentalist by intent yet controlled and partially corrupted by local and global pressures. The narrator composes an account of Babu’s life by meeting the legend’s acquaintances and friends, researching the political incidents involving Babu, learning about his mysterious connections with indigenous leaders, and, most importantly, digging into his private diaries that a fishmonger admirer of Babu hands him. Divided into five sections, the novel captures different phases of Babu’s life including his pre-birth period of Bangladesh’s fight towards independence in which his parents take part. Both Babu and Bangladesh navigate a range of opportunities as well as local and foreign threats as they demonstrate a reciprocal development. The narrator pursues what he dubs as “Babu-truth”—his elusive protagonist’s rise and fall in the Bangladeshi political scene through his environmental agendas and his ultimate disappearance without a trace. In doing so, the novel documents how Babu’s development as a politician and his possible murder is part of the process in which the local and global capitalists remove any threats to their profit-maximizing and environmentally devastating activities in a new nation.

In this chapter, I examine how Babu Bangladesh! represents that the practices of ecological violence in postcolonial Bangladesh are integrally connected to the country’s history of colonial and war violence as well as to the current political and capitalist interventions, both foreign and local. I claim that the combination of the traumatic memories of past violence and
the ongoing history of cultural and political repressions in Bangladesh affects the psychology of people to a certain extent. Such a psychic condition often prompts individual and mass incidents of violence, especially against the ethnic and religious minorities and their habitats. The current instances of violence, in most cases, reflect characteristics of past violence, although not on the same scale. Psychoanalytical theories address the issues of postcolonial violence and ecological violence, mostly separately. However, *Babu Bangladesh!* offers a useful ground to merge these trends to explore the violence that marks the relationship of the postcolonial people with their surrounding human and nonhuman world. The layered narrative of the novel suggests, and even directly claims, that we cannot decode the complicated history and reality of Bangladesh in simple ways. The narrator affirms that any attempt to forge an acceptable, speculative version of the truth of Babu and his “mysterious” country requires us to shun the “bureaucratically sanctioned highways to plunge into the murky backwaters of the Bengali consciousness” (17). So, the novel demonstrates how colonial encounters, war violence, religious and political fanaticism, and spatial dynamics construct the “murky backwaters” of the Bengali psyche. The narrator’s use of the metaphor “murky backwaters,” therefore, means a “murky” unconscious which requires that we “use psychoanalytic ideas eclectically and make creative links between them”\(^3\) for an acceptable analysis of the particular characteristics of the unconscious. Such an analysis will highlight specific political, historical and cultural conditions of a region that shape the unconscious and its connection to the physical environment. Any standardized, apolitical

\(^3\) Minsky, 217. Minsky reviews diverse psychoanalytical angles beginning from Freud’s to conclude that we need to establish creative connections among these angles to reflect on complex cultural behaviors. Her main argument behind this proposition is that psychological conditions are fluid and they change from one context to another.
generalization of ecological crises and their interpretations can obfuscate the fact that capitalist interventions are a chief impetus behind environmental abuses and that all locations of the world are not equally culpable for, or victimized by, such crises. Babu Bangladesh!, accordingly, offers specific spatial and cultural realities of the postcolonial Bangladesh that evidently shape the psyche of the people, and we can analyze the contours of such postcolonial psyche by “draw[ing] on the strengths of bioregionalism without succumbing to ecoparochialism.”

Psychologists claim that the acts of violence against the environment reflect the imprints of the perpetrators’ unconscious aggressiveness, but this generic claim requires further specification when it comes to understanding the postcolonial mind. With a history of the traumatizing colonial experience and a different spatial reality than other bioregions, postcolonial people often develop a complex relationship with their surroundings. There is a rich tradition of theories that address the underlying violent impulses of the human mind and their relationship to the external world, and we also have a growing body of work that extends this relationship in the context of the environmental and climate crisis. Classical and contemporary depth psychologists explore a connection between the darker traits of human psychology and their expressions, often

5 I use the idea of bioregion to highlight a sense of how the human history in postcolonial locations reshapes people’s integrated relationship with the surrounding nature, an idea that mostly echoes Rob Nixon’s take on the same. Rob Nixon refers to the idea of bioregionalism that Gary Snyder and Jay Parini develop based on a “location’s natural characteristics” rather than its cultural and political demarcations, while he also stresses how postcolonial contexts require us to move beyond such a “spiritualized and naturalized national frame.” For more, see Rob Nixon, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2011) 238.
in acts of sadism. Freud maintains that any aggressive expression of our emotions “provides us with a high degree of narcissistic enjoyment because it fulfills a primitive, infantile wish for omnipotence and control.” Likewise, Thomas Moore observes that “selfishness and the desire for violence and misfortune do in fact appear in the hearts of the best of us.” Ecocritics like Simon C. Estok further explore the ideas of violent psychological drives to address human attitudes towards nature. Estok’s term “ecophobia” addresses our unconscious “prejudice and bias” against the environment, which he offers to explain that humans’ increasing confidence about their exceptionalism has gradually worsened their unconscious drives behind ecocidal actions. However, we need to further extend such psychoanalytical perspectives in order to offer psychological and cultural interpretations of violence in postcolonial locations. One particular reason is that “deep aspects of our subjectivity…is structured by (and structures) our culture.” In a postcolonial location like Bangladesh, the subjective, primal emotions combine with the psychological effects of a history of colonial violence and its legacies—a combination that contributes to the formation of not only the individual’s unconscious but also the group’s collective unconscious. Therefore, any exploration of the postcolonial mind’s aggressiveness

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6 Minsky, 155. Minsky further maintains that combining Freudian ideas with object-relations theory—human’s drive to form relationships with others—may offer a more comprehensive perspective into the human unconscious that prompts violent behavior.


towards the environment requires a proper conceptual framework that integrates the implications of colonial encounters and their legacies.

I use postcolonial “ecopsychoanalysis” as a guiding concept to examine the psychological implications of the nature and patterns of ecological violence in postcolonial locations like Bangladesh, as contextualized in Babu Bangladesh!: Dodds’ term “ecopsychoanalysis” offers “a radical questioning of our theories, whether psychoanalytic, philosophical, scientific or political, and the corresponding ways of living individually and collectively that they make possible and reflect.” Dodds’ formulation seeks to explore how the generic and the greater ecological problems can give us “a greater opportunity …for re-imagining the human, our societies, and our place in the world.” With postcolonial “ecopsychoanalysis,” I propose a slight retreat from Dodds’ optimistic idea of “ecopsychoanalysis” especially for two reasons. First, I focus on human’s violent behaviors towards the environment in terms of the ecology of over-congested places in Bangladesh, in which human and nonhuman entities form an inseparable and symbiotic, yet confrontational, coexistence. Secondly, I use the word “postcolonial” as a signifier because the postcolonial condition effectively and uniquely shapes the subjective and collective unconscious through the influences of a history of colonial and postcolonial violence.

Postcolonial critics hold that colonial encounters can be “regarded as psychopathological, a disease that distorts human relations and renders everyone within it ‘sick.’” A sustained

10 Dodds, 119-20.
11 Dodds, 200.
atmosphere of violence under colonial rule, according to Frantz Fanon, can leave a decolonized nation with indelible psychological impacts prone to acts of violence. Fanon views the colonized native “as an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor… to take the settler's place.” A long-standing practice of violent encounters between the colonizers and the natives normalizes “the bloodthirsty and pitiless atmosphere [and] the generalization of inhuman practices,” responsible in the long run for individual and group instances of “reactionary psychoses” among the natives even after decolonization. The collective trauma of colonial violence resurfaces in the mind of the people as such forms of disorder due to the various postcolonial conditions, such as land disputes, repressive cultural practices, and capitalist interventions, which aggravate ecophobia and push people into committing acts of violence that often duplicate the violence they endured during the eras of subjugation. Leela Gandhi, while referring to the disturbing memories that postcolonial subjects tend to repress or repudiate, which she calls “postcolonial amnesia,” observes: “While some memories are accessible to consciousness, others, which are blocked and banned—sometimes with good reason—perambulate the unconscious in dangerous ways, causing seemingly inexplicable symptoms in everyday life.” The apparently inexplicable instances of violence against the environment, especially mass violence or individual doings of sadistic torture that I will discuss in the context

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14 Fanon, 251, 252.

of *Babu Bangladesh!*, are symptomatic of the “dangers” of the postcolonial unconscious that Gandhi points out.

In the earlier chapters, I have discussed how my concept of “eco-material rifts” denotes the colonial and postcolonial developments of Karl Marx’s idea of “metabolic rift,” especially that the organized extraction of human and nonhuman materials and labor has grown in complexity and intensity over time. In the same vein, this chapter addresses some reflections of the postcolonial psyche in *Babu Bangladesh!* as instances of “psychological rifts”—an advanced stage of rifts causing a fractured human psyche, such as the one Leela Gandhi explains. The instances of material rifts from the colonial times are the extracted entities that the colonizers shipped out of the local regions to ensure profit for the British Empire, as the novels of Amitav Ghosh represent. The psychological rift, however, reflects a return of rifts to the postcolonial region, mainly because the capitalist and neocolonial power operates from a distance and does not always require rifted materials to leave the region. This return resembles the return of rifts in the form of toxicity which I have discussed in my earlier chapter on Indra Sinha’s novel *Animal’s People*. The return of toxicity is orchestrated by corporate capitalists whose chemical project causes a disastrous leak and toxifies the body and the habitat of a group of subaltern people. The psychological rift is, thus, a developed stage of eco-material rifts, in which the overall history of rifts from the colonial to the current forms of corporate violence influence the psyche. To explain more, the sporadic instances of violence in the postcolonial regions, including sadomasochism against animals, people and plants and mass violence against the minorities, express an ecophobic psychological development. This condition is engendered by a combination of traumas from colonial encounters and the effects of living through the current
repressive political and cultural practices—a condition that I will elaborate through an analysis of *Babu Bangladesh!* in the successive sections.

