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CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ECOLOGICAL ABJECT : THE POLITICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE IN *GUN ISLAND*

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Abstract

This article proposes to undertake a politically charged environmental reading of Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island (2019). The dangers of the Anthropocene are evident in the form of global warming and climate change. The gradualist and denialist mentalité, which is part of capitalist geo-politics or 'Capitalocene', has done irreparable harm unto nature, causing climate change and global warming to a scale hitherto unimaginable. In Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island, there are many instances of sighting of species in places where their existence had never been in evidence in recorded history or public memory. These "strange strangers" (Morton) constitute what may be termed as the ecological abject or uncanny. This article attempts to understand the politics of the Anthropocene – how it generates a worldview that denies warning signs that are apparent in the environment. The article also tries to understand the significance of the ecological abject – the presence of 'strange strangers' – amidst alien surroundings, and what it bodes for the ecosystem, the non-human, and the human.

Keywords: *Anthropocene, ecological uncanny, global warming, climate change, strange strangers.*

Amitav Ghosh's non-fictional work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) raised several pertinent issues. One of his most telling observations was his attempt at understanding why writers of fiction did not engage with environmental issues to the extent that they should have. Ghosh also questioned why global warming and climate change were not 'interesting' enough themes to whet the aesthetic imaginary of fiction writers? Despite tell-tale signs of the looming catastrophe confronting human civilisation due to ecological crisis, everybody, including committed creative writers, seemed to have turned a blind eye to it. Ghosh acknowledged that he himself did not focus much on environment issues in his past works (both fiction and non-fiction). He rationalised this 'neglect' towards nature to humans ideological indoctrination to 'belief in uniformitarianism' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 34). This notion finds traction in Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge's theoretical distinction between 'gradualism' and 'catastrophism' – antithetical schools of thought – the former emphasising on natural and slower processes of change or decay, while the latter underscored processes that were swift and cataclysmic, resulting in massive rupture. Ghosh's contention is that the culture of rationality (which is compatible with gradualist *mentalité)* came to be endorsed by fiction writers insofar as it corresponded with the quotidian bourgeois everyday life. Therefore, 'realism' came to be the defining shibboleth of fictional/novel writing, and it went a long way in subsuming the improbable or the 'uncanny' phenomenon of nature. The regime of the belief in gradualism came to be so deeply entrenched in modern human consciousness that catastrophic pronouncements about the impending environmental crises (in the form of global warming and climate change) were, till recently, and assumed to be nothing more than improbable apocalyptic prognostications.

However, from 1970s onwards, awareness about nature in the field of Humanities seems to have increased, especially on account of the efforts of certain environmentally-concerned academic groups like The Association for Literature and the Environment (ASLE), Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada (ALECC), European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and the Environment (EASLCE) and so forth, all of which attempted to read literary texts by adopting an environmental perspective. A sub-genre of literature

termed as "ecofiction" and a branch of theory/criticism termed as "ecocriticism" came into being, and these went a long way in classifying works of fiction as environmental fiction, climate fiction (cli-fi), green fiction, etc. Ecocriticism contributed by approaching literary texts from the deep ecological, non-anthropocentric perspective at the beginning, but gradually changing the focus to theories of the Anthropocene. Fiction writers like Barbara Kingsolver (*Flight Behaviour*), Emmi Itaranta (*Memory of Water*), Richard Powers (*The Overstory*), Paolo Bacigalupi (*The Water Knife*), Edward Abbey (*The Monkey Wrench Gang*), Ann Pancake (*Strange as this Weather Has Been*), Karen Joy Fowler (*We are All Completely beside Ourselves*), Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*) have contributed substantially to generating environmental awareness as well as perils of the Anthropocene.

Amitav Ghosh's latest novel *Gun Island* (2019) pushes the environmental agenda even further. In fact, after his non-fictional *The Great Derangement*, it was expected that his next work of fiction would have ecological crisis as an important trope. It turns out to be true. However, Ghosh is ambitious enough to bring into the ambit of his narrative interconnections and intersections at various levels. He attempts to, first, historicize the legend of Bonduki Sadagar; second, explores politics of mobility, especially migration; third, opens a dialogic space between rationality and mysticism, and fourth, writes a sequel to his acclaimed *The Hungry Tide* (2004), thereby recreating the magic of the tide country – the Sundarbans – with some of the memorable characters of the earlier novel. Yet, what marks clear departure from *The Hungry Tid*e is the emphasis on human-engendered environmental crisis. While holding the Anthropocene responsible for present ecological crises, Ghosh attempts to highlight issues pertaining to climate change, refugee crisis and ecological uncanny. The aim of this article is to attempt an ecological reading of *Gun Island* by highlighting upon the curse of the Anthropocene that is effecting potentially-devastating climate change, which in turn, is leading to a condition that can be termed as the 'ecological abject'. Anthropocene engendered climate change on the human as well as non-human leads to migration, which in turn could lead to the precarity of their existence. This theme is explored in *Gun Island*. The text attempts to highlight politics of mobility

