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SUKANYA DASGUPTA
December 2022

Introduction

Volume X of *Critical Imprints* focuses on the theme of Landscape and Memory in literature and culture. We have been very fortunate to receive a number of articles on a wide range of texts that explore the interface between memory and topography.

Shinjini Basu analyses Grossman's *Stalingrad* and Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer* in the light of their transitions from war zones to disaster zones while Chayana Mondal discerns how memory plays a seminal role in Adwaita Mallabarman's *A River Called Titash*. In Aparna Goswami's article, Tanzania is viewed through the prism of its changed identity from the colony of Tanganyika in Vassily's *The Book of Secrets*. Apala Bhowmick looks at Aimé Césaire's poetry as demonstrating the entanglements between the corporeality of the body and elements present in the natural environment vis-à-vis the paradigms of coloniality and power. Ananya Dutta Gupta critically examines how Amitav Ghosh addresses the crisis of insularity in *Gun Island* while Ritobina Chakraborty explores, through the reading of two Afghan novels, how Afghanistan is a site of trauma and political turmoil as well as an idyllic space preserved through memory and landscape. Argha Kumar Banerjee discusses the role of landscape in the poetry and art of the First World War and Sanghita Sanyal examines the landscape paintings of Rabindranath Tagore, that are inextricably linked to his poems and songs. Shirsha Gooptu assesses the fragile balance between public and private memories in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*.

SUKANYA DASGUPTA
December 2022

Contents

Landscapes of 'Missing History': Changing Topographic Imagination from War to Disaster

Shinjini Basu

To borrow a phrase from Michel de Certeau, the French historian of everyday life and practices, every narrative structure works in terms of 'spatial syntaxes'.[1] Rather than looking at stories merely in terms of their chronological ordering, they can be seen as a modality of organizing and regulating space between 'maps' and 'itineraries', 'marking boundaries' and 'focalization'.[2] In this context de Certeau makes a distinction between 'place' and 'space'. A place is the order in which "elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence" without the possibility of simultaneity of two things in the same location.[3] Space, on the other hand incorporates factors such as direction, velocity and time. Space is thus socially constructed, sustained through the practices of everyday life. Stories have the ability to unlock an event from its fixed place and spatialize it, restoring its mobile, vibrant contingency.

One of the most important factors in the social production of space is the endurance of 'architectonic determinants'[4]—remnants of an older social space into a newer form. No space is pre-social, even the ones considered natural or organic and no space completely disappears. They survive in the various representations of space—maps and plans, records and registers—as well as in the representational space—on the level of symbols. Knowledge faces a hurdle when it makes the representation of a space the object of investigation without taking into account how it is processed into the representational space. If there is a disruption on the biomorphic and anthropological level, what ramifications does it bear on the continuity of the two spheres of representation? For a long time war remained the most

obvious cause for such catastrophic disruption. But the twentieth century showed other possible ways in which the landscape of the physical, representable space is altered radically and permanently, resulting in an equally permanent rupture with the representational space. Svetlana Alexievich in her seminal work *Chernobyl Prayer* claims that for a long time our yardstick of horror used to be war. Then came the Holocaust—first Nazi, then nuclear. With the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in 1986, "The history of disasters"[5] had begun. We had not yet acquired the vocabulary or the tools of representation for it. In this paper I would try to trace the transition of the imagination and representation of topography from one of war to disaster; especially in spaces where both have been equally intrusive and pervasive. I shall use two texts—Vasily Grossman's *Stalingrad* (1952, 2019) and Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997, 2016) to show both continuity and rupture in the topographic imagination. I would also try to explore the literary landscape not only as a mode of recording the changes of the physical landscape but rather as a mode of intervention—the loss and estrangement often erased from the physical landscape are re-inscribed into the literary one.

Both texts seem to be territorially fixed to places that have gained metonymic significance—Stalingrad as the representative of the ultimate military resistance against Nazi Germany and Chernobyl as that of nuclear devastation. Both texts try to unfix respective landscapes from the weight of their historical representation. But in the process they yield very different literary landscapes which I would argue result from an altered spatial sensibility.

The changes to a landscape brought in by war have been documented for a long time. Thucydides describes in great detail the alteration of the Athenian countryside due to the massive demographic displacement at the beginning of the Peloponnesian war. Athenians living for a long time in self regulated townships scattered all over Attica were forced to desert their houses and temples. The desolation of the countryside was coupled with the overpopulation of

the city of Athens. Unplanned temporary settlements came up even in sacred spaces which were hitherto prohibited from construction through oracles. Clearly there is a practical acceptance of the war affecting the inviolability of sacred spaces, infusing them with more imminent secular needs of survival. Thucydides quips, "And in my opinion, if the oracle proved true, it was in the opposite sense to what was expected. For the misfortunes of the state did not arise from the unlawful occupation, but the necessity of the occupation from the war; and though the god did not mention this, he foresaw that it would be an evil day for Athens in which the plot came to be inhabited".[6]

However, war may also inculcate a sacred geography within the space of the secular. The widespread devastating effect of war on the natural and demographic aspects of the landscape became an inevitable part of the modern historical consciousness after the First World War as it obliterated the spatial demarcation of civil and military engagement. The long trenches of the First World War have been etched in public memory as the most enduring images of the horrors of the war—human bodies huddling in the ravines stretching across miles. But the First World War installed new sacred sites within public spaces in the form of the graves of the fallen soldiers and war memorials. As soldiers died en masse their bodies were hurriedly buried in mass graves strewn across Europe. There were many instances when fallen soldiers did not receive any burial for months or years. Geoff Dyer mentions how Sir Edward Lutyens, during his visit to France in 1917 was moved by these hurriedly constructed graves. He later had a substantial role to play in constructing many of the cemeteries for the fallen soldiers.[7] It was perhaps for the first time that the aesthetic and architecture of public memorials for the dead became not just a matter of legislative debate but also of public discourse in England. One of the most significant outcomes was the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier—a monument that became the prototype for many later war memorials like the ones after the Second

World War, the Holocaust memorials, Vietnam War Memorial in Arlington or even the 9/11 memorial at Ground Zero.

The dual structure of space Lefevbre talks about, works in line with Roland Barthes' conceptualization of myths as secondary structures. Just like myths, here too physical spaces first find their way into two dimensional representations and then attain a secondary significance on a symbolic level. Lefevbre associates this movement with the transformative effects of capitalism as it tries to produce the 'abstract space' of capital in which

> Space as a whole enters into the modernized mode of capitalist production: it is utilized to produce surplus value. The ground, the underground, the air, and even the light enter into both the productive forces and the products. The urban fabric, with its multiple networks of communication and exchange, is part of the means of production. The city and its various installations (ports, train stations, etc.) are part of capital.[8]

While most wars of the twentieth and twenty first centuries are byproducts of capitalism's need for unimpeded expansion, they work as an interruption in its dual matrix of spatial representation. But *Stalingrad* records the effects of war on a very different topography. Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. Branded as 'Operation Barbarossa' the invasion made initial and rapid inroads. The siege of Leningrad started in September, 1941 and continued for 872 days before the city was finally liberated by the Red Army. In October, 1941 Moscow was attacked by a two million strong German army. Many cities and towns were captured. The military toll on both sides was devastating but the Soviets also had to incur grievous loss of civilian lives. The two forces fought in and around Stalingrad from August 1942 to February 1943. It is considered to be one of the most prolonged and brutal instances of urban warfare. Encirclement of cities with all their civilian population was one

of the key German strategies, turning the entire urban landscape into a battleground. As the summer offensive turned to winter and dragged on the German war machine lost steam. The Soviet resistance intensified, finally defeating the Germans, pushing them out of the Soviet territories and continued till the Red Army entered Berlin in 1945.

Set amid the invasion of Stalingrad the novel in its Tolstoyan length encapsulates various strata of the Soviet social life—Vavilov, a farmer and member of kolkhoz or collective farm and conscripted for the Red Army, the extended family and friends of Alexandra Shaposnikova, a chemist, the refugees of war, Soviet soldiers and officers engaged in the war efforts and so on. However, central to the structure of the text is not just the city of Stalingrad and the Soviet military resistance; rather it is the Soviet social and political landscape in the cusp of an unprecedented challenge.

