"No man is an island": Climate Change and the Challenge to Insularity in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

Ananya Dutta Gupta

> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main . . . [1]

Meditations XVII, the source of the epigraph in the title, is John Donne's rousing assertion of his entanglement with all men as a primary, inalienable condition of existence. It underlines the intense preoccupation among inhabitants of the British Isles in early modern times with their geographical situatedness. Beginning with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), where Utopus sets out on his project of social reconstruction by cutting off his newly founded kingdom from the mainland,[2] insularity seems to have been a handy trope for engaging with the politics of isolation and connectedness. While More projects Utopia as an improvement on the failed island state he inhabits, Shakespeare's John of Gaunt eulogises "this sceptr'd isle" in *Richard II*, 2.1.40-68).[3] Taking cue from this early modern British demarcation of islands as a space of duality, potentially both utopian and dystopian, this article engages with the changed politics of insularity in the recent post-colonially inflected fiction of Amitav Ghosh.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for A Climate in Crisis* (2021), a polemical text that this essay will frequently juxtapose with *Gun Island*, Ghosh will identify the former colonisers, once mutual rivals over the control of spices as continued stakeholders "perpetuating the global fossil-fuel regime".[4] Reading Ghosh's critique of British and European colonialism as a contributor to the earth's endangerment affords interesting insights into the history and the politics of the

idea of an island. Early modern England's cultural self-awareness as an island was both a corollary of and impetus for its part in global exploration and colonisation. This is a useful premise for an enquiry into the conditions that give a fillip to insular or anti-insular thinking. As a world citizen born in Britain's largest colony, India, writing back to the Anglophone global North about the dangers of insularity in the language of an island-nation that is synonymous with imperial history, Ghosh places himself in a paradigmatic relation with the history of the discourse of the term in the same language.

It may seem arcane and anachronistic to begin an essay on Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) in particular with a preamble about the early modern British conceptualisation of insularity, but the rationale lies in Ghosh's own framing of his novel as a counter-narrative to Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare's eponymous merchant is here replaced with "The Merchant who went to Venice" (137).[5] *Gun Island* is a consciously researched post-colonial inversion of the trajectory of movement of people, merchandise, legends, and ideas projected by colonial historiography. Ghosh himself contextualises the "derelict refugee boat" that becomes the centre of climactic drama towards the end of the novel as a fictional "overturning of a centuries-old project that had been essential to the shaping of Europe." (279) This boat full of refugees becomes a proleptic foil to Garrett Hardin's Malthusian trope of the "lifeboat", which Ghosh will dismantle in *The Nutmeg's Curse*.[6]

At the heart of Ghosh's fictional thesis of a living past lie the two islands, the Sundarbans and Venice. Dinanath drives the point home when he reflects how from an aeroplane "it was possible to mistake the Venetian lagoon for the Sundarbans." (147) The project of discovering the pre-figurations of contemporary migration from the Sundarbans to Venice in the early modern period becomes Ghosh's blue print for disrupting human insularity and divisiveness in the face of extinction. Ghosh astutely plots topical concerns around

Venice's endangerment into the Bonduk Sadagar's prophetic and proleptic iconography of two concentric circles. The tenor of that ideogram—"an island within an island"—is suggestive of vulnerability and the need for protection. Later in the novel, the Italian historian Cinta will confirm in her conference talk that Venice is indeed "an archipelago of islands" (134).

That a seventeenth-century globe-trotting Bengali merchant should have been a whistle-blower on twenty-first-century Venice's precarity is an astute post-colonial manoeuvre. Venice's precarity, interestingly, has already surfaced in Ghosh's ambit of discourse. *The Great Derangement* draws attention both to Venice's topography as a lagoon-adjoining space and the visible presence of Bangladeshi ecological refugees "displaced by the same phenomenon that now threatens their adopted city—sea-level rise." The mention of Sundarbans follows shortly thereafter.[7]

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh channels his not particularly well-argued climatological history of culture during the "Little Ice Age" in Europe through the sage voice of Professoressa Giacinta Schiavon. Later Cinta will piece together a subcontinental chapter to the Little Ice Age to contextualise the Bonduk Sadagar's journey westward "to recoup his fortune" (141). A further, trans-continental, fractality (and "pattern" is a term Dinanath himself uses on page 187) is thus suggested here.[8] In fact, Ghosh will draw attention in *The Nutmeg's Curse* to the acute vulnerability not just of Venice but all of Italy in times of accelerated climate change.[9]

The novel, which begins with the declaration that "it was launched by a word" (3), self-reflexively foregrounds its locus within a Shakespearean textual culture where words and the world, books and life intersect. Dinanath Datta, antiquarian scholar cum rare books seller, aligns his scholarly practice implicitly with the legacy of European Humanist philological scholarship exemplified by Lorenzo Valla. He mentions with unmistakable academic flair and relish how he managed to re-date an ostensibly fourteenth-century

Bengali poem-text using internal philological evidence (7). Later in the novel, he references Aldus Manutius, the fifteenth-century Venetian bookmaker (205-206) and Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (34) with equally knowing enthusiasm.