by exploring contemporary refugee crisis, the plight of stateless citizens, diaspora and so forth. However, this article would not focus on these roiling issues as it would make the study anthropocentric. Since my focus is on ecological crisis, I would limit my inquiry to impact of the Anthropocene on the non-human. Another idea that I would explore is the ecological abject – a condition characterized by an aesthetic imaginary that believes in presenting the dark, uncanny, horrifying manifestations of 'strange strangers' pervading nature. These uncanny manifestations/infestations are paradoxically both perpetrators and victims of the Anthropocene, relentlessly working towards undermining its very existence.

The Curse of the Anthropocene

Anthropocene, the term introduced by climatologist Paul Crutzen in 2000, stands for 'the notion that human beings have become the primary emergent geological force affecting the future of the Earth System' (Angus, p. 9). It signifies the end of the Holocene epoch, which Jeremy Davies in his 'Introduction' to *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (2016), has remarked as the '11,700 year span of time that in the established version of the geological timescale still continues to the present day' (5). The end of the Holocene epoch is a watershed moment in both human and environmental history as it signified advancements in the field of culture, arts, aesthetics, sciences, innovation, technology, in fact in all walks of like. The advent of modernity and its materialistic trappings are part of the Holocene. Davies observes that "[the Holocene] is the only geological epoch so far in which there have been symphony orchestras and hypodermic needles, moon landings and gender equality laws, patisseries, microbreweries, and universal suffrage" (5). The coming of the Anthropocene signifies a process of negotiation on the part of humans to continue deriving the benefits of modernity's comforts and luxuries, albeit with the discomfiting realization that it will be at the cost of radically changed environmental conditions. The red flags seem to be evident everywhere, as seen in various kinds of ecological uncanny manifested with increasing trepidation across the globe. Even though Stratigraphy has not included Anthropocene in its list of geological epochs, the contemporary environmental changes that have come about due to human intervention makes it necessary to characterise an epoch by such a

placeholding terminology. It could be defined as an epoch characterised by unmitigated exploitation of the environment for serving utilitarian ends. It is in Otl Aicher's phrase, the 'world as design' (Aicher, p. 179), comprising of expressways, cars, trains, skyscrapers, malls, housing complexes, power stations, landfills, sea reclamations, and such other artificial, arterial systems. This world as design is made possible only by decimating nature. This exploitation is rooted to the culture of capitalism, and in that sense, is driven primarily by carbon economy. Tsunamis, tornadoes, wildfires, earthquakes etc., are causing havoc in many parts of the world, and even though these are natural occurrences and should not be linked directly to human intervention, it has to be acknowledged that climate change effected by global warming due to the prevalence of carbon economy, may have contributed substantially to these natural catastrophes. Perhaps, discourses revolving around the Anthropocene need to be analysed from the angle of political economy, which, Jason. W. Moore termed as 'Capitalocene' (Moore, p. xi). Examined from this context, certain questions arise: for instance, how have 'various human organizations and processes – states and empires, world markets, urbanization, and much beyond – reshaped planetary life?' (Moore, 2016, p. 2). Are the climate sceptics and denialists rejecting the climate change hypothesis because they are complicit with the developmental discourse of capitalism? Is the denial part of reluctance to give up the trappings of modernity and rampant consumerism? How effective can the rhetoric of 'sustainability' be to address the Anthropocene excesses? Should the focus be on fostering ecological pluralism and addressing environmental injustice? These are unsettling questions which does not have easy answers. A 'material turn' to environmental studies is gaining traction nowadays. It is a welcome trajectory, and one that has been attempting to raise a few pertinent issues.