It is a landscape that has already gone through a profound metamorphosis post the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Lefevbre points out that every space is created by allocation of place for social relations of production as well as reproduction.[9] After 1917 the Soviet social space was created through radical redistribution of resources and restructuring of relations of production. When the novel unfolds in 1941, the period of post revolutionary reconstruction is almost complete through the introduction, implementation and then abandonment of Lenin's New Economic Policy, the era of Five Year Plans introduced by Stalin and massive push towards industrialization and scientific and technological progress. *Stalingrad* captures the friction of the Nazi blitzkrieg not just with a material but a radically opposite ideological landscape. The destruction of the so called 'Jewish Bolshevism' was a centre piece of the Nazi ideology. General Franz Halder had announced in advance—"the war against Red Russia will be such that it cannot be conducted in a knightly fashion. It is a war of ideology and racial differences; it will have to be conducted with unprecedented, unmerciful and unrelenting harshness…."[10]

Vasily Grossman, who was present at the Soviet frontlines between 1941 and 1945 as a special correspondent for the Red Army newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda or Red Star*, thus had firsthand knowledge of the military operations and witnessed the long drawn, painful retreat and eventual recapture of lost grounds. His war correspondence, published in *A Writer at War* (2013) provides a witness's account of both the debacles of the military leadership and the grit of the Soviet army in the Battle of Stalingrad. The novel, while preserving the precise observation of the journalist, erects a literary space for the ideological confrontation. In order to accentuate this ideological opposition the massive industrial and engineering plants form an integral part of the depiction of the Soviet landscape. The natural landscape is juxtaposed against the industrial landscape, not as adversary forces, rather as a shared matrix exuding a sense of collective ownership.

The war reconfigures this matrix creating its own cartography as the Red Army loses towns, cities and entire regions to Germans—Valuiki, Kupyansk, Millerovo, the whole of Ukraine. In the spring of 1942 the Southwestern Head Quarters of the Soviet Army is pushed back to the Volga. Grossman provides a detailed account of the rapidly changing landscape from a military point of view. In *Stalingrad* the first glimpse of the retreat of the Southwestern front from Valuiki to Stalingrad comes from Colonel Pyotr Novikov stationed in the Southwestern Front Head Quarters. Curiously, instead of a physical description the withdrawal finds representation through the shifting dots on military maps. On the air-force maps the symbols for Soviet bomber airfields are replaced by the symbols for front-line fighter and ground attack airfields.[11] All over the map there are small black numbers representing German tank divisions. This aerial view flattening the space into a two dimensional surface, draining it of its materiality prepares for the visceral physicality of both military and civilian movements to follow.

Landscape is an important aspect of the military strategy of any war, but the sheer vastness and complexity of the landscape of the

Soviet Union made it the most important factor in this war. However, in the literary landscape this two dimensional militarized view of space is only one component. Through various stages of military offensive and following the movement of troops or their individual members across the length and breadth of the country, the novel tries to structurally emulate the corporeality of the moving, fighting, dying bodies in close interaction with the material thickness of the landscape. But beyond its rigorous physicality, the literary space serves as a mobius strip of multiple social spaces. The novel is spread across Stalingrad and Moscow as well as the Urals where much of the Soviet industrial and engineering units were shifted during the war. The cities serve as interfaces of different social groups—the urban professionals, military establishment, internally displaced population. Each group navigates the cities in different ways. Individuals form varied relations and perceptions of the cities as their paths intersect with one another. Then there are open spaces navigated by soldiers or displaced people on the move.

The war suffuses the pristine beauty of the open space with an unforeseen ominosity, making it both strange and terrifying. Novikov observes, "Open steppe grants the attacker great freedom of manoeuvre, allowing him to concentrate his forces and make lightening strikes".[12] This space could otherwise be considered what Lefevbre calls 'the cradle of absolute space'—"...a fragment of agro-pastoral space, a set of places named and exploited by peasants, or by nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralists".[13] While progressive urbanization sustains itself by using resources from this space, parts of it is assigned a new role—that of the sacred and mystical. It is this part that is transformed into a source of both danger and liberation, particularly as the urban space, shrinks exponentially in a military choke hold. Later in the novel when the Soviet commander Nikolay Krymov escapes from the encirclement and moves towards the Stalingrad front, this mystical side of the steppe reveals itself with all its enchantment.

> Not only is the evening steppe full of smells and colours; it also sings. The steppe's sounds cannot be perceived separately. Barely touching the ear, they go straight to the heart, bringing not only calm and peace but also sorrow and a sense of alarm.
>
> . . . And over the steppe rises the evening sky, and the earth is reflected in it; or maybe it is the sky that is reflected in the earth, or may be earth and sky are two huge mirrors, each enriching the other with the miracle of the struggle between light and dark.[14]

These moments of solipsistic rumination, while enthralling, are also transient, unceremoniously interrupted by the ravages of the war. The rapid change of landscape, or rather our perception of it is shown through two distinctly different depictions of two iconic rivers. In one of the earlier chapters Alexandra Shaposnikova invites her family and friends in what they know to be one of the last peaceful dinners before an imminent attack. After the dinner Mostovskoy and Andreyev, two old comrades take a stroll by the side of the Volga. The Volga is the nerve and the heartbeat of the city of Stalingrad. As the war rages on the Don steppe and moves slowly but inevitably east towards Stalingrad, "everything in the city looked strangely solemn and full of meaning". The Volga was "barely visible in the twilight but it made its presence felt everywhere"[15]—from the hills and slopes to city streets and houses—everything danced to the tune of the river. As opposed to the Volga depicted as majestic and contemplative on the eve of the attack when Viktor, Akexandra's son-in-law travels to Moscow the river Don seems to him "grey, ugly and turbid"[16] as his train trudges through the decrepit and deserted villages and towns. The river is surrounded by long-barreled anti-aircraft guns mounted on the hillocks around it. Trenches have been dug and soldiers are moving along them without even glancing at the passing train. In the two instances the position of the viewer vis-à-vis the landscape

is different. While the viewing eye is placed along the Volga, its field of vision able to encapsulate the vast expansion of the river, the Don is viewed from above—from a half open window of the train as it crosses a bridge across the river. In this view from the top the Don becomes the threshold of an uncertain and unrecognizable future.

First published in 1952 the novel was written over a long time and had to go through many revisions mainly due to state censorship. After its first publication, the book was again reedited and republished in 1953, only a few months after the death of Stalin. There were many more drafts and portions that could not be published in Grossman's lifetime. In 2019 the present edition, compiling all the portions and retaining the title intended by Grossman was published. Initially published as a commemoration of what was termed 'The Great Patriotic War' in the Soviet Union, the 2019 text, published in a post-Soviet unipolar world, serves as a palimpsest, carrying traces of many layers of Soviet history erased and restored at different points. In the intervening years the Battle of Stalingrad had gone through extensive state memorialization in the post-Stalin Soviet Union. The memorial 'To the Heroes of the Stalingrad Battle' was unveiled in 1967. In erstwhile Stalingrad, now Volgograd stands the widely recognizable statue titled 'the Motherland Calls', standing atop an ancient burial ground supposedly named after a legendary Tatar commander.[17] The process of memorialization started as early as 1943 while the war was still ongoing.[18] Over the next two decades many plaques, obelisks and tombs dotted the Soviet landscape, closely aligning with and consolidating the state propaganda. Ironically much of it is now being repackaged by the avowed anti-communist regime of Vladimir Putin. Contrary to the state sponsored monumentalization of the Battle of Stalingrad Grossman's novel envisages Stalingrad not only as a land of memorials but rather as a landscape of memories. To go back to Michel de Certeau, there are two ways of telling a story—the first is through "objects that are ultimately reducible to the being-there of something dead, the law of a 'place' " and the

second is "through operations" of historical subjects conditioning the production of 'space' and correlating it with history.[19] While the state memorialization tells the first kind of story of Stalingrad, the eponymous novel tries to tell the second kind. From the rarified annals of 'The Great Patriotic War' it tries to restore the familiar, everyday life, its effervescence and warmth.

The familiarity of the space, so essential to the topographic imagination of *Stalingrad* is the central problem faced by Svetlana Alexievich in *Chernobyl Prayer* as she deals with a place completely defamiliarized by radiation. At the Nuclear Plant Lenin, located in Chernobyl, near Pripyat in Ukraine, in the erstwhile Soviet Union a series of explosions took place in the night of 26th April, 1986 in the reactor unit 4. The plant consisted of four reactors with the capacity of producing 4000 mega watts of power, all built in the 1970s and 80s and two additional reactors were built in 1986. The explosions occurred during a routine performance check, destroyed the reactor building and released a large quantity of radioactive material in the environment. The resulting radiation affected vast areas of Ukraine and Belarus. Several other parts of Eastern Europe including Poland, parts of Russia and even many countries of Western Europe recorded increased radiation levels. According to the report prepared by the Chernobyl Forum, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and World Health Organization, 56 deaths are directly attributed to the accident along with 4000 extra cancer deaths among 600,000 most highly exposed people.[20] This number is much contested. Many believe that this is a gross underestimation of the actual impact of the disaster mainly since it has not taken into account the long term, varied and complex outcomes of the exposure. Originally 116,000 people had to be evacuated. But the number of evacuees ultimately rose to around 350,000.