The postcolonial psychological rift is the result of an uneven distribution of global ecological violence.\(^\text{16}\) The increase of global ecological risks results in what we can call an increasing export of psychic antipathy towards the other in the global South. Unequal distribution of wealth, power, and facilities between the global North and the South, thus, not only exports war, poverty, disasters, and conditions of congested living and competitive cohabitation to the South, but it also worsens the psychic condition of the population that unconsciously responds to such injustice occasionally with violence. Slavoj Žižek’s theories of violence can further elaborate on how the subjective and collective Bengali psyche has roots in a history of subjugation, repression, and discrimination. Žižek theorizes two interrelated forms of violence. The first category is the “subjective violence,” which is “…enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowd.”\(^\text{17}\) The other type is “systemic violence” which, according to the Slovenian thinker, is “…the violence inherent in a system: not only direct physical violence, but also the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of domination and exploitation, including the threat of violence.”\(^\text{18}\) Žižek’s observations on violence can categorically address the ecocidal impulses and activities in postcolonial locations such as Bangladesh, where individual and isolated acts of environmental abuses, which

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\(^\text{16}\) In the previous chapter, I discussed how Molly Wallace refers to Ulrich Beck’s concept to discuss the uneven distribution of wealth and risks in the world. For more, see *Risk Criticism: Precautionary Reading in an Age of Environmental Uncertainty* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016) 67.


\(^\text{18}\) Žižek, 9.
are “just the most visible” subjective acts of violence, are engendered by “systemic violence,” a logic of oppressiveness linked with the country’s prolonged colonial encounter and with the present-day dynamics of ecological imperialism.  

II. Colonial encounters, spatial silhouettes of the psyche, and replication of violence against the “ecological other”

_Babu Bangladesh!_ narrativizes a layered ecology of postcolonial Bangladesh, especially how the country’s history of double colonization has resulted in certain political, cultural and spatial realities that influence people’s behaviors towards the other in the environment. Choudhury offers fiction as a mode of exploration of the Bangladesh truth through “Babu-truth,” an exploration that welcomes the multiplicity of truth in comparison to the linearity of historical accounts. In the line with this proposition, the narrative eclectically mixes genres to sketch the spatial complexity, convoluted history, and various open and mysterious influences from home and abroad that shape the Bengali unconscious—all of which Choudhury brings together in his depiction of the National Parliament House as a symbol for Bangladesh and the Bengali psyche. The current examples of violence in the novel reflect how spatial politics combines with repressive political and religious norms to create a psychological rift of oppressiveness against the minorities and the other in the physical environment. Such practice, according to Choudhury’s portrayal, replicates to a large extent what the colonizers inflicted on the local people. Some examples of pre-independence atrocities and violence that the novel represents are: the problematic creation of boundary disputes by the British between Bangladesh and India,

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19 Žižek, 11.
which also sparked religious riots between Hindus and Muslims; and the Pakistani army’s genocide, environmental devastation, and rape of hundreds of thousands of women in Bangladesh. These instances of large-scale violence continue to haunt people who replicate such atrocities in many ways. The broader splits in the mind further transform due to the conditions of spatial and religious repression in practice, which lead to both individual and mass instances of violence against the minorities by the identification of religion, gender, class, and nonhuman status.

Choudhury’s complex portrayal of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban (The Capitol, or The National Parliament House of Bangladesh) as an architectural magnificence becomes an extended symbol of the free, mysterious and convoluted collective Bengali psyche, codifying the folds of cultural influences, ethnic diversities and violent histories that shape the Bengali identity. This representation allows Choudhury to draw a tension between the imagined and the real of the Bangladeshi space but, most importantly, it initiates his portrayal of a history of problematic spatial politics as central to the formation of Bangladesh. The first section of the book, called “Building,” narrates the Capitol from all possible angles: the plans and designs, history of construction, diverse cultural and historical influences, roles before and after the war, and Babu’s affinity with it. The reputed Philadelphian postmodernist architect Louis I. Kahn led the construction of the Capitol which began in 1961 and ultimately finished in 1988, with the Independence war of 1971 punctuating the construction for a long while. Choudhury dedicates a good number of pages to document Kahn’s incessant and genius efforts to symbolically reconstruct a Bangladesh from the rubbles left after the war and to gift the Bangladeshis “the capstone of his career” (56), a “world within a world” (58). Kahn navigated the subcontinent’s rich cultural past, places of coexistence of religions, bioregional dynamics, and buildings of
worship of different religions, and he tried to render all these influences with a “spirit of
commonness” in his creation (57). According to the narrative of the novel, Kahn’s visionary
recreation of the diversity and welcoming nature of Bangladesh as a material space renders
calming and transformative influences on those who enter the building and its premises. They are
“awakened to transcendental wisdom and insight,” but then again “only the strong-minded are
able to reconcile the perplexing mandate of Kahn’s legacy” (65). We also learn that
“[m]ultinational executives and local brokers jointly sacrificed compensations and commissions
for clauses ensuring eco-friendly operations and massive investments in projects for the rural
poor,” all convinced by the aura of the building and its rooms (68). Many international donors
waived debts and local millionaires gave millions in small loans to the poor. Overall, Choudhury
interprets the spatial dynamics and the aura of the building as Kahn’s visionary projection that
Bangladesh’s diversity is its main strength as a new nation.

Choudhury offers a material representation of the Bengali psyche and identity through the
symbolism of the parliament building, which also allows him to present his own theory of space
and its relation to the collective psyche. For his theory, Choudhury builds on Gaston Bachelard’s
concept of “topo-analysis” and even directly refers to him in his novel. 20 Topo-analysis as a
phenomenological lens studies the connections between our psychology and the places we
inhabit. Bachelard refers to depth psychologists like Carl Jung who see a building’s architectural

20 Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, translated by Maria Jolas (Massachusetts: Beacon
Press, 1994) xxxvi. Choudhury refers to Bachelard to use Babu as a connector between Babu’s
childhood home and the parliament building—his adult dreams and thought developing from his
experience around the “childhood” domicile, according to “Bachelard’s hypothesis” (Babu
Bangladesh! 49), and his political self influenced by the spatial grandeur and geometric riddles
of the Capitol.
influences and different rooms as representatives of human emotions and fears, mainly to observe that “there is ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the human soul.”[21] Bachelard argues that the retreat from the universal to the topographical influences on the human mind can offer an analysis of the “finer rhythms” which would “tend to reconcile and lighten the ambivalences that psychoanalysis find in the disturbed psyche.”[22] Choudhury’s portrayal of the Capitol as a space builds on Bachelard’s idea by offering what we can call a postcolonial topoanalysis. Choudhury chooses to enter the repudiated and disturbing segments of the unconscious which Bachelard’s generalized concept sidelines as the “hostile space;” such space, Bachelard defines, is the “space of hatred and combat [and] can only be studied in the context of impassioned subject matter and apocalyptic images.”[23] Choudhury’s Capitol with all its architectural folds and meaning-making processes is an ever-evolving site like Bangladesh, calming people with Bachelard’s rhythmic influences as well as enervating people with inexplicable experiences and apocalyptic images that its nooks and corners can generate. Choudhury highlights these bifurcated conditions to imply that Kahn chose to imagine Bangladesh as a place that would nurture benevolence and suppress greed and conspiracies.

The postcolonial reality of Bangladesh, according to Choudhury, has ultimately denied the vision that Kahn attempted to build into his design of the Capitol. The failure of Kahn’s vision encapsulates the idea that colonial legacies, as well as the ongoing religious and capitalist interventions, have undermined the country’s potential to thrive on its ethnic and environmental

[22] Bachelard, 65.
[23] Bachelard, xxxxvi. Bachelard declaredly leaves out “hostile” spaces from his discussion of certain spaces that only represent the “finer rhythms” of the human soul.
diversity. Such a wrong turn for the country also implies a failure of Kahn’s hope of shaping the collective psyche by shaping the environment. The novel narrates that Kahn endeavored to keep religious parochialism away from his symbolic portrayal of the Bengali consciousness and identity, despite continuous attempts from different ruling parties at different times. The postcolonial Bangladeshi space today is cramped and is interspersed with repressive religious ideologies, a probable turn that the visionary architect feared and decidedly kept away from his design. The narrator tells us how in his efforts Kahn might have considered “how artisans and craftsmen, hardened over time against zealots and their new devotions, refused to abandon techniques when ordered to by transient lords” (61). The narrative includes snippets of the way corruption and religiosity have entered the building and the Bangladeshi consciousness. The principles of secularism, on which the nation was founded, were toppled by successive governments who tried to solidify power by institutionalizing Islam as the singular state religion, and “the decades of religious conditioning had undeniably changed the character of the nation” (60). Babu’s fascination with the building shapes his political resolve to ensure that “the riddles of the Capitol did not fall into the wrong hands” (78). Yet, the novel also delineates how the murky and corrupt developments of national politics, along with the colonial legacies of capitalist interventions, continuously shape the relationships between the people and their space differently than the magnanimity Kahn installed in his reincarnation of the location’s history and cultural diversity. As an example, the novel cites how Bangladesh has lost 96% of its trees and forests in just decades due to people’s greed and shortsighted policies of deforestation, making the country “one of the least forested lands in the world, facing a host of problems including soil erosion, plummeting biodiversity, as well as air pollution” (196). Another reason for the unprecedented and unhealthy space congestion in Bangladesh is the rampant housing
developments that replace farming lands and cause deforestation, and the mushrooming projects in Dhaka made the capital city join “the priciest realty market in the [Asian] continent” (111).

*Babu Bangladesh!* demonstrates that the willful Partition of the subcontinent by the British colonizers immediately sparked disputes and violence, and these experiences have continued to shape the spatial consciousness of the people who often reenact similar violence. The narrator indicts the departing British colonizers’ drawing of disputed boundaries between independent India and East and West Pakistan, which left the countries in a condition of spatial complexity and chaos. The novel narrates how the “surgically demarcated borders have resulted in enclaves, exclaves and counter-enclaves (enclaves with enclaves) where an area of Bangladesh is surrounded by Indian territory, which is in turn surrounded by Bangladeshi regions” (305). Such problematic borders have often led to land disputes between these two countries, especially over the high possibility of available gas and oil resources underneath. Besides, topographical realities have also added to the people’s combative psychology, when it comes to claiming land shares. The novel portrays how geographical changes such as submerging of islands and river erosion create landless ecological refugees but the reappearance of the islands often results in “fierce ownership clashes” among the contending parties. The narrator, thus, summons the earlier history of border disputes to explain why “in Bangladesh, redistributive processes involving riverine terrains are vulnerable to corruption and bloodletting” (304).