However, name-dropping early modern texts is not intended to turn *Gun Island* into a gimmicky pastiche. Dinanath is the global scholar, uniquely placed, along with Cinta (23), his sage Italian academic mentor, to forge the necessary connections between past and present, East and West. Cinta's thesis on Venice is met with scepticism, if not derision, from the learned audience at the conference, only to be tacitly vindicated not through scholarly logic but the external "coincidence" of an evacuation order occasioned by wildfires (122-125). Soon after, word also reaches Dinanath through Tipu that the temple he had visited in the Sundarbans had since been washed away in a "bad storm" (134). The "patterns" of fractality then are both synchronic and diachronic in scope.

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* is a text of advocacy addressing the crisis of insularity, geographic, symbolic and metaphorical. However, it is not the only Ghosh text that engages with the geo-political condition of being an island. His preoccupation with islands is also evident in the dream-fable of *The Living Mountain* (2022), the retelling of the Sundarbans legend of Dokkhin Rai in *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarban* (2021), and also the non-fictional revisionist history of colonialism in *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021). The shared thematic and ideological rubric of Amitav Ghosh's four latest works suggests a fractality that is partly organic and partly self-reflexive. Ghosh seems to be looking backwards and forwards, Janus-like, making connections among his own works through self-iterations, proleptic and retrospective. It is as though Ghosh were anxious that these should not stand alone as discrete, isolated islands. The archipelagic aspiration embodied in this intertextuality is yet another way Ghosh proposes to breach insularity.

Ghosh's fiction has all along steered clear of historical fiction,

which posits stories of individuals against the backdrop of known, mainstream historical occurrences. Ghosh has instead veered his flashlight towards hidden, recondite, unacknowledged histories of people, places and unexpected journeys. Given this module of fiction as a kind of archaeology of connected human histories and geographies, Ghosh's lingering immersion in island ontology both as spatial reality and a trope should perhaps not seem unusual.

Ghosh's islands in all four of the above texts are not exotic sites of exploration, discovery and European self-refraction so representative of British travel fiction, stretching from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) and Henry Neville's *Isle of Pines* (1668) to the likes of R.M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island* (1857). In most early modern and nineteenth-century British fictions of island adventures—some of them classics that Indian boys and girls have also grown up on—the gaze is firmly on the traveller and their negotiations with the alterity they confront in these alien spaces. In fact, Ghosh himself offers an interesting reading of Western reductionism around island-spaces as represented in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954).[10] Similar representational politics may be noted in popular culture. The film Cast Away (2000), directed by Robert Zemeckis and distributed by 20th-Century Fox, is a case in point. Another unusual variant of the Robinsonade is the BBC Radio Four social experiment called *Desert Island Discs*, in which the anchor weaves her conversation with guests around the cue what book and music they could imagine being marooned on an island with.[11]

Notably, Ghosh is perhaps not the first Bengali writer to have sought to give voice to islanders. In Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Sabuj Dwiper Raja* (1978) Kakababu meets a noble savage in the Andamans, who too implicates the forces of civilisation in their treatment of island-people.[12] Gangopadhyay's concerns are primarily political and colonial, even as ecology is acknowledged as the site of exploitation. Ghosh's recent fiction however shifts the focus squarely onto ecology

as the primary casualty of the Anthropocene, and of what he will describe in *The Nutmeg's Curse* as the "hideous mimicries of the settler-colonial treatment of Indigenous people" by imperfectly decolonised state machineries in developing and under-developed countries.[13] If *Nutmeg's Curse* deliberates upon this "terrible irony", then *Living Mountain* enacts that in the fable of Varvarois and Anthropois mimicking one another.[14] The contagion of greed is also a common thread between *The Living Mountain* and *Jungle Nama*.

Ghosh's islands are provocative sites of political and now climatic cataclysms. They are spaces of systematic colonial occupation and plunder in the past and of heightened precarity in the face of climatic forces unleashed by Western colonisation and by developing nations subsequently embracing the Western model of industrial growth. Ghosh's island-tales are post-colonial ecological dystopias that flatly contradict the utopian projections of early modern travel fiction. This telescopic inversion of the perspective is his primary instrument for debunking the European politics of othering the islands as utopias only to flagrantly and systematically dystopianise them. Ghosh will write in *The Nutmeg's Curse*:

> In the seventeenth century, even as conquered territories like the Bandas were being violently emptied of their inhabitants, it was becoming fashionable for intellectuals in Europe to imagine perfect societies, or Utopias. This early form of science fiction was another companion genre of colonialism, in that it imagined alternative worlds built on supposedly "empty" spaces.[15]

Ghosh's upfront critique of settler-colonisers' reduction of indigenous land-nations into "neo-Europes"[16] helps contextualise his own earlier militantly vocal support of the refugee cause in *Gun Island* (279-280). He makes no mention of More's *Utopia*, but the Utopian practice of settlement in other lands on the pretext of the indigenous people's

alleged neglect of it[17] bears copybook resemblance to Ghosh's mention of the Puritan leader John Winthrop's argument that "Indians had no rights of ownership in the land" because they did not enclose it for productive use. Indeed, in the light of Ghosh's theory, it is possible to interpret the Utopia itself as More's "neo-Europe".