As already stated, the pitfalls of the Anthropocene are manifested in global warming and climate change. Global warming has led to the rise of water levels in the seas and oceans due to the gradual but inevitable melting of the polar ice caps and glaciers. The rise in sea-water level poses serious threat to humanity. Threat perceptions are in the form of devastating storms, floods and tsunamis. Jeremy Davies observes: 'The Sea is … getting deeper. The world's oceans are likely to grow in height by between 40 and 120 centimetres before the end of the present

century, letting them spill onto coastal land, where cities have always clustered' (Davies, 2016, p. 1). If one goes along with the assumptions of Neocatastrophism, it is likely that such changes might trigger a sort of 'butterfly effect' which could have disastrous consequences.

Yet, the problem one encounters when the idea of climate change surfaces in conversations is that it is not identified as an issue that poses any clear and present danger. It is pushed to the realm of the future, an assumption founded upon probability rather than certainty. According to Antony Giddens, 'people find it hard to give the same level of reality to the future as they do to the present' (Giddens, 2009, p. 3). This 'future discounting' attitude makes it difficult for humans to engage in serious discussions on the reality of climate change. There is the perception that certain critical issues confronting human society, such as, human rights violation, war, terrorism, insurgency, global economic slowdown, market forces, problems confronting disenfranchised subject-positions (like refugees and stateless citizens), women's rights, the rights of the LGBTQ community, children's rights and so forth, pose greater threat to a nation's progress and development than that of the looming environmental crisis. Therefore, formulating policies for resolving these crucial anthropocentric issues are given more importance in national or international forums and symposiums. The culture of deferment and denial is endemic/ universal to all societies, and it is mostly justified by the culture of pragmaticism as underscored by Giddens:

> There is a high level of agreement among scientists that climate change is real and dangerous, and that it is caused by human activity. A small minority of scientists, however – the climate change 'sceptics' – dispute these claims…[One] can always say, 'it's not proven, is it?' if anyone were to say that he should change his profligate ways. Another response might be: 'I'm not going to change unless others do'…Yet another reaction could be: 'Nothing that I do, as a single individual, will make any difference'. Or else he could say, 'I'll get round to it sometime'… I would suggest that even the most sophisticated and determined environmentalist… struggles with the fact that, under the shadow of future cataclysm, there is a life to be lived within the constraints of the here-and-now. (3)

Despite such denialists' assertion, the symptoms that anthropocene-induced climate change has produced are there for all to see. Global warming has adversely affected the balance in the biosphere. It has resulted in uncanny manifestations in nature: unseasonal migration of birds, inscrutable beaching of whales and dolphins, miraculous sighting of 'beings' that were never part of particular ecosystems, virulent manifestation of certain types of pathogens that pose severe threat to the environment, and so forth. Apart from nature, humans too have been affected by climate change to a considerable degree. These issues need to be addressed in literature, and it is slowly finding space in the aesthetic imaginary of creative writers. It is heartening to note that Ghosh is taking up the cause of environmentalism in such a big way.

The impact of climate change on the environment is subtly indicated in several ways in *Gun Island*. The narrator Dinanath Datta (Deen), an antique book dealer, goes to the Sundarbans to meet his aunt Nilima Bose, the founder of the Badobon Trust (a charitable organisation having an extended network of free hospitals, schools, clinics and workshops in the Sundarbans) to learn about the legend of Bonduki Sadagar and to visit the shrine of Manasa Devi (with whom the legend of the former is tied). What comes out as an alarming discovery is that the water level of Sundarbans has risen perilously. A conversation between Horen Naskar (a boatman) and Tipu (son of Moyna) suggests this:

> *'As I remember, the dhaam should be somewhere there,' he said, pointing ahead.*
>
> *'But this stretch of river has changed a lot since I was last here.'*
>
> *In the end it was Tipu who spotted the site, with the help of binoculars.*
>
> *'Oyje!' he shouted, pointing directly ahead. 'There it is!'*
>
> *Pushing up his sunshades Horen squinted at a distant smudge on the riverbank.*
>
> *'The boy's right,' he grunted. 'it isn't where I had thought.'*
>
> *'How can that be? It can't have moved, surely?'*
>
> *'It's the river that's moved,' came the answer. 'When I last saw the place it was still a good way inland. Now it's at the water's edge.' (Gun Island 65)*