The British Partition of the Indian subcontinent not only problematized the spatiality of the new nation of Bangladesh, but the formation of new nations based on religions also led to a series of riots between the Hindus and the Muslims, killing masses of people in pre-independence Bangladesh. The British division of the Indian subcontinent made India a country
predominantly for the Hindus and the two parts of Pakistan for the Muslims. As a result, religious riots broke out immediately, over control of properties as well as over trifles and conspiracies, in numerous locations of both these countries. The novel narrates that in the Barisal district of Bangladesh, riots in 1950 “had resulted in arson, loot, rape and murder for thousands of Hindus” (40). The novel also portrays how the legacy continued through the Pakistan era into certain practices in current Bangladesh, especially the incidents of religious violence that take many lives and devastate ecological landscapes. A “litany of communal horrors pockmarking the years between 1947 through 1971 had ensured that the Bangladeshi Hindu family had been all but destroyed” (213), a practice that has been duplicated on numerous occasions in an independent Bangladesh after 1971. Some women of the ethnic minorities, who have been ardent supporters of Babu’s politics and environmental agenda in the novel, confront him for his failure to protect them: “There are no lands left for us, no chicken, no cattle. Militias and outsiders loot from us at will. They burn our temples and then rape our daughters” (259). One of their main accusations is that leaders like Babu have been complacent in letting the local and foreign capitalists seize their lands and persecute them.

_Babu Bangladesh!_ narrates examples of how people repeat the history of violence against religious minorities, and the representation of a real event, in particular, demonstrates mass frenzy as an example of collective psychological rift. On July 17 of 2015, a fake Facebook post on a religious issue drove a large group of people into a frenzy, causing extraordinary destruction: “a town named Ramu was devastated by a mob of 25,000 rioters. They left a trail of destruction as they torched Buddhist pagodas and homes there…they set fire to the largest Buddhist statue in the country,” all claiming that they had a religious responsibility to respond to the post” (361). This sudden mass frenzy, symptomatic of a collective mind that was ready to
explode, engendered devastation similar to what the rioters committed after Partition or what the Pakistan army acted out deliberately in 1971. Most people participating in the destruction hardly had any clear motives and so, I would like to explain the occurrence as people’s displaced expression of repressed psychological contents against the religious other.\textsuperscript{24} In other words, people’s frenzied participation in the act of violence worked as more of a vent to their accumulated, suppressed emotions than a real protest for a cause. The novel also comments on successive governments’ patronization of religious fundamentalism and provides examples of political frustrations vented out on the religious minority. Babu’s close associate Kanu is hacked to death by his political opponents, but the other reason behind his murder is clearly his Hindu identity (50).

Choudhury’s representation of the persecution of ethnic minorities demonstrates how religious violence complements environmental derangement and loss of biodiversity in Bangladesh. One important representation is the case of the Jumma people who fought for the country’s independence but were forced to give up their lands and farming. Such discrimination and violence against the minority groups and their original habitats lead to further ecological divergences and exacerbate the psychological splits in people. The narrative portrays that the already existing ecological alliances among diverse groups of people and their ecosystems gradually give way to the greed of mainstream people and their “Bureaucratic persecution” (213) of the minorities. The Jumma protesters were persecuted by law enforcers, their houses were set

\textsuperscript{24} Freud explains displacement as an expression of negative emotions, stored in the unconscious from earlier experiences, towards less threatening objects. For more, see Sigmund Freud, \textit{The Interpretation of Dreams}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., translated and edited by James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1965).
on fire, women resistant to leaving were raped, and the remaining ones who tried to survive changed their religions. The narrator calls it “one of the most tragic betrayals the Bangladeshi nation has inflicted upon itself,” and views this atrocity as an ecological rupture for the nation: “As a result of this policy, Bangladeshis severed arteries to their birth cord, a link that stretches into antediluvian times, connecting them to the first humans to inhabit their lands” (213). The driving out of minorities also meant massive violence on the vegetation. In Tangail of Madhupur, the original habitat of ethnic minorities, a mere “7,000 acres remained of the original 46,000 acres of forest,” including “medicinal plants and tubers…pushed to extinction” (213).

Choudhury also explores the neoliberal nexus behind the violence; transnational organizations and local collaborators profited from policies that sought deforestation and set up developmental projects. People in power transformed the freed land of Madhupur into plantations for commercial purposes, resulting in “millions of dollars in soft loans from the Asian Development Bank” (214). The policymakers, who patronize such projects in Bangladesh, often circulate their ideas of development as eco-friendly and define the minorities as potential threats both to development and the environment. I would also like to add here that there are regular reports in Bangladeshi newspapers on how perpetrators dump toxic wastes and hot water at the base of trees deliberately to kill them, and fell and sell them as timber for overnight profit. According to one report in August 2015, more than a hundred trees by the side of a road in the northern part of Bangladesh were killed in this way.

Choudhury’s portrayal of the Samadi Island episode in the novel allegorizes the culmination of the latest and systemic developments of material extraction and psychological rifts in Bangladesh. The organized looting of the resources of the island and the rumored
extermination of the assumed or imaginary amphibian humanoids, the original dwellers of the island, represents a microcosmic scenario of how a local-global nexus of power perpetrates violence against the ecological other. The invisible yet powerful local and global actors consider Babu’s eco-ethic as a threat to the “invasive scientific colonization” of indigenous bioregions and, therefore, they must suppress protests and politicians like Babu (301). A German scientist, who is employed on the island, shows Babu the signs of a civilization wiped out. The German also appeals to Babu to save the island because he worries that the resources there will motivate the capitalists and the powerful locals to “plunder zis island faster zan a continent” (310). The pressures allegedly corrupt Babu to a certain extent, and the narrator expresses his doubts about the ability of Western readers to understand the reality of the “third world,” that they “may find repugnant the backdoor dealings, the underhand duplicity and the artful winks and nods exchanged in Babu’s pursuit of his ambitions” (219). However, the narrative immediately turns to international interventions in the affairs of the island and the Bangladesh politics regulated by the likes of “the CIA and the RAW,” which indicates how the means for corruption and the grounds for ecological rifts are exported disproportionately to the postcolonial locations.

The narrative of the novel directly connects the current instances of violence in Bangladesh to the historically developed processes through colonization, and the practice of replicating violence arises from a psychological and cultural condition that is quite similar to

25 The narrative of the novel adds substantial scientific records of the remnants of different specimens of Homo Sapiens existing in real islands in different parts of Asia, quite like the Samadi Island. However, the representation of the traces of such imaginary lives on Samadi Island appears more as a magical realist mode that Choudhury adopts to indict how capitalists ravage ethnic groups and their habitats.
what Hegel’s master-slave discourse elaborates.\textsuperscript{26} Since “the fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s avenging anger,”\textsuperscript{27} a strange duality of mind, that of switching positions between the roles of the exploiter and the sufferer, shapes many of people’s actions. Their violent activities, accordingly, become reenactments of the colonial violence unmitigated in the eras afterwards: “decolonization is quite simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men. Without any period of transition, there is a total, complete and absolute substitution.”\textsuperscript{28} We can detect modes of substitution of power in Bangladesh, especially in the way the nexus of repressive apparatuses of governance and neo-imperial forces replace the oppressive colonial masters. Decades of corruption, as well as centralization of power and establishments, drive people in search of a better future towards the capital city Dhaka and other big cities. These places have, therefore, become over-congested with claustraphobic physical settings, and these cities also offer discriminatory wages, healthcare and other social facilities. The psychological effects of living in such settings, which Bachelard calls a “hostile space,” can be really damaging. According to psychologists, such configurations of space can push the mind to such an extent that it can seek violent expressions, resulting in individual and even mob violence. In such acts of violence, individuals and mobs imitate their colonial masters and degrade the ecosystem. Moreover, the power-mongering partisan politics in Bangladesh has inserted religious sentiments into most

\textsuperscript{26} Jon Mills, \textit{The Unconscious Abyss: Hegel’s Anticipation of Psychoanalysis} (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002) 136. Mills discusses various etymological and phenomenological implications of the master-slave discussion and highlights how a bondage of desire and recognition sustains the relationship.

\textsuperscript{27} Homi K. Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture} (London: Routledge, 1994) 63-64.

\textsuperscript{28} Fanon, 27.
cultural practices, the beginning of which reflects in their intent to interfere with the design of the Capitol as well as the constitution of Bangladesh, as the novel represents.

The discussed examples of the legacy of violence not only illustrate a cultural and environmental extension of the master-slave positionalities but also demonstrate a psychic rift in which a part of the self seeks to eliminate the “other” of the unconscious, externalized in the environment. The perpetrators of environmental devastation imitate what the colonizers have done before, but their sporadic acts also sustain the combined system of neoliberal aggressions and state violence that Žižek’ identifies as “systemic violence.” These acts also reflect a rift in the individual and the collective psyche in which the “self” wants to exterminate the “ecological other.”

Drawing on Freud and object-relations theory of the self’s relationship with the other, Rosalind Minsky observes that our aggressiveness is a “treatment [which] is meted out towards people regarded as ‘other’, the sub-human bearers of the unacceptable parts of the self which psychoanalytic theory suggests some of us unconsciously project into the external world to be rid of them.”

Similarly, by referring to Lacan, Joseph Dodds maintains that the “other” is essentially “a core aspect of the self…and it is uncanny because there is this feeling of

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29 Sarah Jaquette Ray, *The Ecological Other: Environmental Exclusion in American Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013) 1. Ray develops the concept of “ecological other” to refer to certain groups of people in the environment who fall victim to mainstream environmental discourses which “as a discourse of disgust enforces social hierarchies even as it seeks to dismantle other forms of hegemony.” I borrow the term to imply that the socially formed “ecological other” has a psychic equivalent, in which the ego-self first identifies the “other” in the unconscious and then as the “ecological other” in the environment.