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh concentrates on reminding readers of the fractal pattern of damage wrought by past and recent cyclones such as *Bhola* in 1979 and *Aila* in 2009 (48) on the Gangetic delta. Dinanath tells us how Lusibari, one of the islands in the Sundarbans bore the brunt of the 1970 *Bhola* cyclone (13), and how the impact was aggravated by "West Pakistan's laggardly response" and the subsequent influx of refugees from what was then East Pakistan. In fact, Ghosh has earlier referred to his own ancestors as "ecological refugees" at the beginning of *The Great Derangement*.[18] *Gun Island* will extend this chiastic mirroring between autobiography and fiction when Dinanath feels a strong sense of identification with Palash (266). This entanglement of politics, ecology and migration for survival permeates all of Ghosh's recent works. In *The Nutmeg's Curse,* he argues that the ulterior motive of all colonising missions, certainly that of the Dutch in the Banda archipelago of the East Indies, was "as if the islands themselves were being exorcised so that no ghosts would remain to hinder the efficiency of the future nutmeg-producing machine."[19]

In Ghosh's historical perspective then, these island histories are not isolated, disparate phenomena. Rather, these fractally converge into the umbrella of European mercantile and territorial expansionism and the climate crisis that ensued from it. At its simplest, the objective is to mobilise global opinion, in the only ways in which a public intellectual and storyteller can, towards preserving endangered islands geographically and culturally. This polemical intent informs Ghosh's project of rewriting the shared colonial history on behalf of island-cultures in the global language of English, so as to reach large swathes of Anglophone readers across age-groups and places.

In this context, let us briefly recapitulate some compelling facts about the enhanced risk faced by small islands around the world, especially in the global South. To quote from the UN report on the Caribbean Islands,

> Small islands are increasingly affected by increases in temperature, according to the report Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, launched by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) today. These effects include a larger proportion of the most intense tropical cyclones (TCs), storm surges, droughts, changing precipitation patterns, sea-level rise (SLR), coral bleaching, and invasive species, all of which are already detectable across both natural and human systems (very high confidence).[20]

Fittingly, therefore, the ethical pragmatism that Ghosh espouses in his recent works is an implicit challenge to insularity as a global ontology. Ghosh is tacitly making a case for breaching this insularity at all conceivable levels—economics, governance, knowledge-sharing, and cultural collaboration. In *Gun Island,* decidedly teleological in its objective, this translates into intergenerational and intercontinental collaboration engineered by forces of the uncanny.[21] Thus, the marine biologist Piya meets Dinanath the rare books seller through the mediation of the philanthrope Nilima; and they are in turn helped by the historian Cinta, the refugee trafficking agent Tipu and the Bangladesh matriarch in Venice, Lubna-khala. It is these strange meetings that propel the story towards its satisfactory denouement.

The optimistic vision with which *Gun Island* concludes—"the storm of birds circling above, like a whirling funnel, and the graceful shadows of the leviathans in the glowing green water below"—is of nature's own orchestration of a change of heart in the political machinery. (282) The patrol boat appears with the intention of disrupting the epic and epiphanic spectacle, only to surrender to the

message from nature (282-284). The menace of "apparently inanimate things suddenly coming alive" with which *The Great Derangement* begins[22] is here successfully confronted and resolved with a "miracle".

Further, through the person of Tipu, the mercurial Sundarbans lad who is the perfect foil to the vulnerable Prufrockian protagonist, Dinanath, Ghosh also refracts his felt need to rethink ethical snobbery and separate the legal tenets of righteousness from humanitarian ones. Tipu's resourcefulness at storytelling is meant to help his clients from the region seeking clandestine entry into Europe. (62) In the age of climate change, Ghosh seems to be insinuating, rogue anti-heroes may well prove the true saviours of humanity. Tipu's sudden apparition-like entries and exits on Dinanath's radar and the trajectory of his arrival in Venice eventually seem to be Ghosh's ruse for subsuming him in Bonduk Sadagar's myth. *Gun Island* is a utopian romance suitably peopled by a pointedly diverse cast of empowered global citizens and under-privileged economic migrants whose paths cross serendipitously in order that the plot can deliver a political solution to a humanitarian crisis. The mythical Gun Merchant, *Bonduk Sadagar*, becomes the spectral *deus ex machina* (251), the Prospero of the conquered. It is he, along with the righteously demanding mother goddess, Manasa, who disrupts normality in order that his chosen people might become instruments of change.

Ghosh's utopia, then, is not a remote, pristine, isolated, luxuriant island of plenty, nor the Tahitis of artistic impression, to which select humanity can retire and thrive and build new colonies upon. Such islands are, in his perception, too fragile to afford a future. Ghosh's utopia is *not* an island—it is a global archipelago of peoples and races, islands and main lands that are connected by a common compulsion—avoiding extinction through "the active and willing participation of the great majority of the world's population.[23]

As Ghosh perceives it, much of the political paralysis derailing climate action entails a myopic inability to see how climate change has helped create a truly planetary geography and that political geography

has to rise to that challenge and redefine if not erase the concept of contrived borders and boundaries. Nations and peoples should realise that self-centredness[24] is counter-productive to the programme of survival, and that in order to save our own, we must both help and seek help from those who are ostensibly not our own. In one of his most rousing texts in pacifism, *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916), later published in America under the title *Why Men Fight?* (1917), Bertrand Russell recommends the abolition of national armies in order that a world army may be constructed to protect the world against an imagined common enemy.[25] Ghosh's utopian pacifism posits a similar global alignment of national resources in addressing the risk posed by the climate crisis.[26] To save the endangered islands in particular, to avoid larger mainland landmasses *becoming* islands, marooning whole populations on uninhabitable islands, we must first overcome the insularity of regional and nationalist protectionism.