The change in the island's geological features is corroborated by Nilima Bose's account of her visit to the shrine as part of a delegation distributing food and other essential commodities to villages after the Category – 4 cyclone Bhola wreaked havoc on November 12, 1970, causing what is considered the greatest natural disaster of the twentieth century (which claimed more than three hundred thousand lives). Nilima indicated that the shrine was at 'a good distance from the sandbank, situated on a slight elevation, in the middle of a sandy clearing that was surrounded by dense stands of mangrove' (15). Thus, it is apparent that rising water levels had submerged the sandbank, leaving the shrine to the mercy of the elements. Nilima, in fact, anticipates its doom in the foreseeable future. She portentously states:

> I believe the dhaam's still there, but who knows how much longer it'll remain? The islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they are disappearing before our eyes. (18)

The rising of sea levels is an effect of global warming melting the polar ice caps. The more the level of carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere remains unregulated, the more likely would the balance in the ecosystem be hampered. In a biodiversity hotspot like the Sundarbans delta, with its primordial water bodies decked by mangrove vegetation, rising water levels pose grave risks to its various forms of precarious lives, which include both non-human (endangered flora and fauna) and human (vulnerable human settlements).

The important thing to note here is that victims of environmental disasters are often innocent of what they are made to suffer. Even though devastations happen on a place, its trigger could be located thousands of miles away. The rising levels of the water in the Sundarbans presages devastation of the mangrove country in the foreseeable future. The fundamental premise of Chaos Theory is rooted to the idea of how 'a small change in one state of a deterministic nonlinear system can result in large differences in a later stage' (Weisstein, N.pag.). Thus, despite the Sundarbans being still comparatively 'backward' in terms of subscribing to the logic of the world as design, yet its ecological precarity is triggered by global warming, which is associated with the rise of carbon economy. If geological changes

are getting effected, it is on account of human upsetting the apple cart, going beyond the tipping point, meddling with the natural ecosystem. If the natural balance is disturbed and the ecosystem disrupted, it is a foregone conclusion that calamity would befall. Therefore, ecocritics have made impassioned pleas to humans to think of themselves as global species. Timothy Clark considers this possible through the constitution of 'a new cosmopolitanism, transcending given cultural, natural, economic and social boundaries and the accomplishment of a sort of communal super-subjectivity…' (Clark, 2015 p. 175). It appears to be the only way to resist the culture of utilitarianism of the Anthropocene epoch. Till now, measures to redress ecological crisis seem to be still governed by putative, hypothetical assumptions. It is like being caught in a double-bind – how could one be a climate activist and a consumer of modernity's trappings at the same time? How can one push the developmental agenda forward and still decry carbon economy? How can one drive a car and still proclaim to be a committed environmentalist? The blessing of the Holocene is turning out to be the curse of the Anthropocene. It is affecting the lives of both human and non-human. The tragedy is that nobody seems to be bothered.

Climate Change on the Non-Human

The Anthropocene has devastated natural ecosystems, thereby posing threat to one and all. Since, anthropocentrism concerns with fate of humans, the impact upon the non-human is not given a great deal of thought. The fact is that the Anthropocene epoch has been responsible for species extinction at thousand time's higher rates than they would have been if humans were not in the picture (according to the review published on May 29, 2014 in the journal *Science*). According to the report prepared by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2014, many aquatic life-forms were migrating north or into deeper waters to survive as their habitats underwent change due to climate change. These species were forced to change their behaviour and seek alternate habitats in order to adapt to changed natural systems. Such strange behaviour of strange strangers (non-humans) finds explicit mention throughout *Gun Island*. My concern in this section is to examine the effect of climate change on such non-human

beings as portrayed in the novel. Here, reference to the Irrawaddy dolphin, or zoologically-termed *Orcaella brevirostris*, is central to understanding how the Anthropocene has adversely impacted the living condition of these creatures.

In the novel, there is a character named Piya Roy who happens to be a marine biologist researching on Irrawaddy dolphins. She begins to perceive adaptation problems in the case of Rani, a dolphin with whom she has become familiar after she rescued the mammal from an iron netting in which it was entangled. Piya used to keep 'careful records of each individual in the pod' (91) and had tracked and 'mapped the pod's movements over many years following their diurnal, seasonal and annual migrations' (91) through GPS device inserted in Rani's body. Even though the factor responsible for the pod's adaptation problems could not be exactly determined, Piya felt that the proliferation of 'oceanic dead zones' (95) could be a contributing factor. These 'dead zones' were vast stretches of water with very low oxygen content – too low for fishes to survive. Piya explains the phenomenon in this manner:

> Those zones have been growing at a phenomenal pace, mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers. When they are washed into the sea they set off a chain reaction that leads to all the oxygen being sucked out of the water. Only a few highly specialized organisms can survive in those conditions – everything else dies…And those zones have now spread over tens of thousands of square miles of ocean – some of them are as large as middle-sized countries. (95)

Agricultural effluents dumped into rivers generally created such dead zones, but in the Sundarbans a refinery that began operations a few years back was suspected to be the culprit. Despite regulatory bodies demanding 'safe levels' of discharge of effluents, this refinery must have been dumping toxic wastes much above permissible limits. It resulted in "massive fish kills" (96), as well as adaptation problems for Irrawaddy dolphins. Piya believes that the effluents discharged by the refinery were responsible in 'Rani and her pods [abandoning] their old hunting grounds' (96). Even more tragic was the phenomenon of collective beaching. Rani and the entire pod beached themselves under mysterious circumstances.

The reason for the entire pod doing so could not be pinned down to a definite cause. Yet, the effect of toxic wastes on the lives of these creatures could not be underestimated. Oceanic dead zones, trappings of technology like sounds emanating from submarines and sonar equipments, among others, could account for such strange behaviour as beaching. Piya states:

> [It] must be hardest on Rani, knowing that the young ones depend on her. There she is, perfectly adapted to her environment, perfectly at home in it – and then things begin to change, so that all those years of learning become useless, the places you know best can't sustain you anymore and you've got to find new hunting grounds. Rani must have felt that everything she was familiar with – the water, the currents, the earth itself – was rising up against her. (97)

In fact, there is reference to more mass beaching of Irrawaddy dolphins in Garjontola, a small island in the Sundarbans. Piya is apprised by an incognito whistleblower about an impending mass beaching, and she takes a journalist and a photographer friend to document this peculiar phenomenon. Piya noted that '[they] were swimming not in their usual meandering fashion but almost in straight lines, heading straight for Garjontola…it was the most devastating thing [she'd] ever seen. So many of them, throwing themselves up on the shore' (179). Such strange behaviour on the part of the species *Orcaella* was unprecedented and had to be rationalised or accounted for to effluents dumped by the refinery. There could not be any other logical reason attributed for such uncharacteristic, uncanny behaviour. Apart from Irrawaddy dolphins, the novel mentions many other non-human species whose unnatural presence/s in particular time and space accentuated the notion of ecological uncanny. It seemed as if these unnatural, spectral manifestations were ominous portents of an impending catastrophe. I would like to examine it through the lens of (what I have termed as) the ecological abject.

The Ecological Abject

When one thing of ecology, the metaphor that exemplifies its nature and character (according to Timothy Morton) is 'the mesh' (Morton, 2010 p. 14) what

it implies is the interconnectedness of beings and things on a vast, cosmic scale. The interconnected beings function differently; live as parasites or symbiotes, forms rhizomatic bonds, takes recourse to deterritorialization or reterritorialization, and so forth, under favourable natural conditions. Morton states:

> The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully 'itself.' There is curiously 'less' of the Universe at the same time, and for the same reasons, as we see 'more' of it. Our encounter with other beings becomes profound. They are strange, even intrinsically strange. Getting to know them makes them stranger. When we talk about life forms, we're talking about *strange strangers*. (15)

What the Anthropocene epoch has unleashed is that it has meddled with life forms in such a horrifying manner that these 'strange strangers' have begun to behave even more strangely; in fact, they have become figures of abjection. This is what I imply by the phrase 'ecological abject.' Morton coins 'dark ecology' (16) as an ecological thought that embraces ugliness and horror, which are important as it 'compel[s] our compassionate coexistence to go beyond condescending pity' (17). Such ecological thought that embraces the abject is apparent in *Gun Island* through several instances of sightings of creatures in places where they are least expected: bark beetles, spiders, water snakes, shipworms, among others

Anthropocene-induced climate change is causing havoc to the ecology by disturbing the ecosystem in which beings and things are so precariously interconnected or meshed. Extermination of a species could wreak havoc to the environment as there could be uncontrolled proliferation of other species. For instance, Piya observes that the increasing incidences of forest fires in many countries could be due to uncontrolled proliferation of bark beetles. The reason for their increase of population is global warming. Such creatures could not survive for long in cold climes, but climate change in the Anthropocene epoch has enabled them to survive in these places, thereby affecting the ecosystem of these regions. Since these insects survive by eating up trees from the inside, their proliferation in places where trees are plentiful pose immense threat to these spaces. Piya taking cue from her friend Lisa, who is an entomologist, says:

> [Bark beetles] are insects that eat up trees from the inside so that when there's a dry spell the dead wood is like kindling, just waiting to go up in flames. Bark beetles have been extending their range, as the mountains warm up, and Lisa found that they've invaded the forests around the town where she lives [Oregon]. (109)

Despite such looming threats, people fail to see the signs. The denialists, most often, succeed in framing a counter-narrative against the phenomenon of climate change and continue to function under the structure of the normative. There is a possibility that in the Capitalocene, deniers are governed by vested interest to downplay the perils of climate change. For instance, despite tell-tale signs of a looming pathogenic invasion of bark beetles (blighting the forest trees), the people at large were unconvinced with Lisa's apocalyptic warnings. Piya helplessly states:

> She went to the town council to warn them that they had to do something. But no one paid any attention, not the mayor, or anyone else, least of all the people who were in harm's way. To them she's just a pushy outsider who doesn't know anything about the mountains and is trying to make a name for herself. (109)

To make matters worse, when a raging wildfire breaks out (as warned by Lisa), which resulted in the state declaring an emergency and calling for deployment of helicopters to douse the fire, Lisa was implicated in it. Piya ruefully says:

> You would think that afterwards people would have thanked Lisa for her warnings and treated her as a hero… But no: what they did was that they blamed *her*! A rumour went round that she had started the fire herself because she wanted more funding for her research. Soon it was all over the social media. She was even questioned by a cop. Then she began to get threats – even death threats. Someone fired a bullet into her porch; a tree in her yard was set on fire. (109)

Political gaslighting has become a common phenomenon in an increasingly majoritarian conservative political milieu. In such a scenario, facts are manufactured

by the complicit apparatuses of the oligarchic state to muzzle the agency of the marginalised. Lisa's plight corresponds to such a targeted policy of victimization by those in power. This wildfire, which foreshadows the raging wildfire that ravages Los Angeles during Deen and Cinta's visit to the museum for a conference, also indicates the perils confronting climate activists. They are most often dismissed as apocalyptic seers or prophets of doom by denialists or capitalist stooges.

Even though warning signs are visible everywhere, with more and more uncanny occurrences happening at an alarming rate, people are still not willing to read the obvious message. For instance, encountering rare serpents in a bustling metropolis like Los Angeles was an unheard-of event. Deen, in one of his e-mail chat conversations with Tipu, is cautioned by the latter to be careful of snakes on his trip to LA. This is dismissed by Deen with the words, 'I'm going to LA. There aren't any snakes there…Don't be silly. I'm not going to get bitten in LA' (112). However, on a visit to Cinta's cousin's daughter Giselle (Gisa) who resided on a house near Venice beach, LA, with her girlfriend along with two adopted orphaned refugees, Deen is shocked by the sight of a "two-foot snake…its colour darkly metallic with a bright yellow underbelly (131), dead with its head crushed to a pulp by Gisa's golden retriever, who too succumbs to the snake's bite. The coast guard identifies the serpent as the venomous 'yellow-bellied sea snake' (132) and says that these were not a common sight before, but they 'had a bunch of yellow-bellies washing up here in the last few months' (131). When Deen enquires Piya about the strange invasion of serpents in LA, she replies that such sightings were reported just a day before at Ventura Beach, California. She further stated that these snakes generally inhabited warmer waters to the south. Their sightings in Southern California could be logically explained under the assumption of global warming and climate change. She explained that 'their distribution was changing with the warming of the oceans and they were migrating northwards' (134). Thus, the presence of these venomous reptiles in LA could be accounted for due primarily to global warming. Such events accentuate the element of the ecological uncanny, thereby bolstering the aesthetic imaginary (of strange stranger) of dark ecology.

Yet another instance of the ecological abject is the sightings of deadly spiders in Venice. Deen travelling to Venice to document the presence of Bengali

migrants comes across a spider in Cinta's house. Though spiders are rare in Venice, he chances upon a rare brown recluse (*Loxosceles reclusa*). Piya cautions him that 'its venom is more potent, by weight, than that of a rattlesnake; it breaks down the skin and eats into the flesh' (203). The surprising thing about this sighting was that it was the first recorded sighting of this species so far north. Piya's friend Larry indicated that 'the brown recluse has been increasing its range very quickly because it's getting so much hotter in Europe' (204). Thus, global warming is disturbing the ecological balance in such profound ways that manifestations of creatures that were never expected in certain places are now seen in alarming numbers.