30 Minsky, 153.
recognition."\(^{31}\) The split, according to Lacan, begins with a child’s mirror image which the child recognizes as its own; but the child also “experiences feelings of ambivalence, or aggressivity,” an identification that gradually becomes part of the child’s consciousness.\(^{32}\) The psychic splits discussed in these universal theories develop differently and more intensely in a postcolonial context, as reflected in the examples of violence against the religious and ethnic other in Bangladesh. In the case of these incidents, the traumatic memories of the past play a role to generate a sudden frenzy in the mass people. Their violent acts duplicate the past experiences of violence, following a recognition of the religious minorities as the other who they should eliminate. On an individual level, children additionally receive cultural training that identifies objects of loathing or fear for them. The novel includes an account of Babu’s childhood in which his parents make him “watch a mongoose and cobra fight in the garden” in order to instill in him “a very necessary fear and awe for their deltaic wilderness” (36). We also see an expansion from individual to culturally-developed, collective cases of psychological rifts, amplifying the split of the self to the split of the collective self. The traumatic experiences of violence against the religious and ethnic minorities during and immediately after the colonial and Pakistan period exemplify such psychological rifts, in which the collective self tries to eliminate the culturally defined “unacceptable” reflections of the self, identified as the “ecological other.”

\(^{31}\) Dodds, 121.

III. Psychological rifts from double colonization: war and sexual violence

*Babu Bangladesh!* documents horrific accounts of war atrocities that the Pakistan army inflicted on the Bangladeshi people and the environment in 1971—atrocities that explain how the violence has passed on and culturally aggravated to turn the victims into potential perpetrators. The war atrocities further complicate the ideas of psychological rifts. A section of the once colonized Pakistan plays the role of colonizers against the other part of the country and further worsens the rifts through unprecedented genocide and sexual and environmental violence. Choudhury’s representation of war violence reflects psychological rifts with traits of sadomasochism against human and nonhuman entities, and these traits bear racial, gender, sexual and environmental dynamics. His portrayal of post-1971 violence in Bangladesh shows how the traits of war violence reassert themselves not only as the legacies of the war but also as culturally modified appearances of violence.

Violence against the environment and people in Bangladesh has potential roots in the traumatic memories of the War of Independence of 1971. The incidents of mass violence, with their sexual and racial traits, have become part of the psychopathological drives as well as potential influences for continued violence in Bangladesh. The war happened after the then Pakistan rulers lost the 1970 general elections of undivided Pakistan to the Bengali Awami League. The “whiter” rulers didn’t want to hand over power to ‘non-martial’ “Bengali ‘black bastards’” who were viewed as racially inferior and thus exterminable, just like the trees, animals and ethnic people now (143). The war violence, which Bangladeshis were subjected to, was actually the culmination of a long period of second colonization of Bangladesh. The genocide of 1971 wiped out “anywhere from 300, 000 to three million” lives, and the army “slew every Bengali male they found between the ages of twelve and sixty” (145). Hindu minorities and
women were among the worst sufferers; hundreds and thousands of women were raped and tortured brutally. The tradition of violence against the ethnic and religious minorities in today’s Bangladesh, therefore, bears influences from both the British and the Pakistan period of subjugation and torture.

The novel’s representation of the frenzy of a character called Major Tareq Saud reflects a condition of psychological rifts in which the drive for violence prompts frequent swapping of victims. Saud is a Pakistani major in charge of an important troop employed on the Dhaka University campus in the capital of Bangladesh. His feverish attempt to topple a huge banyan tree represents a mind that seeks to demolish the environment. The shade of the banyan tree, known as “bot tola,” has been a refuge for cultural and political activities at Dhaka University for decades. Choudhury represents the tree as a symbol of Bengali freedom and vegetation that Major Saud tries to overpower with all his energy and military machinery. Having failed to destroy the tree in over a week, the major and his troops behave in a frenzied manner and torture the captured freedom fighters a lot more intensely, as if to inflict pain on the tree. The narrative portrays how he vents his repressed anger on other entities that perform as objects of substitution for him: “Major Saud behaved like a man possessed, venting dark furies upon the three [captives], surgically removing ears, fingers, toes and limbs” (179). If such expressions of eco-phobia or antipathy develop as a default emotion of colonial encounters, the major embodies such a drive for violence. Saud’s atrocities against the tree and the people couple with his violence against the religious minority, once again reminding us about the imposition of such practice in postcolonial Bangladesh. The major reports to his boss in Pakistan: “Three Hindu and Buddhist temples destroyed, all elements extinguished” (172). He and two of his officers were later “hospitalized in a psychiatric ward” because of their paranoia and phobia. Saud’s psychic
rift considers the greater ecological setup of Bangladesh as his enemy—the “ecological other;” in his violent treatment of the other, he considers a tree, the freedom fighters, and the minorities as interchangeable entities. This dimension of interchangeability proves that the impulse of destruction in his mind is his main driving force and the victims of his violence are just examples of the “ecological other” that he must annihilate.

I consider that the history of sexual violence and suppression plays an important role in the formation of the postcolonial psyche in the context of Bangladesh. The psychological effects of the appalling degree of sexual violence against the Bangladeshi women in 1971, followed by cultural-religious suppression of sexuality in the successive decades, have imposed the sporadic practice of sexualized violence in Bangladesh. We see such practice of violence in the sadistic or sadomasochistic performances of cruelty against the weaker in the psychical environment, examples of which I will discuss in a moment. Babu Bangladesh! provides a detailed account of not only the extent and brutality of the rape of women during the war but also the negligence these women have suffered in the new nation. A total of “between 200,000 and 400,000 Bengali women were raped over the nine-month war” (198). After the war, Bangladeshi soldiers discovered hundreds of thousands of them “in military brothels…fully naked inside their quarters” (197). Many of them lost their mental balance and developed severe trauma from months of torture in the military camps, and many “committed suicide afterwards—poison and drowning were most common” (198). Many of them who survived “were abandoned by husbands, families and society in general” (198). Choudhury sums up their status in the free society as “dishonoured souls” who couldn’t live among others, an attitude that contributes to the overall cultural attitude to women as part of the larger, “ecological other.” Although sexual suppression is largely subjective, it is also a cultural phenomenon in Bangladesh because of the
religious interpretations casting a controlling gaze on even adults and their relationships before marriage. Individual and cultural repression, coupled with the effects of war in the unconscious, often translates into sudden as well as regular outbursts of rage, violence and even mass hysteria, mostly wrecked upon the weak, the inanimate, and the immobile in nature. If the war caused a liberation of sexuality in the form of extreme violence, the post-war culture forced extremely opposite violence of sexual suppression. Therefore, the current examples of violence, which often contain hidden or expressed traits of sadism or sadomasochism, relate to the psychological effects of violence and repression of sexuality.

Rosalind Minsky’s concept of “feminized other” can further substantiate my observations about the effects of sexual violence on people’s aggressiveness towards the “ecological other” in postcolonial Bangladesh. Minsky borrows from Freud’s claim that children at an early age unconsciously reject ‘femininity’ as a sign of biological weakness, and she extends Freud’s concept in the bigger context of cultural patriarchy. According to Minsky, the concept of “feminized other” can offer “insight into the roots of racism, classism, tribalism, homophobia, violent forms of nationalism, religious persecution, ethnocentrism and intolerance of difference generally as forms of ‘feminization’ stemming from an unconscious hierarchical and destructive response to difference.” Minsky explains that our historical and universal practices of patriarchy and power against women have also perpetrated the mechanism of “feminizing” other entities, a mechanism that uses violence for omnipotence and control. In the context of Bangladesh, therefore, we can claim that the violence against the “feminized other” exacerbates due to the explicit cultural codes of patriarchy and because of the psychological responses to the

33 Minsky, 87.
violent subjugation and humiliation of women during the War of Independence. In other words, the effects of patriarchy, along with the self’s projection of women as the humiliated other in the unconscious, have created an intensified feeling of dispensability about the “feminized other” in the collective unconscious, which is a more aggravated feeling in comparison to the generalized psychic condition that Minsky takes up. Thus, the history of sexual violence potentially contributes to the formation of the “feminized other” in the psyche, expressed as gendered violence against all forms of the “ecological other.”

Let me further illustrate a few cultural and literary examples of violence against the human and nonhuman other in Bangladesh, mainly to substantiate my discussion on the practice of hierarchical, sexualized torture of the “ecological other.” Many prominent Bangladeshi writers, such as Akhtaruzzaman Elias and Hasan Azizul Haq whose works have influenced the representation of indigenous habitats in Babu Bangladesh!, provide symbolic representations of sexual repression codified in violence towards the other in everyday incidents. Haq in his short story “Shokun” (“The Vulture”) uses the bird of prey in its dying moments to show how the repressed human mind seeks out its vent, often in a violent way.34 I find this representation a fitting example of violence in postcolonial locations caused by repressive ideologies. In this story, a group of poor, teenaged boys from the poverty-stricken northern part of Bangladesh chase a dying vulture and inflict sadistic cruelty on it. The bird becomes a symbolic object on which they unleash their repression created by days of hunger and lack of sexual indulgence. Their intention to taunt the tired, directionless vulture and to revel in its suffering is reflected in the words of Rafiq, one of the boys: “…come, let’s have some fun; let’s make this thing dance a

while” (17). The filthy, odorous vulture symbolizes nature that they want to despoil even more: “An unbearably strong odor punched the nose—as if the vulture had just bathed in the ditch fouled by decomposed bodies of animals and reeking of a certain smell similar to that of fish scales” (17). The boys view the vulture also as a symbol for the local capitalists: “[the boys] felt the vulture would claim a share of their food—that the shirts they were wearing were like its filthy, stinking feathers—that it reminded them of the face of the money-monger capitalist [named Oghore Bostom]” (20). Haq sets the stories of this collection in desolate, unfertile landscapes of northern Bangladesh which appear very much like ecological ruins, largely due to the uneven distribution of wealth and the iron grip of local capitalists who control the labor and the land of poor farmers.