It is possible to read not just *Gun Island*, but all three of Ghosh's recent fictions as activist works (and he categorically indicts "the slow violence of inaction" for accelerating the catastrophe[27]) that embody a kind of autochthonous[28] praxis. In other words, the author adopts the blue print for climate-adaptive literary fiction that he has himself earlier manifested. Some years before climate change became one of the most compelling subjects in global public opinion, Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) challenged literary practitioners to break free of the generic perception of literature, the humanities and the arts as languishing in a dangerous disconnect with "human-induced climatic perturbation".[29] The book seeks to impress upon writers of fiction their own capacity to re-define their place in relation to the kind of crises that are generally seen as the domain of the sciences and public policy.[30]

To claim or reclaim its rightful place in the sphere of action and application, Ghosh suggests, literature, specially fiction will have to unlearn and disavow the very tenets of social politics that its story of origin in eighteenth century Europe is traditionally entangled with.

Ghosh implicitly connects the rise of the individual at the root of the rise of the novel-form—with the larger-than-life anthropo- and Eurocentric heroisation of a Robinson Crusoe. He disparages "that sense of the individual moral adventure—of the evolving individual in varied and roughly equal battle with a world of circumstances—which since "Don Quixote" and "Robinson Crusoe," has distinguished the novel from the fable and the chronicle.[31] Thus, in the new poetics of a climate-aware, climate-resilient, communitarian fiction, the first thing to go would have to be the potent construct of the isolated, self-sufficient, individual survivor or saviour.

This late post-colonial reading is largely instigated by what Ghosh sees as the common timeline of colonialism, Industrial Revolution and the Anthropocene. He makes that thesis boldly transparent once again in *The Nutmeg's Curse*: "As a process, then, the muting of a large part of humanity by European colonizers cannot be separated from the simultaneous muting of 'Nature'."[32] The ensuing focalisation of fiction around a single, central human protagonist that can then also be institutionalised as the authoritative work of a single person strikes Ghosh as being implicated in the very processes that commoditised nature and disempowered people whose ways of life had entailed a far more reverential and protective ethos towards earth and its non-human elements. In other words, Ghosh implicitly indicts the traditional European novel in the politics of marginalisation.

To make itself relevant and functional in the discourse of climate action, as Ghosh would have it, new fiction must reinvent its calling, by assimilating older forms of storytelling from what Dinanath explains as the oxymoronic concept of *bhuta* as "a past present in the present" (104-105). It must re-centre itself in respect of the seemingly uncanny yet stark reality of the alienated, freakishly reactive global physical environment. The restoration of the ultimate home, the planet itself, is fundamental to the rehabilitation of its inhabitants. Ghosh uses a stirring Bengali phrase for this many-splendoured home: *"sasagara basumati"*, i.e., "the ocean'd earth" (271). As

suggested in Piya's indictment of the refinery for polluting the rivers of the Sundarbans and forcing Irrawaddy dolphins to either beach themselves or migrate to other waters (96), destruction of human and non-human habitat is a simultaneous outcome of uncontrolled industrial pollution and climate forces.

Ghosh's latest fictional works posit a more shamanic, magus-like, mythmaker's role for the author. It is noteworthy that *Gun Island* subtitles itself as "a novel", *Jungle Nama* as "a story", *The Nutmeg's Curse* as "a parable" and *The Living Mountain* as "a fable". The historian's role is analytical, academic, un-affected by the interventionist urgency informing a prophet's role. Clearly, Ghosh has felt the need to veer away from the historian's stance to that of the primitive storyteller, privy to more mystical ways of seeing and knowing that transgress the Enlightenment mould of human reasoning and communication in a strictly human language. In *Nutmeg's Curse* Ghosh critiques what he sees as the "erasure of nonhuman voices from "serious literature" as a "feature of official modernity" and asserts that "the medium of stories" is the only way of restoring "nonhuman voices".[33] Correspondingly, there is pointed mention in *Gun Island* of "a family of Hindu gayans (or ballad singers) who had kept alive the epic poem (or *panchali*) that narrated the legend of the [Manasa] shrine, passing it down orally through many generations." (15)

All this may be said to be an effort to breach another kind of insularity, i.e., that of human language as an exclusive anthropocentric system, putatively superior to the communication mechanisms among other animals. On one occasion, when Tipu pops up on Dinanath's screen and asking pointedly if "shamans can communicate with animals. And even with trees, and mountains, and ice and stuff." (105) He goes to relate the shaman to the "bauley" "who leads people into the jungle" (107). Ultimately, it is the "goddess" Manasa who is postulated by Dinanath to be the most powerful shaman. He unravels the legend in a way that confers a meliorative twist to this feared and demonised female deity: "Without her mediation there

could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression." (152-153)