Alexievich considers Chernobyl a watershed moment in our historical consciousness—a break not only in the nature of a historical event but our perception of it. The 'history of disasters' as she calls

it is difficult to map since it cannot be measured and quantified only in terms of lives lost, properties and infrastructure damaged in the immediate impact of the event. In the chapter in which the author interviews herself Alexievich ruminates—"All our lives, we had been at war or preparing for war, we were so knowledgeable about it....[21]" But Chernobyl exposed the residents of areas far and wide to terror of a different kind—invisible, thus omnipresent. The term 'disaster' brings with it apocalyptic connotations—the French translation of the text has 'apocalypse' in its title[22]—precisely because it eludes evidentiary documentation. The aftermath is far reaching and much of it is imperceptible. After the accident it took several days to extinguish the fire, many more months to clean up the rubble and build a sarcophagus containment structure around the destroyed reactor. Even though evacuations went on over a long period of time, the remaining reactor units resumed normal operation in 1986 itself.

This assumption of 'normalcy' is in tune with the "interpretation of Chernobyl as a finished occurrence" which "stands in stark contrast to the interpretation of the accident as an ongoing event"[23] manifested in the diverse diseases reported in increasing numbers from the surrounding areas, death and deformation of unborn children, genetic alteration of not just local population but animals, plants and all living organisms.

The defamiliarization is nowhere more apparent than people's relation with the landscape that they had known and lived in for generations—every known patch of earth contaminated, turning into a source of potential death. After the rubble was cleaned up a 30 kilometre radius around the plant was declared a 'forbidden zone' which became just the 'Zone' in common parlance. The calculation of the area of the Zone was as arbitrary as the calculation of the number of the dead. Almost as a reversal of demarcating parts of the natural landscape as sacred a part of the landscape was being marked out as monstrous. It was done to bring a sense of boundary and with that (en)closure to something that seemed both trans-temporal and trans-

spatial. When the author travels to the Zone almost a decade later, she is still warned against picking flowers or sitting on the ground.

Alexievich observes how people try to grapple with this emerging, unfamiliar reality with the known tropes of war. And indeed there might be some overlapping—the landscape of Chernobyl post-disaster was dotted with markers inseparable from those of war—explosions, soldiers, abandoned homes, evacuations. The Zone was being guarded by the military. Even the new terminology put in place was not only militaristic but some of it was straight out of the science-fiction lexicon of the Cold War era. For example, more than 600,000 men and women were brought in from different regions of the Soviet Union to clean up the reactor site. They were called the 'Liquidators'. Yet there was a profound difference. One respondent comments, "Chernobyl. The war to end all wars. There's nowhere to hide. Not on land, in water or in the sky".[24] In such a situation how does the association of the habitants with the habitat change and how is that change recorded in memory and language? Alexievich believes that in order to capture this change a more spatial historical sensibility needs to be developed. Going by the definition of Michel de Certeau it would seem that she is trying to extrapolate a sense of 'space' out of the 'place' by turning a more intimate gaze into it. Alexievich claims that her book is not about the event of Chernobyl, but the world of Chernobyl—its "missing history, the invisible imprint of our stay on earth and in time".[25]

The text is arranged as a series of monologues of survivors of Chernobyl—mainly, but not exclusively from Belarus—families of the dead workers of the plant, sick patients, the Liquidators and their families, the evacuees and also those who came back. In their telling both the intimacy with and estrangement from the landscape are apparent. Zinaida Yevdokimovna Kovalenka, a returnee, says, "You get everything living here. The lot! There are lizards, the frogs croaking. Worms wriggling. And there are mice. Everything! It's good in the spring. I love it when the lilac is in flower. The smell of the

blood-cherry blossom."[26] She has returned to her village despite the fear of radiation because of her intimate knowledge of the space—"We weren't all that scared of the radiation. If we hadn't seen it or known about it, maybe we'd have been frightened, but once we'd had a look, it wasn't really so scary".[27] Many refused to evacuate since unlike the encirclement by an enemy army, the imperceptibility of radiation particles circling in the air makes it difficult to understand and accept. Yet there are more perceptible markers on the earth and in everything that grows on it. After the accident it rained for days; it was radioactive rain, laced in toxic material that mixed with the soil. Plots of land turned lumpy, there were patches of blue, the vegetables died, ones that did not were no longer edible.

The transformation of the natural habitat makes it stranger and alluring at the same time. In the 'Monologue on a Moonscape' Yevgeny Alexandrovich Brovkin, a lecturer at Gomel State University recollects a moonlit night in post-disaster Chernobyl—"On both sides of the road there was a genuine moonscape: fields covered in white dolomite, stretching out to the horizon. The top layer of the contaminated soil had been removed and buried, with this dolomite sand poured in its place. As if it wasn't earth; like we weren't on earth….[28]"

Ironically the toxicity of the landscape permeates it with sentience; its texture and character changes; it starts to behave in unforeseen and unpredictable ways. Before human beings animals sense the changes. Alexievich opines—"In the land of Chernobyl, man's plight makes you sad, but the plight of the animals is even more pitiful".[29] Once villages were evacuated animals were left to fend for themselves. In the Zone soldiers came and shot the animals; buried them deep into the ground. But the ones that remained were the first to catch up to the new reality. Rats came out of their holes in the contaminated soil; birds would no longer eat the fruits. The abandoned domestic animals became the only living creatures occupying a land that itself was coming to an afterlife. They readjusted, marked their territories and kept life going while humans gradually came back. Both animals

and humans are united in that after life. One person calls the animals of the Zone 'walking ashes' and humans 'talking dust' [30]—the living dead of a necropolis.

It is interesting to note that the site of the Chernobyl power plant has never been completely abandoned. The last reactor was turned off in 2000. But thousands of workers are still employed to maintain and inspect the facilities on a regular basis. During the ongoing war in Ukraine the ghosts of Chernobyl came back to haunt after a Russian aerial offensive in the region. The persistence of life in Chernobyl and continued discussions around it makes it a "living site of memory."[31] In mapping 'the missing history' of disaster memory serves as an important tool. In *Realms of Memory* Pierre Nora talks about loci memoriae or 'memory places'—collective memory sediments in specific places and reconfigures them with new socio-political and cultural connotations.[32] Memory connects dots history forgot to wipe out. Many survivors of Chernobyl in Belarus had survived German occupation as well. While the physical spaces had been wiped clean of the signs of the occupation, it remained in memory spaces and could connect them to the present. Three hunters, entrusted with the task of killing abandoned animals look at the empty villages in the Zone and remember what the Nazis did to the village Khatyn during the occupation.[33] Zinaida Kovalenka recollects the trauma of evacuation—when the soldiers came to round up people an elderly couple got their cows and waited it out in the forest—"Just like in the war, when the Germans burned the villages down." [34]

Since creating memory places is ultimately a mnemonic device, the connotations are not ossified; they alter with each retelling. It is this memory place that Alexievich tries to resurrect through testimonials of survivors. The vividness of their memories is in sharp contrast to the official opacity maintained around Chernobyl and the denial of its lasting impact, not only by the then state machinery but the scientific establishment, particularly the proponents of nuclear power. Karena Kalmbach talks about the propagation of the concept of

'radiophobia' which claimed that the long term effect of the incident was mainly psychological—people were falling sick not because of the radioactive exposure but because of their fear of contamination.[35] The almost tactile immediacy with which the survivors remember and recollect the slow but irreversible mutation of their surrounding landscape as well as their own bodies and that of their loved ones is an act of resistance not just against forgetting but against erasure.

However, Nora problematizes the simple binary of history and memory—"what we call memory today is therefore not memory but already history. The so called rekindling of memory is actually its final flicker as it is consumed by history's flames. The need for memory is a need for history."[36] Verbalization of memory is already mediated, through language and thus through history. Kalmbach observes that "The emergence of Chernobyl as a site of memory is thus directly connected with its politicization."[37] The west has turned Chernobyl into a cipher for the life on the other side of the so-called iron curtain. Alexievich is acutely aware of the shifting geopolitical landscape on which Chernobyl took place. Two disasters were happening simultaneously, she says[38]—the explosions at the plant site and the implosion of the Soviet Union and along with it the fragmentation of the socialist landscape. In *Secondhand Time* (2013), a book recording the responses and memories of the Soviet people after the fall of the Soviet Union, Alexievich terms the latter event to be an 'apocalypse' as well. She collates snippets of conversations and whispers in both intimate and open spaces like kitchens and streets. Those conversations record both nostalgia and disillusionment about the USSR, the exaltation about the Gorbachev era—"Democracy was an exotic beast",[39] comments one respondent—and then the disillusionment with that as well. What is common to both apocalyptic events is the estrangement of the known world and familiar spaces, the loss of language to ascribe meaning to the unfathomable reality of emerging landscapes. Being instances of oral history both texts claim a certain undeniable truth value. Yet, standing at the crossroads of

history they are aware of the slipperiness of both history and truth. Played out in the domain of contested truths every monologue in *Chernobyl Prayer* is an attempt to re-engage with a deformed and mutating historical landscape. While doing so the monologues trade a porous line between history and literature finding new pathways of language, new tropes and tones.