The uniqueness of ecocidal activities in postcolonial locations proves that ecophobia is “a dynamic interplay of biological and cultural forces,” and such activities in Bangladesh reflect influences from the earlier history of violence in Bangladesh.35 The following harrowing and unprecedented examples, which I have witnessed myself and come across in the media, demonstrate that the human mind is susceptible to prompting extraordinary acts of violence, often with unprecedented, sexualized antipathy towards the “other.” In my childhood, I often saw people derive pleasure from taunting dogs stuck together after mating, and people’s expressions would tell that there was something forbidden about it. However, I witnessed a type of ghastly cruelty done to dogs on two occasions, after which I was traumatized and always dreaded the

possibility of seeing a similar act. Once, a young man, and then a teenage boy on another day, cut through the stuck genitals of the mating dogs with a rapier to split them. I have even seen restaurant boys throw hot water on dogs deliberately; scars from such atrocious deeds are often seen in the bodies of stray dogs and other animals roaming about the streets. These activities reflect minds with a deep-seated dislike for the other forms of life. Moreover, in two recent harrowing incidents that would surpass any imaginings of human atrocities, teenage boys were tortured to death in ways that are symptomatic of violence caused by (sexual) repression. On July 8, 2015 in Sylhet, Bangladesh, a 13-year-old boy Razon was beaten for a prolonged period to death by two brothers and their accomplices, and he was even denied water despite his repeating pleas for water and mercy. The boy finally died of a brain hemorrhage. Later, an autopsy revealed about 64 injury marks on his body. The culprits even videotaped and shared the heinous act on social media. The boy was allegedly involved in stealing a rickshaw van but the alternative version that came out was that the culprits had killed him after having failed to rape him. Less than a month after the Razon murder, another 12-year-old boy Rakib, who had left his job to avoid poor pay and physical torture, was pumped to death at a motorcycle repair workshop in Khulna, another big city in Bangladesh. Employers from the workshop that he used to work at inserted a high-pressure air pump nozzle into his rectum and released air into his body. He died from severe damage to his internal organs. These instances of violence either emulated a sexual act or had a connection to repressed sexuality, a phenomenon that I will further elaborate on.

There are sadistic elements of torture in the above traumatic cases of homicide and torture of animals, and such acts are prompted by the conditions of psychic rifts that I have discussed before. Sadism has various meanings and subdivisions in the discourse of psychoanalysis. The most common idea of sadism is the elicitation of pleasure, often sexual,
from inflicting pain, torture or violence on others, usually weaker by strength, social class or in other categories. The lack of consciousness in the aggressors and their prolonged or repeated exercise of torture reflect their specific mode of gaining pleasure. In the mind of the sadist, according to Benjamin Karpman, “the will to power is sexually accentuated”, and “he revels in the fear, anger and the humiliation of the victim.” The incidents I have cited show contents such as involvement of the genitalia, simulation of sexual activity while torturing someone to death, violence done after desire was suppressed, and violence done as a result of what appears to be repressed sexual desire. Other symptoms of these incidents are the lack of immediate guilt in the perpetrators, and their suppressed or expressed revelry in tormenting victims, for instance by prolonged group celebrations after the animals have been cut apart or killed. Relevant psychoanalytical theories point out that an ego-centric human attitude towards others in nature has grown to such an extent that people now respond to their surroundings with utmost antipathy. Uriel Fogué’s term “(eco)sadism,” which refers to “the violent manner in which anthropocentrism has placed nature in the sense of standing-reserve,” is also helpful to interpret these violent incidents, although the sadistic contents in the current examples seem a lot more sexually amplified than what Fogué’s term suggests. The incidents of animal torture reflect a localized and more intensified idea of what Ernest Borneman termed as “zoosadism,” a term that generally explains the deriving of (sexual) pleasure in tormenting animals. Although the practice of deriving pleasure in tormenting animals is not unique to postcolonial societies, the

performance of such acts in the public sphere and their normalization to a certain extent certainly deserves specific scrutiny.

*Babu Bangladesh!* integrates a subtle representation of what I would like to call the continued performance of eliminating the “father” figure in the history of Bangladesh. This representation demonstrates that the non-mitigatable, bifurcated impulses of psychic rifts lead to the widely divisive trends of the Bengali consciousness—a divisiveness in celebrating and eliminating the father figures. The impulse to replace the father figure, according to psychologists, shows that the self tries to obtain complete control of the desired object.38 In the case of Bangladesh’s history, the self’s control of the mother as an object of desire translates into the perpetrators’ control of the motherland for political power and for the natural resources. The narrator’s incessant investigation through many quarters yields that Babu might have been “assassinated by petrochemical oligarchs” (396). Babu has shown unmatched growth towards becoming a national leader and a celebrated protector of the indigenous environments. Therefore, his elimination somewhat duplicates what the narrative reminds us as the “chilling act of national patricide,” the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the undisputed leader of the Liberation War of Bangladesh and the Father of the Nation who was murdered by local and foreign detractors within four years of independence (41). His killing, again, appears to be a continuation of the indiscriminate killing of prominent Bangladeshi figures by the Pakistan army and their local collaborators. Sensing an imminent defeat, the army slaughtered “hundreds of scholars, lawyers, journalists, politicians, scientists and businessmen,” an act that was meant to be “a parting shot into the neural cortex of an infant nation” (192). The very acts of replacing the father figure or

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38 Minsky, 133-34. Minsky discusses the basic psychoanalytical observation of how the father works as an obstacle to the child’s consideration of the mother as an object of fantasy.
the protectors of the national interests and the environment demonstrate the divisive ideologies and ambivalent responses of the Bengali consciousness towards the very ecology they are part of. However, such a representation in the novel also incriminates the local and foreign agents, such as the “petrochemical oligarchs,” whose active involvement in such killings sustains the systemic violence and the worsening of the psychic rifts in postcolonial Bangladesh.

IV. Conclusion: from “psychological rifts” to “ecological self”

In one of his journal entries, Babu ruminates on the lifestyle of the indigenous community, the Santals, especially how their animistic relationship with nature can serve as a model for maintaining ecological sustainability. Babu calls such a spirit of living “a pantheistic and conscientiological sensitivity to the world,” as he also articulates the reason for the current instances of ecocidal activities in Bangladesh: “Snapping off psychosomatic antennae and neglecting biorhythms would mean devastation” (46). I consider the breaking of the “psychosomatic antennae” as metaphorical of the postcolonial psychological rifts that result from our growing separation from the greater ecology of the bioregion we inhabit. Our loss of “antennae” means that our concern for and affiliation with nature “has undergone a cultural suppression.”39 This repression has relegated our “ecological unconscious”40 and promoted our ego-self, creating a further split between our selfishly driven cultural activities and our original concerns for the greater ecosystem. Choudhury’s notion of “psychosomatic antennae” serves as a

39 Dodds, 123.
reminder of Ulric Neisser’s concept of the “ecological self,” which refers to the sensitivity of individuals in seeing themselves as integrated into the bigger physical environment: “What we perceive is ourselves as embedded in the environment, and acting with respect to it…our own actions constitute the very characteristics of the ecological self that we are simultaneously perceiving.” Babu Bangladesh! echoes Neisser’s urge that we should identify with all entities through our respectful “ecological self,” instead of promoting the psychic splits that act with vengeance against the forgotten part of the self, identified as the “ecological other” in the physical environment. Identifying with the ecological self “gives us a more intelligent, deeper sense of our relationship to the ecosphere” and convinces us to treat our environment with more respect and selflessness.

The narrative of the novel offers clues and scopes to understand the nation’s collective psyche and highlights the importance of negotiating history. The following paragraph is one of the many occasions on which the narrative stresses the need for negotiating the fears and traumas of the past in order to work towards a better future:

we must look into the abyss of human history, into its darkness, its dark green emerald, and into its brilliance and daylight…We inevitably find ourselves thrashing about in the belly of intimate moments we thought long since disappeared. We will awaken inside desolate crypts populated by forgotten demons that roam untethered. If we are able to

42 Deborah Du Nann Winter, Ecological Psychology: Healing the Split between Planet and Self (Mahwah, N.J. & London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003) 249. Winter adopts Ulric Neisser’s concept of the “ecological self” to offer a sustained discussion on what constitutes the psychology behind environmentally fitting behaviors.
bear these most harrowing of reckonings, we will be rewarded with new growth, and peace and light. (400)

These sentences indicate that an understanding of the Bengali mind requires us to address both “the abyss of human history” and “the belly of intimate moments,” which suggests a combination of the universal and the culture-specific angles of postcolonial “ecopsychoanalysis.” In other words, the quote proposes a range of psychological issues to understand the psyche of the postcolonial everyman, and some of these issues are the “murky pathways” of Bangladesh’s history, the collective history that goes into the making of an individual, and the repressed cultural memories and enemies that come back to haunt the people. The “forgotten demons” mirrors Leela Gandhi’s idea of “postcolonial amnesia,” a repudiated content of the mind that resurfaces to unsettle the persona.

Babu Bangladesh!, thus, serves as a fresh reminder that the people of Bangladesh have not yet systematically negotiated the trauma of their violent past of torture and subjugation. Governments have failed to settle the question of the country’s conflicted religious outlook and people have divided reactions to the issues of independence and the ruthless exploitation and torture caused during the Pakistani era. Therefore, the reason that I have tried to establish a connection between the sadistic, unusual acts of violence in Bangladesh and its history of subjugation is to argue that working out such connections can lead us towards the much-needed negotiation of the postcolonial psyche—a reconciliation process that postcolonial critics emphasize. In other words, the focus of this chapter on the regional peculiarities of violence against the physical environment, and their causes, does not attempt a derogatory representation of a certain postcolonial location. Rather, the discussion emphasizes the need for postcolonial people’s coming to terms with the traumas of their past so that they can resist the bigger political
power that has always exploited their resources and mind, and will continue to do so in newer ways, making the human unconscious as one of the most affected sites of political hegemony. Such awakening will also help postcolonial scholars generate discussions on the psychoanalytical angles of environmental justice.
Introduction: Overcoming Assumptions

In the edited book *Margins in the Classroom: Teaching Literature*, Kostas Myrsiades and Linda S Myrsiades compile essays that explore literature teachers’ need for adopting radical pedagogies that incorporate modern theories and reflect teachers’ role as educators with social and political awareness.¹ The introduction to the book reflects on the dilemma that the role entails: “we are faced with…political responsibilities that remove education from the comfortable role of passive onlooker in the greater cultural debate and place the academic squarely within the space of the contested site of struggle.”² Over time, climate change and environmental issues have become the most urgent topic for many in the English departments who consider that addressing such issues is their immediate political, social, and academic responsibility. Nevertheless, scholars in the field also find themselves in the thick of responding to assumptions about the credibility of English departments to teach issues of environmental disasters and climate change. There is a general perception that such issues are the purview of science rather than humanities disciplines which are considered too subjective to understand and impact the reality of environmental concerns. However, we also need to evaluate if these assumptions result from the gaps among disciplines and worsen our collective denialism of

² *Margins in the Classroom*, xii.
environmental derangements. We can read and teach literary texts to explore the debatable aspects of social and political angles of diverse issues as *Margins in the Classroom* points out. Overall, such efforts can work as counternarratives to the general sense of denial which is embedded in the way global capitalism creates, circulates, and recognizes global emergencies. Besides, the detractors of humanities disciplines treat environmental challenges as only hard facts and overlook the need for proper discursive and critical interpretations of the challenges that disciplines like English studies can provide.