Interestingly, both *Gun Island* and the *Living Mountain* respectively give primacy to a woman shaman, an Ethiopian lady (281) and the ancient Adept (34). In *Jungle Nama*, it is the poetry taught by the old mother that saves Dukhey from Dokkhin Rai.[34] *The Living Mountain* presents itself as nothing more than a transcript of a dream recounted by the spectral figure of a certain Maansi, who in turn adds a fresh layer of gendered lineage by conjecturing that it could well be her grandmother's dream.[35] This intentional displacement of agency from able, powerful males, to women as repositories of indigenous wisdom, is central to Ghosh's critique of masculinism and anthropocentrism as the dual driving force of the Western novel tradition. Dinanath Datta's willingness to submit to the interventions of Cinta, Pia and Lubna-khala in *Gun Island* are Ghosh's way of redressing that inequity. Ghosh's practice may be understood in relation to his endorsement elsewhere of Carolyn Merchant's thesis about the "emerging philosophy of science in which nature was seen as an essentially feminine domain of disorder that had to be conquered, subjugated, and indeed tortured in order to extract her secrets."[36] By giving agency to women from across races and economic strata in mobilising what he will himself call "vitalist politics",[37] Ghosh seeks to redress that skewed politics of gender. In making Manasa a key player in nature's *witchery*, then, Ghosh seeks to overturn the condescending diminution of the nature-woman trope.

Ghosh is equally anxious not to let his critique of the Western colonial machinery and its legacy blind him or his reader to the contributions of Western scholars and benefactors. Dinanath is at pains right through the book to underline how it is time and again Cinta's quasi-maternal stewarding that nudges him towards a truly planetary "awakening" (217). Dinanath's description of his uncanny experience on board the aircraft's "impregnably metallic, mechanical, manmade womb" of viewing the "wild tangle of mud and mangrove"

that is the Sundarbans,[38] is tellingly foetal, and unwittingly echoes Shakespeare's Lear's hysteria[39]: "What had I been thinking? Had I gone mad?" (101-102)

While this certainly seeks to displace the author from the pre-eminence granted to him or her by print culture, it nevertheless confers on the author interpretative, translatory, even evangelical powers. Ghosh's new paradigm of authorship may well be critiqued for not altogether breaking free of author-centric insularity. Nor does it rid him of the anxieties of dwelling within English language and Western education and culture with a kind of conflicted criticality. It prompts us to raise an alarm about the possible re-entrenchment of the authorial function in the Romantic and Carlylean icon of the poet as vates, seer, visionary, prophet.

Realising this, perhaps, both *Jungle Nama* and *The Living Mountain* are presented by Ghosh as experimental co-creations and artistic collaborations, involving visual illustrations,[40] the graphic novel-form, verse-poetry, adapted precolonial prosody and the myths couched in them from languages that the continued global dominance of English has relegated to the status of regionality. Ghosh's choice of *dwipadi* verse in English in *Jungle Nama* seems to be conditioned in part by his claim in *The Great Derangement* that poetry "has long had an intimate relationship with climatic events".[41] *The Nutmeg's Curse*, a work of scholarly historiography, offers a striking example of Ghosh experimentally intervening not only with the anecdotal but also the creative philological touch. The "tiny planet-shaped nut" is turned into a trope for hidden ontological hemispheres, where "songs, poems, and stories reside."[42]

In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh insists that indigenous knowledge systems have to be tapped into not just to break the magisterial *insularity* of English as a global language, but also because it helps reconnect human cognitive abilities with the non-human world and create a new mimetic language based on inter-species understanding and empathy. The rationally inexplicable visions experienced by

Tipu about the Irrawaddy dolphin matriarch Rani and the special bonding she shares with Piya (88-93) are cases in point. In *The Great Derangement*, again, Ghosh identified the twentieth century as marking a "radical turn away from the non-human to the human, from the figurative to the abstract" in art and literature.[43] Six years later, at the end of *The Nutmeg's Curse*, he declaims, "It is essential now, as the prospect of planetary catastrophe comes ever closer, that those nonhuman voices be restored to our stories."[44] Dipesh Chakraborty calls this a need to revive "reverence" for nature:

> In building a new tradition of political thought that is not simply about human domination of the earth, we would need to find ways of combining elements of both wonderment and reverence in our relationship to the places we inhabit.[45]

Amitav Ghosh's vision for fiction in the age of climate change sets out to translate that reverence into a narrative mode.[46] It is based on English language accommodating, if not simulating older local idioms rooted in local ecosystems that offer insights into extant, living traditions of amicable human-nonhuman cohabitation. Such an author is a curator of a text that becomes a site of cohabitation and coalescence of dominant, residual and emergent cultures, of global and local languages, of diverse genres and art-forms, of orality, print and digital media, of modern history and informal storytelling. Cinta's peregrinations in the Maidan are contrived to coincide with a "*jatra*" performance, that too about Manasa (26).