In a novel like *Stalingrad* the literary space provides an opportunity to preserve the lived reality of everyday life during the war in the face of the onslaught of official, regimented history of the war. As one moves from the history of war to that of disasters, more than regimentation the attempt is to survive erasure and symbolization—the concerted efforts by the state as well as by supra-state entities to deny the survivors the materiality of their experience, turning it into an empty symbol of the failure or success of the state. Their act of telling the untellable is an act to reclaim their experience. In the process they curve out a literary landscape to recuperate from and resist the loss of historical meaning.

NOTES

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2 Ibid. , 116.
3 Ibid., 117.
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6 Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1950), 112.
7 Geoff Dyer, *Missing of the Somme* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1994), 12.
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12 Ibid., 123.
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14 Grossman, ibid., 734.
15 Ibid., 54.
16 Ibid., 179.
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18 Ibid., 380.
19 De Certeau, *The Practice*, 118.
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Riverscapes: Looking Through the Eyes of Fishermen in *A River Called Titash*

Chayana Mondal

লালন বলে জল শুকাইলে
সেদিন মীন যাবে হাওয়ায়।।[1]

As the camera pans, we see the sail of a boat on the vast expanse of the river, rain falling on the boat and silt, floating hyacinths on rippling water, a bald young boy performing rites at the river, people bathing, washing clothes, myriad kinds of boats with fishing nets docking, leaving, and arriving at the shore, trees casting shadows on the bubbling water surface, and waves touching the feet of a woman in abeyance. This continuity of events together with Dheeraj Uddin Fhakir's folk song gives the audience a glimpse of rural Bengal's riverine landscape in Ritwik Ghatak's cinematic adaptation (1973) of Adwaita Mallabarman's novel *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam* (1956).[2] I argue that riverine landscapes or riverscapes which serve as the infrastructure or the background for collective existence of communities are perceived differently in a fluvial environment as the inhabitants of *nadimatrik* Bengal share a complex intertwined relationship with the rivers making the land-water binary inconceivable.[3] Memory also plays an integral role given the need of traversing rivers without a cartographic map and community formation along the rivers' course. This paper attempts to look at landscape and memory from the point of view of the Malo fishermen community in *A River Called Titash*.[4]

With the advent of the Bengali novel in the nineteenth century, lucid descriptions of Bengal's riverscapes and riparian communities were added to the vernacular repertoire—the Kahars by the Kopai river in *Hansuli Banker Upakatha* (1947), the Rajbangshis by the

Teesta river in Tistaparer Brittanta (1952), the Malos by the Padma in *Padma Nadir Majhi* (1936) among others.[5]

> "The bosom of Bengal is draped with rivers and their tributaries, twisted and intertwined like tangled locks, streaked with the white of foamy waves . . . All these tangled wet gray locks are the rivers."[6]

Being born into a Malo household in the Comilla district by the river Titas in present-day Bangladesh, Mallabarman paints a fitting picture of the Bengal basin.[7] The Jhalo Malo or Malos, one of the primary fishing castes of Bengal, were designated as Scheduled Caste in the colonial records.[8] His Dalit identity finds some reflection in Ananta's character who also migrates to the city like him. Set in the pre-partition era, the ethnographic portrayal of the lived experiences of his community makes *A River Called Titash* a tour de force in the novelistic tradition.[9]

Titash's history is the history of its people making public memory an essential and irreplaceable part of Malo culture.[10] Their ancestors had settled along its banks not knowing who had named the river or what its etymological significance is, yet their public memory has no recollection of a time when the river was not called Titash.[11] According to Edward S. Cassey, individual memory, social memory, and collective memory contribute to the formation of public memory. The river has no major towns or cities on its bank nor do merchant vessels ply on it. Its banks are rather "imprinted with stories of a mother's affection, a brother's love, the caring of a wife, a sister, and a daughter" and Titash has existed as an eternal truth being a witness to death, grief, birth, and joy.[12] This ingrains the permanence of the river into their lives accentuating their place dependence with it.[13] The human need to be attached to places and have profound ties with them unravels differently in riparian communities where the

dynamic river partakes in identity formation. Thereby, I attempt a reading of the riverscape through hybrid spaces, heterotopia, and elemental water.

GHATS AND PORTS

A port is a man-made infrastructure that allows vessels to dock for the transportation of cargo and passenger whereas a *ghat* can be a natural sloping into the water or man-made steps going into the water used for everyday chores and tying of boats. This man-made system of spaces superimposed on the land functions to serve the community.[14] The land-water boundary is blurred in the presence of such hybrid places (*ghats* and ports) that negotiate or overlap the space between the two different milieus. These land-water interfaces have shaped civilizations by providing access to water for travel while at the same time locates cultural mores of the Malos and holds a repository of intangible values.[15]

Flecking the course of the river with human activities, the *ghats* come alive with young mothers dipping and lifting their plump babies, daughters, and wives filling up their earthen pitchers and the plying of boats. A newborn's first bathing ceremony takes place at the *ghat* where the mother washes the baby's head and prays to the river amongst the group of singing women. Boatloads of straw and clay also arrive at the *ghat* for the annual Kali Puja. Malo boys take great pride in mixing the finely chopped jute fiber, water, and clay for the goddess's structure. The abstainers for the puja start their day with a predawn bath in Titash and fetch water for the worship, arrange flowers and offerings of food before the idol. On the day of the winter solstice festival, children wait at the *ghats* for the return of fishing boats, and they celebrate it with sweet treats, singing, and a procession. The *ghats*, then, become an expression of the Malos' beliefs reinforcing the identity of the community on the place and the

identity of the place on the community.[16] The attachment stems from familiarity and a deep sense of care for the river and its floodplains.

Maghmandal is also performed at the *ghat* by unmarried young girls for thirty days where they bathe in Titash, worship the sun with a bouquet of flowers, and offer seven cupped handfuls of sacred water whilst chanting. These rites are observed for marriage; where on the thirtieth day, a banana plant float is carried by the girls over their heads to sail it on the river. Women celebrate the ritual's observance by singing along with the drums and the brass plate. As soon as all the floats are launched, the village boys jump into the water and end up ravaging most of them. Such rituals and customs strengthen the attachment to the riverscape by reaffirming the sanctity and unchanging significance of it, thereby, building enduring relationships between 'a people and their place'.[17]

Unlike the *ghats*, Bhairab is a large port where steamships occasionally halt. Merchant boats carry out their business transactions through the day. Nobody lingers around the port after their work is done. When they finish late into the day, the boats set sail at the strike of dawn. Bhairab Malos fare better than Gokanghat Malos given the access to railways and the big river. The port along with Bhairab Bazar serve as a marker and safe harbor for the fishermen who sail north to fish during the lean winter months as we shall see in the following section.[18] As place is any stable object that catches one's attention, the waterscape constructs become those points of rest on the vast expanses of water.[19]

A *ghat* is again used as a marketplace. Fish trader Kalobaran's mother gets her basketful of fish from the village *ghat's* marketplace where the night fishermen's boats have stationed. The traders go up and down the slope carrying out their business. Kadir Mian, who grows sweet potatoes, goes to sell them at a market that falls on the left bank after crossing Titash's arc. Janet Donohoe speaks of places serving not only as settings or sites of events but also as active participants. This holds true for the Malos in their hybrid aqueous

places that provide a transitioning plane between the materialities of land and water allowing the boat (heterotopia) to shift milieus.

ROUTES AND RIVERSCAPE

The introductory paragraph which describes Ghatak's opening scene roots the standpoint of humans being terrestrial animals. *Titash's* narrative oscillates from the land to the water and back again to the riverscape. Mallabarman's illustrative fisherfolk routes forces the readers to adopt a non-terrain centric viewpoint. A Malo neighborhood is in a state of perpetual preparation to set sail on the water with their boats tied to the *ghats* and the mending nets drying on the ground. Malo homes, an irreplaceable center of significance and the foundation of identity, extend beyond the homesteads into the riverscape and the Titash river. Public memory is situated and enacted in these common arenas where the place facilitates remembering as well as embodies the memory. Yi-Fu Tuan claims places to be stable objects on which we lay our eyes, thence, the riverscapes and siltbeds become the 'points of rest' for the fishermen on water. Adrift on water, the fishermen on boats challenge our terrain-centric conception of landscapes and give rise to alternate ways of seeing.