The English departments can address the above assumptions by rethinking the existing curriculum and teaching. One important way to do that could be the inclusion of more environmental literatures in the syllabi and the integration of effective pedagogies that can appeal to students of diverse disciplinary backgrounds. Amitav Ghosh and Rob Nixon illustrate in their nonfiction works that conventional literary narratives are not able to account for environmental disaster’s aftermath (slow violence) or scale (global warming), but both of them argue that genres other than the modern novel are potentially better equipped to deal with these issues of temporal and spatial scale of climate challenges. However, Ghosh predicts that experimental forms of fiction will emerge to tackle climate issues,³ and Nixon cites examples of fiction, such as *Animal’s People*, which successfully adopt the politics, history, and differential

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³ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016) 84. Ghosh thinks that such new forms of fiction will foreground environmental issues and readjust the language and form of novel to accommodate the plot and discourse of climate change. His latest novel *Gun Island* (2019) adopts “hybrid forms” that blend formal narrative with the supernatural and the speculative, an experimentation that demonstrates how Ghosh tries to move beyond the realist tradition of fiction to incorporate the themes of climate change more substantively.
consequences of environmental disasters. In my dissertation, I examine novels that not only deal with pressing environmental concerns but also experiment with the form of the novel as they incorporate a range of interdisciplinary angles to broaden the scope of the novel. These novels demonstrate how the literary genre can respond to the current crisis in a way that other stakeholders cannot. However, taking these works of fiction to a broader audience, especially by teaching them in the classroom the least, is a mammoth challenge in itself. To perform the task, Greg Garrard observes that teachers and scholars not only have to include more empirically driven approaches in their ecocritical pedagogies, but they also have to face challenges such as skepticism about the disciplines in humanities, while teaching ecocriticism alongside “dealing with scale, coping with interdisciplinarity, and developing strategies for non-literary media.” Garrard argues that empiricism and interdisciplinarity can make ecocritical pedagogies more solid and appealing.

It is in this context of choosing environmental fiction and teaching them through effective ecocritical pedagogies that I propose my perspectives. This epilogue serves as an extension of the analytical and theoretical ideas taken up in the earlier chapters and presents a few angles from which such ideas, or more generally South Asian Anglophone ecofiction, can be taught in the classroom. If the existing assumptions about English studies are symptomatic of our collective mind’s denial of a grave problem like the global ecological crisis, I argue that the classroom can be a good medium to minimize the gap. The chief pedagogical implications of my

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theories in the dissertation concern teaching works of ecofiction from South Asia as the representative works of South Asian Anglophone fiction. I argue that teaching ecofiction through the lens of my conceptual framework of eco-material rifts can offer pedagogical angles which can implicate students in an understanding of local disasters as continuities of global politics and histories of material extraction as much as these pedagogies can foreground the question of environmental justice for certain groups of people. These pedagogical angles would also generate substantial arguments in favor of fiction’s ability to represent the pressing issues of climate change and environmental degradation and would also take up the discussion of teaching such works effectively to students from diverse, non-literature backgrounds. Richard Kerridge observes that English Studies can argue for its capability to address climate change by citing its history of resistance to power in its critical frame, that the discipline “defines and holds a space of opposition to industrial instrumentalist rationality.” Likewise, I present my conceptual angle of eco-material rifts as an interdisciplinary model which can critique the dimensions of power that continue to shift faces and have created the current ecological crisis on a global scale.

My observations in this Epilogue are, in most cases, hypothetical and sporadic, which not only address the task of teaching South Asian ecofiction but also cover the ideas of teaching climate fiction in general. In some cases, I draw from my experience of teaching Science Fiction and Introduction to Literature courses to undergraduates—courses in which I used environmental themes or applied ecocritical interpretations to certain texts. A graduate assistant who teaches at the undergraduate level would hardly have the opportunity to teach a topic course on South

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Asian ecofiction. Therefore, I often relied on making sporadic references to South Asian fiction or comparing those with mainstream English texts in my class to experiment with some of my pedagogies with the help of the students. I believe some of my comparative and interdisciplinary pedagogies, which I discuss below, could be integrated into existing standard courses in environmental humanities, ecocriticism, and world literature. Undergraduate courses will not be able to accommodate the teaching of the novels of greater scope, such as Amitav Ghosh’s *Ibis* Trilogy, which are more suitable for graduate courses. Overall, I consider my pedagogical reflections as an ongoing endeavor and I intend to work on and modify them further based on my future experiences in teaching South Asian ecofiction.

**Pedagogical Implications & Related Arguments:**

**Teaching Social/Environmental Justice**

If we teach South Asian ecofiction through the concept of eco-material rifts, we can stress the issues of environmental justice as an intersection of the common concerns of social justice. This pedagogical angle also caters to the current revisionist vein of inclusivity in academia. South Asian ecofiction foregrounds how some marginalized groups of people form a symbiotic relationship with their surrounding environment, which is often different than the typical environment in the global north. The lens of eco-material rifts is helpful to show how the discriminatory global system severs the symbiotic relationship between humans and nonhumans, as it also demonstrates the incremental material rifts which discriminatorily affect people in terms of their class, race, gender, and other social identities. For example, my chapter on *Babu Bangladesh!* offers an extended discussion on the nation-state’s violence against ethnic
minorities living in forest areas, demonstrating how violence against the indigenous communities also causes environmental derangement and loss of biodiversity in Bangladesh. Discussing these issues in the class, therefore, can make students aware of environmental/social justice for certain victimized groups.

The two acts of teaching ecofiction and focusing on environmental justice can be mutually beneficial and can enhance the credibility of environmental humanities. One focus that the related pedagogy should include is that ensuring justice depends a lot on shaping a proper discourse of justice, a task that English Studies or climate fiction can claim to perform. Summer Harrison argues that the general agreement about scientific facts on climate change is proof that “climate change denial is not caused primarily by a lack of information or knowledge, but by a lack of identification with the cultural community of climate change believers.” It is in this context that Harrison identifies a gap in cultural and aesthetic understanding of different groups of people, and ecocriticism or environmental literature can address that gap. As I have discussed in my chapter on Animal’s People, environmental challenges are unequally distributed around the world and so, the faces and scales of environmental disasters are not the same everywhere. In the same fashion, environmental justice initiatives or discourses should not fall into a totalizing pattern. Harrison further observes that stories and narratives can influence people’s actions and so it is important to both “decry specific environmental injustices” and, at the same time,

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“reconsider how we construct the narratives that authorize or challenge them.” In the light of this discussion, classroom conversations on novels like Animal’s People can highlight the specific narratives of environmental justice and can serve as examples to teach the diversity of environmental justice issues around the globe.

**From Diasporic to Ecocritical Reading**

English departments across the world have, for long, maintained a tradition of treating South Asian Anglophone fiction as purely diasporic works, a treatment that has impacted both the production and teaching of such works. I propose that the pedagogy of highlighting eco-material rifts in teaching South Asian novels turns attention to ecocentric movements—that of rifts, labor, and humans and nonhumans as interrelated entities—from the current overwhelming focus on diasporic concerns, a focus that is anthropocentric by nature. The anthropocentric discussions push nonhuman entities to the background, entities that are considered resources for exploitation, or as props. Ecocentric pedagogies, on the other hand, analyze human positions as deeply entrenched within the nonhuman world shaped by global socio-political realities. Greg William Misiaszek terms such inclusive pedagogy as “ecopedagogy” which should expose how the “power relations … embedded both inside and outside educational systems” influence our teaching to sidestep the “connections between environmental and social problems.”

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8 Harrison, 458. Harrison elucidates that narratives have the power to affect people’s understanding of crises by incorporating relevant ethical issues as well as by identifying or imagining the oppressive political power at work.

dominant pedagogies, which emphasize diasporic individuals’ homelessness and migration, not only ignore environmental connections but have even impacted the writing of novels in turn and narrowed their scope. Somdatta Mondal makes an interesting yet alarming observation that the diasporic Indian writers “have often been criticized of writing for the Western audience in mind and with an eye towards bagging a Booker or a Commonwealth writer’s award.”10 Mondal doesn’t directly claim if writers’ desire for recognition leads to the production of identical diasporic novels, but she observes that such desire has at least given rise to the repetition of certain themes in diasporic writings, such as the protagonists’ experience of the dilemma between the home culture and the new culture in the cosmopolitan center. In most cases, diasporic writers replicate their own migrant experiences by depicting characters caught between their consciousnesses of home and homelessness, which lead to their in-between, hybrid identity and largely ignore the bigger ecological and political conditions. I, therefore, hold that ecocentric teaching can modify the stereotypical modes of teaching South Asian Anglophone fiction, as well as global Anglophone literature in general, and can substantially resist the power that narrows the focus of teaching literature.