Ghosh's Afterword in *Jungle Nama* vindicates this experimental hybrid aesthetic as a timely restoration of the aesthetic, religious and cultural syncretism found in its sources.[47] The aesthetic framework of *Jungle Nama* is consistent with Ghosh's own earlier postulation of the "expulsion of hybrids" as an ultimate offshoot of the segregation of nature and culture, and consequently, literature and science.[48]

This aesthetic kaleidoscope in turn becomes a motif for breaching

insularity through interdisciplinary collaboration as a foundation and mechanism for climate action. It is important to note that *Jungle Nama* is dedicated to the environmental anthropologist Annu Jalais, who is in the vanguard of campaigns for climate justice in Bangladesh and India. Correspondingly, Ghosh locates himself and his narrator-personae in *Gun Island* at the intersection of creative practice and public activism, like Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, the prominent poet and climate spokesperson from Marshall Islands, who emphasises the need to shift the focus from "mitigation" to building "resilience".[49]

Ghosh's fictional praxis pitches itself as the timeless story that nonetheless speaks to a moment in time. This is signposted at one point in *Gun Island* when Cinta reminds Dinanath, her mentee, not to "underestimate the elemental and inexplicable power of stories" (127). In *Nutmeg's Curse,* again, Ghosh argues for the instrumentalisation of "a shared story—a narrative of humility" in forging the "broad and inclusive transcontinental alliances" needed to address "the planetary crisis".[50] It is Cinta again who will embolden Dinanath to temper the studied critical detachment associated with authentic Western research methodology with the affect that inflects layman response to works of art. (34) In Ghosh's schema, the critique of Western Enlightenment comes from within its academic legacy, tempered with an expansive openness to non-European methodologies.

One may well demur, however, that the insistent intentionality of Ghosh's storytelling in *Gun Island*—marked by copious *mis en abymes* in the plot—undermines the naturalness of the narrative and, in the process, the very sort of messianic efficacy that primitive cultures would have attributed to such a storyteller. It is true that in *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh proleptically justifies this transgression of the commonplace with the exceptional in narrative, particularly in novels where exceptions which are the very "motor of narrative" remain carefully concealed.[51] In *Gun Island*, however, Ghosh may be said to err in making exceptions themselves the rule, the sole foundation of successive events. It is as though the author himself were engendering

strange concatenations of events and persons like a Prospero. From the narrator's point of view, this is the magic of non- or pre-realist genres of storytelling, i.e., the myth, the romance, the fairy tale and the fantasy (268). Not surprisingly, both *The Gun Island* and *Jungle Nama* show a literary historiographical preoccupation with "legend" (5, 7, 43, 69, 123, 127, 138) and "folklore" (5). Cinta will later elaborate her thesis that people of the past knew about the power of stories to "tap into dimensions that were beyond the ordinary, beyond the human even. …" (127)

These forms demand a suspension of disbelief, which translates into a re-adjustment of the reader's horizon of expectations. It is a return to the metaphysics of magic and faith, hence a return to Hamlet's observation, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in our philosophy." (1.5.168)[52] The remark comes from a book-reading, university-returned scholar-prince who elsewhere in the same play plays the modern sceptic. Hamlet's observation helps substantiate the point Ghosh is implicitly making, i.e., that an acknowledgement of nature as an active, living, proactive and reactive entity that is now naturally manifesting the effects of man-made excesses necessitates extending the margin of what we call real; of adding layers to it. There is copious sprinkling of words like "strange" (3) and "weird" (99) in Gun Island and also pointed references to "reverie", "vision" (99), "dream" (133) and "hallucination" (101, 133). Early on, Nilima recounts to Dinanath how a particular Sundarban hamlet, skirted by the river Raimangal, escaped harm thanks to "the miracle" wrought by the goddess of snakes and local protector, Manasa Devi (14). The book will end with another fortuitous "miracle" (284) wrought by a scientifically explainable phenomenon of "bioluminescence" (282).

Interestingly, in *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh offers a historiography of the modern novel as an exercise emphatically in realism, i.e., in the relegation of the improbable to the backdrop.[53] It is possible to read *Gun Island* as Ghosh's arrival at an alternative

epistemology of fiction, one in which improbability can be accommodated in the form of "miracles", "legends" and "fantasies". *Jungle Nama* and *The Living Mountain* are similar exercises. Cinta will disabuse her mentee's assumption that Europe was all about "scientific rationality" with the following clarification: "I can tell you that to this day there are many people in France and Italy for whom witches and spirit-possession are just simple facts of life.' (35) Later in the novel, Cinta will invoke Manasa's European counterpart, the Black Madonna of La Salute who is also the Minoan goddess of snakes" (223) The cultural political ramifications of an Indian scholar trained in Western academia being alerted by an Italian scholar about India's continued accommodation of pre-modern knowledge-systems and its overlap with the pre-Enlightenment discourse of supernaturalism in Europe are hard to miss. It is Ghosh's challenge to the Western equation of residual occultism with obscurantism. His counter-claim is that such occultism obtains in the West despite "scientific rationality". This way, Ghosh's cultural politics remains simultaneously inclusive and progressive, and congruent with the necessity of knowledge-sharing in the interest of sustaining a single, united global front.