When Ananta takes his first trip on water from Bhabanipur, the readers share the amazement and point of viewpoint of the young boy. The ebb tide pulls the boat down the creek as we watch the villages and farmlands pass by. As the banks close to each other, Ananta could peek into their homes, observe the farmer smoking a hookah and the yoked bullocks. The boat ran aground in the shallow water. Gouranga and Nityananda had to tie a rope around his waist and push with his shoulders respectively to reach the waters of Titash. Ananta walks up to the bend of the creek and is mesmerized by the sight of Titash: "Not a mere river—it is a thousand years of untold stories flowing on between the bounds of two banks".[20] Ananta's or Mallabarman's personal act of remembering is idiosyncratic to their

individual memory. Ananta's mother's individual memory tries to recall the village she was married into by Titash where the river takes a westward bend following a long northward course. Their ways of knowing the river and riverscapes are determined by their relation or situatedness to the water, whether upstream, downstream, distant, or immersed in it.[21]

Peter Turchi states that cartographic knowledge has been in use to ward off fear of the unknown and distinguish between life-sustaining and life-threatening whereabouts. In the fluvial environment of Bengal, social memory takes the place of maps; the memory held in common by those that are affiliated by kinships, geographical proximity, and engagement in the same project like in the case of the fishermen Kishore and Subal relying on old, frail Tilakchand to navigate the river route from Gokanghat to Shukdebpur village in the lean fishing months of winter.[22] In the process of Tilak's articulation of his route memories, they become public to the next generation, moving beyond the remembering individual. The 'unique rememberer' remembers the routes in particular ways where the primary locus is situated in an intersubjective nexus that is at once social and collective, cultural, and public.[23] There exists extrapersonal dimensions of remembering where the river and its riverine landscape form a part of their knowing and being known.

Rowing for a half day on Titash they finally join Meghna, leaving young Kishore spellbound by its bottomless depths and immensity. The riverscape shows signs of erosion on one bank resembling a clifflike projection while the other bank has an accretion of silvery beds of sand. They arrive at the landing of Bhairab village at sunset and could immediately make out the presence of Malos from their boats, nets spread over bamboo stakes, tar-stained pits, vats of gaab resin, and cane baskets. As Tilak could not locate a safe place to harbor in the next bend of the river, they decided to anchor at Bhairab for the night.

At the break of dawn, they resume their journey leaving behind all signs of the Bhairab port to the boundless, transparent, quiet waters of the Meghna. They travel close to the bank in the morning surveying the barren bank with no village, trees, or *ghats*. The desolation observed calls to mind Jackson's statement about landscapes being the visible manifestations of a community or, in this case, the lack of one.[24] Tired of the bleakness, Kishore instructs Subal to steer to the other bank which was not visible. He reassures Subal that danger reigns near the banks while Mother Ganga protects boatmen in the midstream. Michel Foucault's heterotopia, the boat, which is a floating piece of space makes the utterance of the belief possible. Without it, humans would not have been able to traverse a different milieu for a prolonged period. The boat enables a vantage point from the aqueous milieu to the terrestrial landscape. It is also a means of security and a pause in the currents.

At nightfall, they hit a sandbar and later learn the name of the village at daybreak. Unlike the Malos of Gokanghat, the Nayakanda fisherfolks do not have to go for night fishing owing to the Meghna's bountiful supply. The sadhu who invited Tilakchand, Kishore, and Subal for a meal as a part of their tradition gets teary-eyed at their departure from Nayakanda.[25] With this, Mallabarman shifts his lens and now both the readers and the *sadhu* watch the boat become a distant dot from the *ghat* before vanishing from view on the endless water. These cultural constructs nourish the Malo existence by providing a woven net of relationships. The river takes a convex arc where the swirling water erodes the hard rocks making it perilous to go anywhere near the bank as the falling chunks of earth can crush their boat. It has turned into a hill-like projection. Oaring against swiveling currents they make it through the stretch. The Meghna's breadth has narrowed substantially as they rowed upstream. The reading of a landscape varies from person to person depending on their past experiences and it has a history of its own. Collective

memory involves the commonality of content even if the individuals do not share the same history, locale, or experience.

In the downstream, the banks had looked like faint dark lines. They could make out the thatched roofs of village houses by the side of the river. Subal enquires of Tilakchand which river they are on given the change in the landscape he was witnessing. A village lined with trees arises in front of them. The river again takes a bowlike turn at the end of the village towards the west and disappears from their vantage point. Beyond the village lies a curved flat stretch of glistening sand that has fewer trees than the village. The stretch has an assemblage of straw-topped structures while the river slithers like a python through the landscape. Tilakchand recognizes Shukdebpur and the fish-drying stretch of Ujaninagar khala.

The fear of the unknown has been tackled by a route map allowing them to reach life-sustaining stretches of the river. Topographic narratives shared by Tilakchand threaded together constituted the route map; it converted the physical spaces into memory-laden places.[26] Memory draws the map while the map archives the memory. The community's mapping practice seeks to articulate the place-based relations of a watery home and hence it differs from the cartographic navigation methods.[27] It also substantiates the role of memory in intergenerational learning of riverine routes. Landscapes and memory bring together different time frames, and different material interfaces which facilitate ways of knowing a place. It helps one realize the past, live in the present and plan for the future.

CHANGES IN THE RIVER(SCAPE)

A river goes through dynamic changes through its course diurnally, seasonally, and over the years, altering its floodplains and subsequently the lives of people on its banks. Some rivers cause profuse flooding during the monsoons making their banks indistinguishable from

the river itself while in summer months they run dry, and expose flatbeds which are then used for growing crops. The shallow water is not suitable for cattle to soak themselves. As there is no looming fear of drowning, mothers let their wards waddle in the water while they finish their chores. The stabbing cold shallow river water of winter makes bathing an ordeal. By the end of *Chaitra*, there is hardly any water to wash off the sweat on one's back.[28] In *Magh* the riverbeds bloom with mustard flowers and sprouting peas and beans.[29] With their triangular fishnets, fishermen catch *chanda*, *punti*, and *tengra* in the dribble that is left behind.[30] Bijoy, situated thirteen miles from Titash, is one such river that almost dries up in *Chaitra* leaving the fish and the fishermen gasping for life and livelihood respectively.

Titash is full even in autumn. The low-lying lands hold enough water for the paddy, vinelike grass, and water lilies. Towards the end of autumn, the water evaporates, and the river reverts to its normal level leaving the flatlands to dry and harden into clay. With the onset of the harvesting season, peasants carry the crops from the farmlands along the river to their hinterland villages. They return to plant mustard and eggplants in the fields and sweet potatoes on the sandbars as they grow well in sandy soil. Spring brings no color to the farmlands but excites the fishermen who tether their boats by the *ghats*, sell, and eat the fish they catch. They decorate their boats and smear colored powder (*abir*) on the bows and sides.[31] Titash is tinged with the red-pink hues of the skies. *Chaitra* ends with the gusting winds of *Baisakh* marking the end of a long hot summer.[32] The approaching rain washes the plowed fields and carries the surface water from the overflowing fields into the river. It turns the water of Titash to an ocher brown. Fishes unable to see swim directly into the fishing nets of Malo men while children enjoy the temporary yet cool muddy waters of the river.

At this point, one must be reminded of the lyrics quoted at the beginning of the article where Lalon Fhakir speaks of the

disappearance of fishes in the absence of water, promptly raising the question as to whether it is the elemental water that sustains a fluvial morphology. Ivan Illich claims that water is not a-historical. It covers whatever existed before space or place came to be perceived. The fishermen's life and livelihood dwells on the river. They inhabit and retrace the lives of their ancestors through their dwellings. It develops when every moment contributes to or shapes a community's own space. Traditional dwellings never terminate, it terminates when the material or stuff upon which they have built their dwellings diminishes: "As long as there is water in the river, only that long do they float on the water. When the water dries, they too evaporate and disappear."[33] With the floating boat realizing the shift to a non-terrain centric viewpoint, we also become aware of the *charlands* embedded in the water. *Charlands* are a unique fluvial environment where the lands float on water in accordance with Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Gopa Samanta.

The stories of the new tributary formation and the origin of Titash are all part of the oral history of Malos which is a deeply social practice, connecting the past and the present.[34] Hamilton and Shopes use the term public memory to indicate the essentially social nature of the remembering process. One of the factors in the study of 'the memory of publics' is the oscillation that exists between the horizon of remembrance and forgetting. The latter is attested in Titash's origin story which is seldom recalled by the Malos. While dancing along its course the Meghna slipped and created a breach on its left bank.[35] Gushing waters paved their way through the alluvium and hard rock and made sweeps around various villages touching the base of many forests and flatlands. After creating its own course through the plain, Titash returns to the lap of Meghna. Its circular shape is compared to the bangle kankon worn by the village women which has a gap between its two ends just like Titash.[36]

On their return journey from Shukdebpur, the three fishermen arrive at the new tributary after sailing through Aganagar, Bhairab

Bazar, and the inlet of Khalapura. As places store the memories and prompts them, the remembrance of 'the memory of publics' is confirmed in Tilakchand's narration of the new tributary's formation story.[37] A small rift was formed on the western bank of the river and the mouth of a canal had existed in the west. It filled up in the monsoon and dried up in the winter. Boys of Baikunthapur and Tatarkandi villages caught small fish in the shallow waters. A massive surge from the Meghna whirled against the ground and created a wide mouth into which the waters gushed and crashed against the two banks of the canal resulting in chunks of earth falling into the whooshing water. The whirlwind of violent currents consumed farmlands, open fields, villages, and trees for days. Farmers cultivated their harvests; villagers left their huts driving their cattle with them farther west to safety. The frenzied movement of water knew no bounds and the canal metamorphosed into a body of water wider than the Meghna, full of strong currents and waves.