The ecocentric shift in teaching South Asian fiction answers back to the commodification and circulation of such fiction in the global market; this angle presents ecofiction as self-critical that implicates the very market that produces them. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee considers this

Misiaszek further claims that ecopedagogy can be an effective tool for voicing social justice because it can expose power relations that sustain oppressions towards certain social groups.

paradoxical capacity of South Asian ecofiction to critique themselves and the capitalist power that commodifies them as their specific literary merit which also establishes a deep connection with the postcolonial environment and addresses the derangement of interwoven humans and their surrounding resources.¹¹ The same capitalist forces, which create climate crisis and material rifts, also control the production of “diasporic” South Asian novels; the genre of ecofiction takes its roots from the local environmental concerns in contrast to the diasporic novels which mark the heavy influences of the imperial form of the novel that hegemonizes the global south and its various locations from outsiders’ perspectives.

There is certainly some conflict between teaching South Asian fiction from the anthropocentric angle of diasporic issues and from the ecocentric angle of environmental justice for marginalized identities, but these two trends are not necessarily mutually exclusive. I, therefore, support the potential third space of teaching that analyzes the displacement of diasporic characters in their bigger political and historical contexts—an angle that can potentially broaden the scope of teaching. Such contexts will help us scrutinize the diasporic characters in a dialogic relation with their historically marginalized predecessors in the past and their subaltern counterparts in regional environments. Apart from a theoretical discussion on diasporic characters’ bigger historical contexts, one way to implement such teaching in the classroom is the concept of highlighting inter-textual settings that focuses on different representations of a place in multiple texts, especially a diasporic novel and a local eco-fiction. For example, West Bengal, with its farmers’ revolts during the mid-twentieth century, serves as an intertextual

setting between Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* (2013) and Akhtaruzzaman Elias’ *Khoabnama* (Dream Epic, 1996). Whereas Lahiri settles with the diasporic passage of her protagonist by cutting short the representation of the historical backdrop, Elias demonstrates that the revolutions ultimately benefit the elites and exclude the laboring people. Such comparative discussions can engage students, especially in the upper-division or graduate courses, to explore if power sources influence certain novels to marginalize some groups in the act of representation.

The issue of climate migration can offer a more integrated dialectical approach to the above third space in teaching South Asian fiction. Since the climate crisis will continue to displace people especially in the Global South, thus increasing the diaspora, the issue of climate refugees and migrations could be studied as yet another example of eco-material rifts caused by global capitalism. Numair Atif Choudhury’s novel *Babu Bangladesh!* (2019), which is narrated from the future year 2028, represents a warning about the would-be dire consequences of climate change. The protagonist’s parents migrate from Bangladesh as climate refugees to Australia in 2023, along with masses of people from many other countries, such as the Maldives and the Philippines, which are supposed to face horrible consequences. Although I could not include this discussion in any of my classes, the novel’s representation of climate migration can serve as a great example that South Asian Anglophone fiction can allow us to integrate ecocritical and diasporic angles into one mode of teaching.

**Reader Response: Teaching Ecofiction as Counternarratives to Denialism**

Teaching ecofiction is helpful to explain to students that the apparently isolated, environmental disasters have global implications and geographical and historical continuities. The selected works of ecofiction in my dissertation, such as *Animal’s People* or the *Ibis* Trilogy, personalize the apparently distant, abstract ideas of environmental concerns and disasters, and
recreate them from the experiences and multiple perspectives of the characters. This approach strives to make environmental concerns more relatable to students and also helps them understand that our existing indifference towards climate and other emergencies is a development of our alienation and mechanization of emotion imposed by the capitalist order of the world. The ongoing industrialization, corporatization, and technological revolution has not only harmed the environment incrementally but also made us more inured to the crises through the systematic draining of our emotion and empathy. Christian Salmon argues that the imperialist quarters and capitalist corporations exercise control and increase their global outreach by implementing strategies to captivate the modern mind in a make-believe condition that frames people’s emotions, beliefs, and ideas, and “…tacks artificial narratives on to reality.”

Neoliberal capitalists sustain themselves by orchestrating industrial disasters and environmental pillages, followed by the narratives of denial that they circulate to evade their responsibilities. People’s lack of emotion and empathy for crises in a techno-capitalist world has, therefore, further worsened due to the way capitalists frame the stories of crises. This, in the long run, has made general people inured to the reports of environmental disasters and climate change. The contemporary crisis of the Anthropocene is a culmination of such practices of denialism and indifference.

We can utilize our classroom to address the issues of climate denialism. To aid that, works of South Asian ecofiction can shift attention to specific examples of identifiable units of humans and nonhumans affected by climate change, in comparison to the generic discourses of global warming and climate change which often prioritize ideas over victims and overlook the

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fact that not all regions are impacted to the same degree. Also, literary texts have the advantage to incorporate multifaceted perspectives because of their figurative/discursive complexity. Their layered narrative can explore a certain crisis from perspectives, such as political, scientific, historical and anthropological, which are interconnected and can also offer an effective discourse on the forces and quarters behind the crisis. Since denialism often results from alienation of a problem from history and other spheres of life, the multiplicity of perspectives that these fictions adopt can draw attention to the historical and global processes of discrimination and interventions that ultimately lead to environmental injustice. For example, Indra Sinha’s novel *Animal’s People* can generate a classroom discussion on the fact that an unequal or improper distribution of wealth, power, profit, and culpability is responsible for the normalization of frequent industrial disasters in the global south. The novel fictionalizes the 1984 Bhopal chemical gas leak in India, one of the worst industrial disasters in history. The disaster unleashed toxic elements which not only destabilized the surrounding environment but also damaged the reproductive and other physical abilities of many of the survivors, mostly the indigent people who were exposed to the toxicity. However, the Union Carbide Corporation, the owner of the project, blamed it on poor operations by the local officers and tried to evade their responsibility. Over time, the initiatives for justice declined; general people forgot or started to take them as natural calamities or fate.

Many novels offer integral models of reader response to demonstrate an expected change in readers when they closely observe environmental crises as personal plights of fictional characters. In *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Amitav Ghosh uses his narrative to represent pressing issues of environmental justice as stories of felt experiences and global connections; he also adopts an idea of reader-response by including a character from the West who witnesses the
tragic fate of a group of subaltern people and changes her outlook—a change that Ghosh apparently expects from his readers. Piya, an American cetologist of Bengali origin, comes to the forest with her pre-conceived, academic knowledge that the local people harm the ecosystem in the Sundarbans. But she changes her perspectives after witnessing and learning about the tragedy of the people who must survive by killing tigers and accessing the forest resources. Through Piya’s transformation, Ghosh seems to integrate a model of how distant scholars and readers ought to respond to the reality of particular places.

However, we also need to address the limitation of putting the Western readers in the forefront of realization and activism regarding environmental crises in the Global South. Readers certainly react or respond in various ways, and we should expect such plural reactions from students in a classroom too. My informal discussion with the undergraduate students in my Science Fiction and Fantasy class at West Virginia University collated some interesting observations. During the discussion, I asked students how well they could relate to the culturally different setting of Gabriel García Márquez’s "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." I briefly introduced the example of Ghosh’s reader-response model to my students and they appreciated that such models might help them relate to problems of other locations. However, many of them expressed doubts about their ability to properly understand the difficulties faced by distant characters and about what such realizations might lead to. Our discussion took a more fruitful turn when I briefly mentioned that Animal, the protagonist in Animal’s People, blatantly refuses to share his story with foreign journalists because he believes that distant readers would never understand his position. Whereas most students agreed with Animal’s perspective that outsiders often generalize issues and obfuscate local, individual experiences, many of them still supported the integration of multiple perspectives or positionalities, including that of outsider characters.
Teaching Ecocriticism Empirically

Empirical ecocriticism is emerging as one of the ways for literary criticism to both appeal to a larger audience and measure the effects of novels on readers. I think the application of empiricism in teaching ecofiction can be a great supplemental effort in generating student awareness and measuring their response as readers. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson’s study is one of the first known experiments in empirical ecocriticism, in which he surveys the positive effects of 19 works of climate fiction on 161 young American readers.\(^\text{13}\) Whereas Schneider-Mayerson tries to establish the need for more studies of such empirically-driven interdisciplinary engagements in English Studies, his results depict rather a mixed yet hopeful message. He observes that climate fiction may not convince skeptics because they do not read fiction, but “it might effectively nudge moderates and remind concerned liberals and leftists of the severity and urgency of anthropogenic climate change.”\(^\text{14}\)

My own experiment in “empirical ecocriticism” reflected Matthew Schneider-Mayerson’s claim that climate fiction can play a limited yet important role in generating consciousness. I informally conducted a survey in my Science Fiction and Fantasy course that I taught under the theme “Environmental Imagination in Alternative Worlds.” At the end of a class in which I taught Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993), I asked my students to write short responses to a couple of descriptive questions about how students relate themselves to the apparently distant and imaginary environmental issues that speculative fiction often projects as


\(^{14}\) Schneider-Mayerson, 495.
“alarming.” Note that my students had already read certain texts and discussed how common
global issues are responsible for disparate environmental consequences around the world. Most
of my students wrote that fiction had the power to engage them more effectively than
documentaries and reports they came across, and reading fiction left them with a lasting
influence and awareness of the problems. Some students argued that fiction’s effect might not be
long-standing, but the classroom discussions certainly made them aware of the
interconnectedness of peoples and places affected by climate change and of the political and
historical contexts of such connections. More interestingly, quite a few students admitted that
such angles also opened up new meanings of science fiction for them, that they now felt science
fiction was multidimensional and ecocriticism seemed like a fitting interpretative tool to relate
the genre with other types of novels representing ecological concerns. The most important
observation that my class generated was that no particular field could possibly tackle the climate
challenges alone and that environmental writers should be appreciated for generating
consciousness among certain educated groups who could further spread the thoughts.