As indicated at the start of this article, the attempt to inter-textualise Shakespeare and Ghosh's Gun Island is not an act of whimsy. Half-way through the novel, Ghosh's first-person narrator Dinanath visits a Los Angeles Museum hosting a conference "to celebrate its acquisition of a very valuable seventeenth-century edition of *The Merchant of Venice*" (114). Cinta offers a conjecture about Venice's Jewish enclave, where the "real-life counterpart of Shylock" would have lived (134). Later, Cinta will couple *Othello* with The *Merchant of Venice* in her thesis that plays about the racial other—Shylock or Othello—could only have looked convincing if set in a place as cosmopolitan as Venice. (142)

Ghosh's text creates a peculiarly ambivalent tension between its narrative and the worlds Shakespeare wrote about. On the one hand,

Shakespeare's plays project the very sort of Janus-like world that recognised just the kind of cohabitation of religion and magic, faith and reason that Ghosh is envisioning. And yet it is the also the era that paved the way for the European colonial enterprise, exemplified by Prospero. As a scholar-writer in English, no doubt deeply shaped by his academic career at Oxford and subsequently by his domicile in the US, Ghosh is best placed to understand and replicate the Hamletian angst and dilemma.

Dinanath's aspiration towards cosmopolitan scholarship, discussed earlier in this article, is implicitly moored in Bengali self-fashioning as the cultural and intellectual leader of colonial India, the first if not only Indian region to have had its own Renaissance. However, Ghosh is careful to steer clear of vernacular nationalism by foregrounding Bangla in the new millennium as a global language (163) of subcontinental—Indo-Bangladesh—and subaltern parentage. In *Gun Island*, the people who have kept the language alive in Italy, the very cradle of European classicism, are not jet-setting peregrinating scholars like Dinanath Datta, but the likes of Tipu, "the Dalit from the Sundarbans" (51), Rafi and Lubna-khala, i.e., legal or illegal economic and ecological refugees from coastal Bengal and Bangladesh.[54]

The dialogues in the novel become a heteroglossic site for the languages of Europe and of their erstwhile colonies to finally reverse the stigma of a Tower of Babel. Dinanath cites a sixteenth-century book titled *The Strife of Love in a Dreame* in English translation, featuring a Babelian dream peopled by real and fantastical beasts, trees, flowers and spirits communicating "cryptic messages in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic" (207-208). Thus, along with Latin and Bangla learned phrases, the reader also encounters the un-glossed juxtaposition of Italian colloquialisms (e.g., 28) and Bangla sentence fragments (57). Earlier, Dinanath deciphers an old verse fragment about the time of the Bonduk Sadagar's shrine in the Sundarbans to be a riddled allusion to Dhaka as a world city long before Calcutta came into being (21). In the climate refugee Lubna-khala's Madaripur

accent, Dinanath recognises the tones and inflections he had heard in his grandmother's Bangla (159). Parallel to Tipu and Rafi's homoerotic bonding, Lubna-khala becomes another anchor for Ghosh's vision of inter-religious amity and a shared heritage. Ghosh thus consciously invokes a pre-Partition history of cohabitation as a site for sentimental nostalgia to galvanise new relationships and affections.

A cautious parallel may be seen here with Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873), that iconic early Anglophone Bengali whose creative trajectory is framed around the dramatic transition from extreme Anglophilia to committed advocacy of Bangla as a literary medium. Remarkably, in *The Great Derangement* Ghosh speaks appreciatively of Dutt's "immoderate portrayals of Nature" that Bankimchandra putatively disapproved of.[55] Cultural evangelism is secondary to ecological evangelism in Ghosh's recent works. Nevertheless, the writer betrays a desire to resolve an inward cultural struggle comparable to the tension between the adopted culture and the root culture evident in Dutt's language politics. Without overemphasising the autobiographical overtones, it is nevertheless possible to read Ghosh's latest works as a site of contestation and conflict between these dual cultural pulls. Dinanath speaks of "switching between two states of mind, each of which came with its own cache of memory" (103) as a routine strategic adjustment to travelling between his two lives, Brooklyn and Kolkata, and how this internal arrangement is disrupted by his experiences in the Sundarbans: "It was as if some living thing had entered my body, something ancient that had long lain dormant in the mud . . . " (103). His four latest works climactically register Ghosh's Oedipal disillusionment with Western intellectualism and book culture, of which his earlier erudite fiction and style are the quintessential product. Ghosh's angst and fantasy are played out in filial separation and eventual reunion with his mother's and grandmother's lands. Dukhey abandons his aged, grieving mother in *Jungle Nama* and then returns as the prodigal son.[56] *Gun Island* concludes with Cinta's

mystical, Dantesque vision of a reunion with her lost daughter (259). Tellingly, the motto that Ghosh invokes through Cinta at the end of the novel is "Unde orige inde salus", i.e., "from the beginning salvation comes." (286) The only sadness about the fairy-tale ending to *Gun Island* is Cinta's peaceful demise (286-287), which will again uncannily anticipate Ghosh's moving account of his own mother's dying vision in *Nutmeg's Curse*.[57]

In this otherwise relentlessly polemical, agenda-driven social novel, it is such cultural anxieties and their projected resolutions through feminine, maternal agency, that afford the sparks of interiority that Amitav Ghosh sacrifices to the exigencies of a global emergency.