At times the changes to the landscape are also man-made or human-induced. The large village of Bhairab shrunk from its former size as land was taken away to build railroads pushing the needs of marginalized people to the periphery. But the riverscape change that permanently altered the lives of the Titash Malos was the rising siltbed in the river. Not only does water animate their bodies but also permeates their ways of thinking. Their lives are intricately linked to the river networks and their identities are shaped in relation to the waters they experience.

Kendall R. Phillips uses the phrase 'the memory of publics' to investigate the ways in which memory or memories affect the public(s) and are in turn also effected by the publics. Radhacharan Malo had a bad dream of the river drying up. He describes his experience of the river while night fishing to his fellowmen as most Malos no longer fish at night. The intergenerational knowledge makes Malo fishermen aware about the direction of currents at different points of the river. After lowering his net beyond the bend of Jatrabari, Radhacharan

made a note of the opposite swirl in the water currents. Knowing Titash like the back of his hand, he feels something is amiss in the flow's pattern. The places where he was familiar with slanted currents are straight now and where they used to be straight are slanted. These memories present themselves as the horizon within which the conception of a public's memory is developed, where our sense of the public is constituted, and individuals are deliberated to become public beings. He found no fish near the cremation ground bend, neither near the bend of five homes nor near Garibullah's tree. The currents were slack; the fish leaped at a little distance away from where he laid the net and expected the flow to be. It was near the mouth of Kurulia canal where the currents churned like a top.

The memories constitute the sense of collectivity and are constituted by togetherness.[38] Although the Malos had dismissed Radhacharan's dream, they always made it a point to lower the net's poles deeper with apprehension and look for changes in current patterns. They notice the discrepancies and surmise the growing of a large siltbed.[39] Unlike large rivers whose banks are subjected to erosion and accretion, Titash does not erode its bank and hence the siltbed had started to form at the center of the riverbed expanding and rising upwards. Half a mile from Gokanghat, starting from the bend of Jatrabari the siltbed stretched further upstream. A *char* is a piece of land that rises in the shallow riverbeds of deltaic Bengal due to the deposition of silt. It is a hybrid environment where the demarcation of land and water is neither defined nor permanent.[40] Its ambivalent identity makes it a place of contestation betwixt fishermen and farmers—"As long as this land was under water, Malos moved on it, it was theirs. The moment it floats above water, it becomes the farmers'."[41]

"During the rainy season Titash is again full to the brim. At the end of it the water level goes down and the siltbed reappears above water like a chest that rises after a deep breath. Where has so

much water gone? Where have so many fish gone? Only two narrow channels remain near the two sides of Titash, the only evidence that a brimming river once flowed here."[42]

Over the years the floating char or siltbed had extended beyond the village of Nabinagar upstream.[43] It exhausted their means of livelihood and brought about changes in their cultural identity. The social ties of the community had slackened, squabbles broke out over tying boats by the ghat, and they hit each other over laying nets in the river. While the loan-givers visit the Malos with a gun-carrying attendant to terrorize them and take their possessions away, old fishermen are thrashed and dragged into the cold water of Titash in winter. The rains bring momentary relief but cannot subsist the Malos. They buy from the Pal shopkeepers on credit. Their leader Ramprasad claimed the siltbed underwater belonged to the fishermen as the water over it and ends up losing his life in the brawl with the farmers. Resorting to alternate means of sustenance, few like Banamali carry fry in clay pots slung on shoulder poles, some take up jobs of bringing sacks of goods for the Pal shopkeepers on their back, others harvest paddy for farmers while the remaining folks labor for large scale fishing on the big river.

On either side of the river, the villages of peasants remained green, varying broadly from the landscape of Malo neighborhoods where the sight of loss and ruin is palpable. The homesteads have been reduced to bases with broken hearths and crumbled steps, rows of fishing boats have almost vanished at the *ghats*, and cows graze on the land where fishing nets used to dry. Their yards have piles of fallen leaves on them and no one brings a lamp to the sacred altar of the basil plant anymore. People left on their boats with parts of their huts and belongings when Titash's water was still navigable. Those that left later could not carry their chattels. The villages of Radhanagar, Kishtonagar, Manatala, and Gosainpur all identify with the sameness of the derelict condition. With the onset of the rainy

season, the paddy growing char submerges and small waves reach the shores of Gokanghat. The Malo neighborhood has ceased to exist leaving behind empty hut bases to the wilderness.

The present landscape can no longer be typified by its profound meanings and symbols but by its absurdity and separation from the Malos. Vernacular dwelling space or "commons" is regulated by custom. Once the water evaporates, the river-centered customs also disappear along with the "commons". A Malo is an inhabitant man, not a political animal.[44] He does not think of the landscape as his creation; he thinks of it as a habitat that existed long before him. Titash is never relegated to a resource or commodity. The yards from the Malo homes took them directly to the waters of Titash. Their proximity is a precondition to their riparian identity, attachment, and reliance on the river. Place making involves giving meanings to landscapes over time, keeping in mind that the character of places also changes with time. The meanings bestowed on Titash's riverscapes reflect the shared experiences of the Malo community. Time is a part of their experiences of places. Reminiscing about the past introduces their narrative and history into memory in addition to the fact that places and memories co-constitute one another. The spirit of the Malos lay in the waterscape; their identity as floaters was influenced by Titash's experience: hence with the drying up of the river water, their dreams, cultural vivacity, livelihood, and identity too disappeared.

NOTES

1 The quoted lines are from Dheeraj Uddin Fhakir's folk song that opens Ritwik Ghatak's adaptation. It translates to the following: Lalon Fakir states, the day the water dries up, the fishes are going disappear into thin air.

2 The novel was first published by Puthighar in the year 1956.

3 The Bengal basin is a large tectonic unit debouched by rivers from the Himalaya in the north, the Chotanagpur plateau in the west, and the Manipur-Tripura hills in the east. The region endowed with numerous river systems is thereafter called a 'nadimatrik desh' (a land nurtured or mothered by rivers), see Kalyan Rudra, *Rivers of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna Delta: A Fluvial Account of Bengal* (Springer Nature, 2018), 1, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76544-0.

4 For the scope of this paper, I shall be using Kalpana Bardhan's 1993 translation of the original text *A River Called Titash.*

5 Supriya Chaudhuri, "The Bengali novel," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 101-123.

6 Adwaita Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*, trans. Kalpana Bardhan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 16.

7 Titas originates from the river Meghna in Sarail upazilla of Brahmanbaria district and rejoins it downstream near Nabinagar upazilla, see Sagir M.D. Ahmed and Hafeza Akther, "Brush and Vegetation Park Fishery in the River Titas, Brahmabaria, Bangladesh" *South Pacific Studies* 29, no. 1 (2008): 64; Muhammad A. Saadat, Mir Abdus Subhan, and Imran Khan, "Application of Mathematical Model for Assessment of River Morphology: A Case Study of Titas River," *Esteem Academic Journal* 11, no. 1 (March 2015): 166. To locate the Titas river in Bangladesh, see Ahmed and Akther, "Brush and Vegetation Park Fishery in the River Titas, Brahmabaria, Bangladesh," 64.

8 Rup Kumar Barman, "Caste and Class Awareness Among the Fishermen of Bengal." *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 1, no. 1 (January 2008): 68.

9 The Radcliffe's Award was announced on 17th August 1947 dividing Bengal into West Bengal and East Bengal, see Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57-58.

10 Hereafter, I shall be using this spelling of Titash following Bardhan's translation.

11 Public memory is the circulation of recollections among the members of a community. Matthew Houdek, Matthew, and Kendall R. Phillips, "Public Memory," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, 2017, accessed January 9, 2023, 1, https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-181.

12 Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*, 21.

13 Place dependence refers to the satisfaction a place provides with respect to the needs met in comparison to other alternatives, see Barbara B. Brown, Irwin Altman, and Carol M. Werner, "Place Attachment," in *International Encyclopedia of Housing and Home*, ed., Susan J. Smith, Burlington: Elsevier Science, 2012, 1.