The infestation of these creatures/critters can create a condition of ecoprecarity, be it drought, famine, wildfires, and so forth. Such a surreal manifestation of a "different kind of monster" (230) is shown to Deen by Cinta on their walk down the street towards the Fondamente Nove. Pulling out a hairpin, Cinta dug into wooden pilings, picking at the rotten wood. Suddenly, a "creature plopped out and fell on the pier… It was about two inches long, the colour of congealed coconut oil. Its tapering body widened into a funnel-like mouth that was ringed with tiny filaments" (230). Cinta identified the creature as a shipworm. She said that these creatures posed immense threat to the city of Venice:

> More and more of these are invading Venice, with the warming of the lagoon's water. They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities. It has become a huge problem because Venice is built on wooden pilings. They are literally eating the foundations of the city. (231)

Thus, despite the apparently innocuous nature of infestation of these termite-like creatures which was not visible on the outside, the harm that it did on the inside was frightening, to say the least.

Global warming could be regarded as the sole factor behind such uncanny manifestations, like the ones discussed in the novel. Towards the end of the novel, a "miracle" is seen. Of the known total eight species of cetaceans inhabiting the Mediterranean Sea, seven are seen simultaneously which an unprecedented event

is Piya observed exultantly: 'Sperm whales … pilot whales … fin whales … bottlenoses – they're all there! The only Mediterranean species I haven't seen yet is Cuvier's beaked whale!' (276). This miracle can be considered as another manifestation of the ecological uncanny happening due to climate change. Even though the novel celebrates this event, it is worth pondering why such a "miracle" happened. Does such ecological uncanny auger well (or bode ill) for humans and non-humans? Going by the logic of the novel, such sightings could be ominous. Therefore, ecological thought embracing horror, or subscribing to the notion of dark ecology, seems to be the need of the hour. It could be one of the ways by means of which the normalizing strategies of denialists be countered. The unfortunate thing to note here is that people do not seem to be making concerted efforts to address the various issues humanity is confronted with on account of climate change. Emissions of Carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases have increased in the atmosphere leading to global warming and climate change. Even though people realise this, they are quite reluctant to give up their everyday comforts. Cinta smugly observes:

> Everybody knows what must be done if the world is to continue to be a liveable place, if our homes are not to be invaded by the sea, or by creatures like the spider. Everybody knows…and yet we are powerless, even the most powerful among us. We go about our daily business through habit, as though we were in the grip of forces that have overwhelmed our will; we see shocking and monstrous things happening all around us and we avert our eyes; we surrender ourselves willingly to whatever it is that has us in its power. (217)

Such a denialist position makes the task of conservation difficult. Meanwhile, both human and non-human life forms must suffer nature's fury in the form of winds, hailstorms, tornadoes, etc. Even though such events are supposed to be 'natural', the increasing frequency of occurrence is "thought to be an effect of changing weather patterns" (263), which could eventually be attributed to global warming. Carbon economy being the prime mover of capitalism, its rampant use has propelled this materialist ideology to such an extent that the right-wing historian

Francis Fukuyama has termed the Capitalocene as the 'end of history', albeit positively. However, in the wake of the massive thrust to consumerist ethos (which demands newer technologies/innovations), the relinquishing of carbon footprint is becoming more and more difficult. Therefore, global warming is becoming a global menace. It is impacting climate change, which in turn is posing immense threat to the ecological balance. It is affecting both human and non-human. The curse of the Anthropocene is looming large. If timely steps are not taken to redress the wrongs committed by humans in their quest for material comforts and luxuries, the consequences could be disastrous.

Therefore, raising consciousness about the perils of the Anthropocene is a task that is not meant only for climate scientists, climate activists, stratigraphers, ecologists, geographers etc. Creative writers need to show their commitment towards the rapidly depleting ecology as well. It is true that literature tends to be anthropocentric insofar as it emphasises on depiction of the human condition realistically/imaginatively. However, the need of the hour is to address the grave ecological issues confronting humanity, which are paradoxically of their own making. In that sense, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* is a laudable effort in that direction. It is hoped that this work would go a long way in stoking the creative impulse of other writers, and in that way contribute substantively towards the bolstering of the cli-fi genre.

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