NOTES

1 'Devotions upon Emergent Occasions' in John Donne, *The Works of John Donne*, vol. III, ed. Henry Alford. London: John W. Parker, 1839), 574-5, reproduced in *Luminarium: An Anthology of English Literature*. https://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/meditation17.php#:~:text=No%20man%20is%20an%20island%2C%20entire%20of%20itself%3B%20every%20man,am%20involved%20in%20mankind%2C%20and Accessed on 2 January 2023.
2 *Three Early Modern Utopias*, ed. Susan Bruce (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 50.
3 Stephen Greenblatt et al (eds.), *The Norton Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1997), 967.
4 Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2021), 102 & 110.
5 Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island. A Novel*. (Gurgaon: Hamish Hamilton, 2019). All citations from this work will be parenthetically inserted in the main text.
6 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 175-176.
7 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2016), 84 & 85
8 Cf. Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse,* 153: "long and enduring patterns of history."
9 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 143.
10 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 177-178.
11 See BBC Radio Four home page for Desert Island Discs,

https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qnmr , accessed on 2 April 2023.

12 Sunil Gangopadhyay, *Sabuj Dwiper Raja*, (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 1993; rept. 2011), 103-115 & 127-128

13 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 196.

14 Amitav Ghosh, *The Living Mountain: A Fable for Our Times* (Gurugram: Harper Collins, 2022), 33.

15 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 217.

16 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 82.

17 More, 'Utopia', Second Book in Bruce, *Three Early Modern Utopias*, 63.

18 Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 4.

19 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 255.

20 'Small islands are increasingly affected by climate change: IPCC Report', *United Nations in the Caribbean*, 28 February, 2022, https://caribbean.un.org/en/173533-small-islands-are-increasingly-affected-climate-change-ipcc-report, accessed on 25 February 2023.

21 For Ghosh's Shakespearean dwelling on the uncanny as presaging, see *The Nutmeg's Curse,* 7. For an exposition of the uncanny as a concept applicable to climate change, see *The Great Derangement,* 40.

22 Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 6 & 84.

23 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 242.

24 For Ghosh's take on human selfishness, see *Nutmeg's Curse,* 176-177.

25 Bertrand Russell, *Why Men Fight* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010; 2nd Indian repr. 2012), 53, 65, 66.

26 In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 147, Ghosh will urge for more global discussion of the direct impact of "military-related emissions" on global warming. Cf.124: "As far back as 1992, the Union of Concerned Scientists warmed that humanity faced a stark choice between spending its resources on war and violence, or on preventing catastrophic environmental damage. . . . In 2017 the warning was reissued. . . . it concluded that the state of the world was even worse than before." Also see 117.

27 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 165.

28 The word "autochthonous" is used by the narrator in Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 6.

29 Ghosh, *Great Derangement,* 9, 15. Also see *Nutmeg's Curse*, 53.

30 Ghosh, *Great Derangement,* 159, 181 & 216.

31 Ghosh, *Great Derangement,* 103.

32 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 190 Also see 119, 121 &153.

33 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 204. Also see 200-203.

34 Amitav Ghosh & Salman Toor, *Jungle Nama* (Gurugram: Fourth Estate, 2021), 23-24, 53 & 68.

35 Ghosh, *Living Mountain*, 5.

36 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse,* 256.

37 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse,* 235.
38 Ghosh in Nutmeg's Curse, 190, references Kurtz's sentence "Exterminate all the brutes".
39 "O how this mother swells up toward my heart! / *Hysterica passio!* Down, thou climbing sorrow, *Thy element's below*." 2.4.53 & "Oh me, my heart! My rising heart! But down." (2.4.114) in William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear,* ed. Jay L. Halio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; repr.2014), 162 & 165.
40 Devangana Dash is the illustrator of *The Living Mountain* and *Jungle Nama* presents the Brooklyn-based Pakistani artist Salman Toor as its "illuminator".
41 Ghosh, Great Derangement, 35. Also see 38 for his mention of Bonobibir Johurnama, one of the two source-texts of Jungle Nama.
42 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 76 & 97-98.
43 Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 160.
44 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse,* 257.
45 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Delhi: Primus, 2021 for the University of Chicago Press),
46 Ghosh engages with Chakraborty's essay on 'The Climate of History' in his *Great Derangement*, 12.
47 Ghosh, Jungle Nama, 74-79.
48 Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 96 & 94.
49 'On the Frontlines of Climate Change, Small Island States Can Lead in Resilience', Feature Story, *The World Bank,* 11 April, 2022, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2022/04/11/on-the-frontlines-of-climate-change-small-island-states-can-lead-in-resilience, accessed on 25 February 2023.
50 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 242.
51 Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 22.
52 Greenblatt, *Norton Shakespeare,* 1687.
53 Ghosh, *Great Derangement,* 21.
54 Cf. Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse,* 154.
55 Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 29.
56 Ghosh, *Jungle Nama*, 24 & 69.
57 Ghosh, *Nutmeg's Curse*, 216.

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