Drawing on the positives of teaching environmental concerns through fiction in the
classroom, I believe we can further highlight to readers and students the implicit empiricism that
writers bring into their production of fiction. Scott Slovic argues for the effectiveness of literary
narratives and ecocriticism by claiming that this particular field has its own deep means for
presenting environmental concerns and issues through involved narratives that come out of
writers’ active involvement in and understanding of a vast network of information; Slovic calls
such effort as “energizing data” which relies on “multispecies storytelling”15 for better effect

15 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in
through “artistic and journalistic presentation of data.” Slovic stresses that writers’ experimental modes of narrative can represent the culturally different and subjective modes of experience shaped by colonial and capitalist experiences over a prolonged period. Examples of South Asian ecofiction, such as those written by Amitav Ghosh, can offer good discussions on how writers adapt their methodologies and research to generate “energized data” and apply “multispecies storytelling.” Amitav Ghosh employs partial autoethnographic models of research for narrativizing pressing ecological concerns, especially by living for an extended period of time in a place that he chooses as the setting for his novel. Ghosh’s historical fiction demonstrates Slovic’s observations about writers’ ability to fictionalize broader political and historical realities as subjective experiences. His *Ibis* Trilogy illustrates how the stories of individual characters recreate the colonial history of opium production as narratives of resistance to the discriminatory treatment of marginalized identities and labor integrated within the process of material extraction. However, it would be impossible to teach the whole trilogy in an undergraduate course; even one of the novels would take up a lot of classes. Teaching Ghosh as a major author in a graduate course, and in some cases in an undergraduate seminar, might be the only reasonable way to teach the trilogy.

**Teaching the Interdisciplinarity of South Asian Ecofiction**

The pedagogy of teaching South Asian ecofiction by highlighting the genre’s interdisciplinary orientations can be an effective way to forge collaborative teaching and engage

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students from diverse disciplines. In the article “Bridging the Gap: Surveying Interdisciplinarity in the Environmental Literature Classroom,” Christine R. Junker and Stephen J. Jacquemin propose that collaborative teaching across disciplines can help the teaching of environmental literature become directly interdisciplinary: “a synthesis of how scholar-teachers in the field of environmental literature approach these courses while providing a theoretical framework for an immersive field-based environmental literature course that effectively blends two classically disparate disciplines, English and biology, in a student-centered, collaboratively taught course.”

According to them, collaborating with science disciplines will bring out the inherent interdisciplinarity of environmental humanities. Many works of South Asian ecofiction are interdisciplinary in essence, and Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* and Numair Atif Choudhury’s *Babu Bangladesh!* are fitting examples. *Animal’s People* integrates political, historical, economic and scientific issues in its fictionalization of one of the world’s greatest industrial disasters. Moreover, Jesse Oak Taylor observes that “one way to interpret the novel is as a participant in a public relations war ranging across multiple media.” Taylor cites that Sinha’s efforts to connect his own activism against the perpetrators of the Bhopal disaster go beyond the interdisciplinary novelistic representation of the industrial disaster. Sinha not only sketches a scientific discussion of the loss of Bhopal’s sustainability and affected human health, but he also circulates his protests through a website in which his novel’s characters also engage in


communications. The teaching of fiction like *Animal’s People* can certainly benefit from collaboration with experts in different fields, such as an expert in modern or subaltern history.

The conceptual methodology of eco-material rifts that I propose in my dissertation, with its interdisciplinary angles of history, imperialism, political economy and biology, can be an effective tool to highlight the interdisciplinarity of South Asian ecofiction. As I have discussed in the previous chapters, eco-material rifts extend Marx’s idea of metabolic rift. Whereas Marx addresses how capitalist export of crops causes loss of soil fertility, eco-material rifts address the gradual intensification of global ecological rifts. As a lens of postcolonial ecocriticism, my conceptual methodology combines the areas of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism, in which ecocriticism can materialize postcolonialism, and postcolonialism can historicize ecological concerns.19 The interdisciplinarity of eco-material rifts can, therefore, “materialize” or concretize the pedagogy of teaching ecofiction, meaning that we can teach the history and politics of material movements around the world in which all students are implicated too. Such interdisciplinary orientation will respond to the question of why students beyond humanities/English should care about learning about climate issues from fiction; one point of response is that the interdisciplinarity of eco-fiction can appeal to various student groups and that some elements of knowledge (political, historical, biological, etc.) are transferrable to other contexts of knowledge in different disciplines. To substantiate my argument, I can, once again, refer to one of my informal discussions with my students. Most of my students in the Science Fiction course were nonmajors, and I asked them why they should care to read science fiction ecocritically and what domains of knowledge/skills they would consider transferable to their

respective disciplines. Referring to some ideas that I had already discussed in my class, a student of Environmental Geoscience said that she would like to carry forward the idea of metabolic rifts, and a History major stated that the plurality of characters’ perspectives is something that he would like to explore in the context of his own field. Students thus expressed that some of the ideas or methodologies from the interdisciplinarity of my concept were directly transferrable to their respective disciplines.

Merging the concept of interdisciplinarity with that of empirical ecocriticism can work as a further useful way of engaging students in the multifaceted environmental concerns represented in ecofiction. Schneider-Mayerson et al. urge utilizing empirical ecocriticism as a truly interdisciplinary tool, which combines, for example, ecocriticism’s aesthetic and narrative perspectives from textual analysis with environmental communication’s “activist rhetoric” and social sciences’ methodologies, to effectively measure awareness of environmental issues.\(^\text{20}\) I think the combination of interdisciplinarity and empiricism is an organized critical and methodological apparatus that can make novels appeal to a much wider audience across disciplines because of the similar approaches to learning that different disciplines adopt. Eco-material rifts, especially explored in the contexts of novels that foreground subaltern narratives, would add to and reflect the power of narrative as “activist rhetoric,” which Schneider-Mayerson et al. emphasize.

“Place-Centered” Pedagogy

Teaching South Asian ecofiction with an emphasis on eco-material rifts can strengthen the existing “place-centered” pedagogy of ecocriticism. According to Annette Lucksinger, “place-centered” pedagogy attempts to teach students how to move “from the personal, to the local, to cultures other than their own, to the planet and its well-being, gradually expanding their understanding of sense of place and its significance.” Such an approach leads students into the process of understanding the problems of a distant place in terms of their own place or environment. Lucksinger observes that this process begins as the students gradually relate to the characters and their habitats in a text. However, Greg Garrard argues that the pedagogy of place-centeredness has to address the complexity of the term “place,” especially that the idea of a “place” is both subjective and intricately globalized. Garrard cites the works by scholars, such as Mitchell Thomashow and Ursula Heise, to claim that “the notion of place” is not linear and we must negotiate a range of experiences and understandings associated with the application of the word “place” in ecocriticism. The bigger contrast in such understandings, according to him, is that the term at once implies how place is a subjective experience and also requires a complex, collective perception in an age of complex globalization.

My concept of eco-material rifts has an integral angle of place-centeredness which can help students engage in an understanding that grows from the personal to the global. Eco-

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21 Annette Lucksinger, “Ecopedagogy: Cultivating Environmental Consciousness through Sense of Place in Literature,” Pedagogy 14, no.2 (2014): 355. Lucksinger claims that a “place-centered” approach can highlight a sense of place in teaching literature, which is a successful way of providing students with an easier access to a text.

22 Garrard, 6.
material rifts offer a dialogical engagement between the local and the global: the local is defined by the way the bodies of local people, such as subaltern groups, interact with the place through their labor; at the same time, the severing of the local bonds as eco-material rifts demonstrates how the local is shaped by frequent interactions with global realities and politics of imperial and capitalist interventions. In other words, the movements or displacements of integrated entities as eco-material rifts reflect that the global and the local shape each other. The process of exploring the history and politics of material movements through eco-material rifts has a “spatial turn,” which, according to Damodaran et al., means the understanding of the colonial relations of a place through “tracing entities that move in and out of that region.”

Eco-material rifts can, therefore, substantiate the “place-centered” approach in teaching ecofiction in the class, especially for understanding the colonial/postcolonial continuities of material extraction in a certain place.

One way that students can relate better to the ecocritical concerns portrayed in South Asian ecofiction, or climate fiction from any other locations, is by studying the geographical similarities and continuities between places. This process can begin with students receiving an introductory lesson on the setting of a fiction. Erin James teaches a graduate course in postcolonial ecocriticism at the University of Nevada, Reno, in which she ensures that her students get a detailed orientation to the geographical location and background of the Sundarbans before they can relate to her teaching of the environmental concerns represented in The Hungry

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To further modify such an approach, we can focus on elucidating the common historical realities that affected different places. In my classroom, I often point out that the British Empire, which caused environmental devastation in South Asia, also committed similar activities of material rifts in other parts of the world including America. Therefore, the movements of material entities, or eco-material rifts, equate places through a common link of colonial history. We can explain the idea of such colonial interconnectedness to the students to help them compare other places with their own.

I propose to combine the place-centered pedagogy with teaching environmental justice narratives to work out an even better pedagogical angle, for which I borrow from Adrienne Cassel. She emphasizes that students’ awareness of social justice depends heavily on their understanding of their own positionalities and access to justice, a task that ecocritical pedagogy can take up by assigning students projects or critical writing tasks about their equitable access to a good life in their own habitats. I think this is not only an effective way of further generating students’ sense of the interconnectedness of places but also a scope for developing awareness about others’ access to justice by understanding our own.

**Conclusion: Looking/Teaching Ahead**

In an age when we witness a paradoxical coexistence of the digital revolution and the ecological crisis on a planetary scale, most academic disciplines continuously rethink their

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applicability to the real-world needs. In most cases, academic departments readjust to the market needs and also shape the market. English studies, or humanities in general, carries the ethical burden of questioning the market’s role in “dehumanizing” education, while also handling budget cuts and negotiating the worrying thoughts of staying relevant in the market. Ruyu Hung considers academia’s lack of proper initiatives as compliance with the forces that generate crises, as she asks a rather rhetorical question: “What on earth makes the mainstream mode of education an accomplice in the human exploitation of the environment?”26 Hung implies that the lack of human awareness about the physical environment has resulted in a similar indifference in the academia towards the ecological issues, which translates into a by default participation in the worsening of environmental crises. Hung further observes that “the current education has been driven to develop under the guidance of pragmatic and useful values, and thereby the status of the place presented in education is a resource.”27 Therefore, to echo Hung’s point, teaching ecological concerns through environmental fiction is not an addition to the existing curriculum but a moral obligation for the stakeholders. At the same time, we should not fall into the traps of tokenism by selecting texts randomly and presenting a generalized scenario of environmental crises to the students. The treatment of South Asian ecofiction as a separate genre, as well as the focus on eco-material rifts as a guiding pedagogical element, can both make students aware of their environmental realities and contribute to the discussions on the diverse scales and shapes of current environmental crises.


27 Hung, 44.
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