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17 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 32-33.
18 To locate Bhairab Bazar on the Meghna river, see the map in Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*.
19 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 161.
20 Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*, 72.
21 Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, ed., *Thinking With Water*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 4.
22 To locate Gokanghat on Titash, see the map in Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*. Shukdebpur is located upstream bordering the districts of Mymensingh and Sylhet.
23 Casey, Edward S. "Public Memory in Place and Time," in *Framing Public Memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 20-21.
24 Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, 12.
25 A sadhu is a pious person who has renounced the worldly life.
26 Ben Bridges and Sarah Osterhoudt, "Landscapes and Memory," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, 2021, 4, https://oxfordre.com/anthropology/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.001.0001/acrefore-9780190854584-e-304.
27 Cecilia Chen, "Mapping Waters: Thinking with Watery Places," in *Thinking With Water*, ed. Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 285.
28 The Bengali calendar starts with the month of *Baisakh* (mid-April) and ends with *Chaitra*. It roughly corresponds with the Gregorian calendar in the following manner—*Baisakh* (April-May), *Jaishtha* (May-June), *Asarh* (June-July), *Sravan* (July-August), *Bhadra* (August-September), *Ashwin* (September-October), *Kartik* (October-November), *Aghran* (November-December), *Paush* (December-January), *Magh* (January-February), *Falgun* (February-March), and *Chaitra* (March-April).
29 See note 28 above.
30 Names of fish in Bengali.
31 All translations from Bengali are my own unless otherwise noted.
32 See note 28 above.
33 Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*, 245.

34 Paula Hamilton, and Linda Shopes, ed., *Oral History and Public Memories*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), viii.
35 Meghna along with its tributaries drains the eastern part of the basin, see Rudra (2018, 74). The rivers in the alluvial plain of Bengal tend have cyclical oscillations within the meander belts, see Kalyan Rudra, Rivers of the *Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna Delta: A Fluvial Account of Bengal*, 4.
36 Adwaita Mallabarman, *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*, (Calcutta: Karuna Publishers, 2017), 8.
37 Bridges and Osterhoudt, "Landscapes and Memory," 4.
38 Phillips, Kendall R, ed., *Framing Public Memory*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 3.
39 The first appearance of siltbed in the lower bends of Titash near Gokanghat was noticed in the late 1930s, see Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*, 267. Sediments from the Tripura hills in India and those that are carried by Meghna render the siltation condition severe in the upstream reach and the downstream of Akhaura, see Saadat, Subhan, and Khan, "Application of Mathematical Model for Assessment of River Morphology: A Case Study of Titas River," 166.
40 Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt, and Gopa Samanta, *Dancing with the River: People and Life on the Chars of South Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 1.
41 Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*, 245.
42 Mallabarman, *A River Called Titash*, 245.
43 To locate Nabinagar on Titash, see Ahmed and Akther, "Brush and Vegetation Park Fishery in the River Titas, Brahmabaria, Bangladesh," 64.
44 Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, 40.

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Depiction of Liminal Spaces in M. G. Vassanji's *The Book of Secrets*

Aparna Goswami

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Secrets, a novel by M. G. Vassanji, depicts the gradual transformation of the African colony of Tanganyika into an independent nation Tanzania. As seen from the history of the world, the twentieth century marks the demise of the British Empire that had once claimed that the sun never sets on it. Though the handing over of power by the colonizers is formally complete, the same cannot be said about the process of decolonization. Though the Empire has gone as a necessity of the changed circumstances, the empirical world-view, with its modes of representation and perceptions appears to be deeply rooted in the hearts of the colonized people.

The diary of Alfred Corbin, a civil servant in the British colony of East Africa, serves as the basis for the novel's overall plot which is mostly replete with the colonizer's justification. Corbin refers to his arrival in Africa as a benevolent gesture following his promise to Mr. Winston Churchill, that he would put his life and soul for serving the territory under the British regime. His initial shock at the wilderness of the terrain and later gradual acceptance of it are reflected in his diary in such a manner that readers can empathize with him. His claim to Mariamu that he had gone there to help her and her people appeals to her and several others of her community who are grateful to the empirical powers for their control over the African soil. Native Africans were in awe of the colonizers who could bring railways in the wilderness of Africa and later are seen using airplanes during the havoc of the First World War that greatly puzzled the simple tribesmen.

All ended up believing the British powers as indomitable. The novel opens with the description of the happening town of Kikono, set up by Indian migrants from the Shamsi Muslim community, waiting for the formal approval from the British authorities whom Corbin represents. It is an irony that immigrants set up a town in their host land and await the legal approval from the colonizer while the natives are either ignored for being illiterate or are subjugated mostly by being coerced into conversion.

The later part of the novel deals with the investigatory project undertaken by Pius Fernandes, a retired school teacher in Dar es Salaam, who was given the diary of the then ADC Alfred Corbin by his erstwhile student Firoz with the intention of knowing its worth as a historical document. He depicts the changed face of the African territory in the postcolonial times where the same places existed with different names or vanished altogether like Kikono that actually got dismantled in the turbulent times of the First World War before getting the formal status of a town. The present paper endeavors to explore the fate of the liminal spaces described in the novel along with its impact on the people residing there. The changed nomenclature in postcolonial Africa in its struggle for doing away with the colonial influences and searching for their 'real' past also plays an important role in giving the places a different identity. In this novel M. G. Vassanji projects the viewpoint of Indian immigrants in Africa and addresses certain subtle issues relating to a person's identity in the postcolonial times when the conscious efforts of decolonization create complications in the lives of those immigrants who see the image of their home shattering before their eyes as they become strangers in the place where some of them had resided for generations.

ROLE OF COLONIZATION IN ALTERING IDENTITIES OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

As seen from several examples of colonized nations, the arrival of

colonizers altered the dynamics of identities of people and places. Places situated close to the shore, such as Mombasa in the context of Tanzania (erstwhile Tanganyika), gained importance as they served as the gateway for the emissaries of the colonizers. In the novel Alfred Corbin first lands in Mombasa and from there he is sent to Kikono after being handed over the charge as A.D.C. Kikono, though a small place, had gained importance due to its strategic location in terms of political boundaries that exposed it to an easy access from the German colony of Moshi and also because it was located close to the rail route of Voi. The introduction of railways in Africa demanded skilled labor force that the colonizers availed from their other colonies like India. In the context of the novel, Rashid, Mariamu's step-father; worked as a coolie at the railway station before the fear of lions scared him away to take shelter at Kikono. The arrival of people as workforce and also for the purpose of spreading their business, changed the demographic structure of the territory. The studies of Indian diaspora in East Africa revealed the motives behind mass-migration of people from India to Africa as follows: "Muslim merchants with firms in Bombay, Karachi, Mombasa, and Zanzibar exported East African ivory and cotton to India and imported everyday foodstuffs and consumer goods. Hindu and Muslim retailers took consignments of these imports on credit from wholesalers and sold them to Indian, European, and African clients in shops (dukkas) that they set up along the railway line."[1]

It can be inferred from the novel that the British colonizers built good relations with Indian immigrants and with the native Africans they applied the policy of conversion; to facilitate the latter, a company station run by two ladies was established at the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro. Corbin used to attend all the festivities organized by the Shamsi community and was on friendly terms with Mukhi Jamali. He enjoyed Indian hospitality quite often and as a result the Indian Shamsis had some influence over him which was not at all the case with his relations with the natives. The fact that the

Indian immigrants shared power with the colonizers, made them culprits in the eyes of the natives and thus the rift between the two communities increased.

The wilderness of the African terrain is described through the occidental point of view of Corbin in which occasionally the contempt of people like Maynard (the military man in the colonial service) for the place and for its natives is accentuated as the latter says, "This is a savage country, and it could turn you into a savage. It is so easy to be overcome by its savagery, to lose one's veneer of Western civilization."[2] Corbin sums up this paradoxical relationship between Maynard and the Africans by commenting, "He respected the African, yet would call him nigger. He loved animals. He had killed scores of both."[3] Corbin describes his visit to Nairobi where he has to go for appearing for an examination testing his competence in the local language that was mandatory for all the officials serving in the imperial set-up. He calls Nairobi as 'man-made Nairobi' as opposed to places like Kikono, untouched by human interference. There he is surprised at the extent the Europeans had transformed the African city that it gave one an impression of being in a developed city in Europe full of amenities and resources for recreation. There Corbin becomes aware of the hierarchy of the places in Africa under the colonial empire:

> This was the capital of the land, where the rulers lived, he told himself. From here the government and the secretariat sent directives to the provincial Commissioner in Mombasa, who directed Corbin's own master, the DC in Voi. This was the "up there", or the "God's eye view", in contrast to the "down here" or "worm's eye view" of the lowly ADCS.[4]

The hierarchy of places mentioned by Corbin changes in the decolonized Tanzania as Dar es Salaam, the city that had enjoyed limited popularity during the colonial era becomes its capital. In

1988, Pius Fernandes, refers to Corbin's diary along with several historical documents and correspondences, and becomes aware of the existence of places like Kikono that remained in the liminal zone and perished before formally coming into existence. Such was the destructive impact of skirmishes between the British and German colonies in East Africa that some territories were wiped off from the face of the map. Much later in the novel, Mariamu's son Ali Akbar Ali who rose to name and fame as an immigrant in England and posed as a chief's son in exile replied humorously when asked about his birthplace in an interview: "In a place that's not in any map. I wonder if it existed at all."[5]

RESHAPING THE HISTORY

The 'self-reflexive historical fiction' written by Vassanji enquires into the history of East Africa investigated by the involved narrator Pius Fernandes. The plot of the novel comprises sincere endeavors of reshaping the history of the place made by the narrator, an expatriate Indian who had spent the prime of his life teaching at a school in East Africa after his appointment by the colonial regime. An erstwhile history teacher in the Boyschool at Dar es Salaam, Pius loses his job in the independent Tanzania and is helped by his former student Firoz, who gives him the assignment of investigating the details in Alfred Corbin's diary. Though the diary did not sustain much curiosity for the general public, it is deemed as a valuable family asset by Rita, daughter-in-law of Pipa, who had cherished the diary all through his life. The secret that the diary contains may not have any value for others but for Rita it is the question of honour and identity of her family as it contains the truth about her husband Ali Akbar Ali's paternity. Though an estranged wife of Ali, Rita wants to bury the secret in order to save the honour and social position of her children. Pius, in spite of successful completion of his investigation, hands over the outcome to Rita only to be buried,

along with a promise that he would never let out the secrets that the diary contained. His sacrifice is a tribute to Rita whom he adored since the days of his youth but never dared to come close to, keeping in view the orthodox ways of her Shamsi community.

Pius resorts to old official documents, interviews of people who are related to those mentioned in the diary, reviewing the correspondence between people connected with each other through Corbin's diary and most of all personal observation of the places that were once the hub of activity during the imperial rule. From Mukhi Jamali's descendants, he gets to know how rising fortunes of the man who was to be the mayor of Kikono, turned upside down due to the First World War and consequent clashes between the British and German colonies of East Africa. Shortly after this sudden tragic turn in life, Mukhi breathed his last in Moshi, formerly occupied by the Germans. Pius recalls the memories of people of those days in which he mentions the game played by people to identify German soldiers by calling out 'Achtung!'(Meaning 'attention!' in German language) randomly, to which a German soldier would instinctively respond. This speaks of the marginalization of Germans in the place where they had once ruled respectfully. This shows that with time the fortunes of places as well as people change for better or for worse. Jamali's wife Khanoum's African origins were despised by the Shamsis after Mukhi's death and she was left to languish alone with her half African sons who later grew up hating Indians for their contempt and ingratitude towards their mother.

Pius's actual visit to Moshi is juxtaposed with his imagination of the place on the basis of Corbin's diary, where he imagined the battles being fought between the British and the German troops. In modern Tanzania the same place housed a cinema hall featuring the popular films from Hollywood as well as Bollywood. The contrast of war and peace is vividly described through the actual and imaginary visuals associated with the place. He gets to know that among occasional visitors to the place, there was a German couple who perhaps wanted

to recall their memories of the place when it was a home to them. Corbin happens to visit a church built in the 1930s where earlier Company Mission Station stood and strove to win the hearts of the natives by providing them with food and education. Even the remnants of the Missionary institution were not visible in Moshi, in independent Tanzania that looked with contempt at everything that made people recall the colonial period.

In the process of rebuilding history, Pius throws light upon the rise and fall of places and empires in the ever-changing power structures. He describes the town of Dar es Salaam since its foundation and the consequent of changing hands in occupying power over it. The once nondescript village located beside a perfect peaceful harbor had attracted the attention of the Sultan of Zanzibar who fashioned it into a town and named it Dar es Salaam, meaning 'Heaven of Peace'. "The Germans came and wrenched it from Arab hands; they built it up further, with beautiful white houses, roads, and monuments. It became now for the British, the main military base for the reminder of war."[6] Later he goes on to recount, "As the forties arrived, Dar es Salaam was a booming town and a capital surpassing Zanzibar."[7] After the end of the colonial rule, the same town was made the capital of independent Tanzania. This depicts the journey of a village from its insignificant status to its becoming the capital of its country within the timespan of half a century. While depicting the changed fortune of the place, Pius also explores the changed fortunes of its occupants like Nurmohammed Pipa who made money during the war by serving as a spy to both the parties at war. Some were destroyed by the war while some amassed a lot of wealth due to war. Pipa was among the beneficiaries. At the commencement of peace, he started a shop that catered to the daily needs of people in his locality and soon became a rich trader.

Pipa, who had built his world by the dint of hard labor and a good sense of business, went on to live in a two-storied building

'Amin Mansion' named after his second son Amin. However, Pipa's downfall began since the anti-colonial activists started marginalizing him on the basis of his Indian origins. They treated him rudely and threatened that like the British they would pack him off to his place of origin. Pipa, who hardly knew his own parentage, could not claim any place as his own besides Dar es Salaam where he had created a world out of nothing. At the onset of independence, apparently Pipa was invited as a guest for the ceremony of handing over of powers by the British to the natives, but actually the native Africans who had risen to power overnight, wanted to pose a threat to his existence on their land as they associated Pipa and other Indian immigrants with colonial rule. During the ceremony, a minor accident leads to the death of Pipa's son Amin foreshadowing the end of his power in his adopted land where soon after the independence of Tanzania, his property is confiscated and he dies in oblivion. His shop and house eventually are owned by his relative Firoz, Pius's student, who retrieves Corbin's diary from Pipa's belongings.

The novel, in its course throws light upon the interpersonal relations between the British colonizers, Indian immigrants and the native Africans. It is evident from the narrative that the Indian immigrants always kept the natives at bay and almost shared the power with the British colonizers by establishing friendly ties with them. This was partly due to the close-knit structure of their society and the feeling of insecurity as immigrants. They had taken British power over the land for granted and looked upon its end with disbelief. The native Africans, fighting for their freedom, sensed this attitude and started treating these wealthy immigrants with contempt. With the gaining of power by the natives, the decolonized nomenclature was introduced that resulted in renaming of streets, landmarks, shops etc. Everything in the independent country gained a new native identity and the culture that was so far relegated enjoyed the limelight. Long years of colonial rule and history of conversion had kept the natives

away from their history which was recreated by their leaders like Mwalimu, popularly addressed as the teacher who assumed power in the decolonized land.

In the broader agenda of decolonization, the identity of the immigrants came into question. The characters of Pipa, Pius and Gregory in the novel reflect their dilemma about their homeland. Pipa openly challenges the leaders of African Independence to find his origins so that they can send him back to his 'original' place. The winding up of the British Empire puts the careers of Pius and Gregory in jeopardy as narrated by Pius, "We were intensely aware of our essential homelessness. Our world was diminishing with the empire. We were all travelers who had on an impulse taken off, for all kinds of personal reasons, yes, but surely also to pursue a career we had all chosen—to teach."[8] The idea of home was elusive as they had spent the prime of their youth in Dar es Salaam. Gregory, an Englishman had even abandoned his British citizenship in favour of his African one when the question of choice between the two arose as a result of the rule made by a new government. His popularity as an English teacher started waning in the course of time and he died a lonely and unacknowledged death. Before his death he had documented his experiences in turbulent East Africa with specific reference to Dar es Salaam in the form of a collection of poetry entitled 'Havin' a Piece intending a pun at the meaning of Dar es Salaam as 'Heaven of Peace'. Pius, a Goanese Portuguese had left his native place for joining a position as a teacher in the British colony of Africa and homeland for him was merely a concept considering the changed circumstances of Goa after the departure of the Portuguese. Thus all these three characters were rendered as anathema in independent Tanzania.

SIGNIFICANCE OF CHANGED IDENTITIES

In his narrative, Vassanji intermingles different images of Dar es

Salaam at different periods of time as the place had witnessed too many changes as a result of changing power structures. The transition from being under the power of the Sultan of Zanzibar to having its own governance in modern Tanzania was not sudden as the place had been subjected to the dominion of two different European colonies. The narrator of *The Book of Secrets* Pius Fernandes, focuses on the changed nomenclature and especially on names of the popular places that had undergone change leading a person to feel like an outsider in one's own place. When he meets Rita in a café on Somora Avenue, he recalls that it used to be Independence Avenue earlier and Acacia Avenue even before that. The changes in names of places and change in the lifestyle of people (Khanga, the traditional dress of Swahili people was hardly worn by people in modern Tanzania of late 1980s), is suggestive of changed identities of people.

The change of power from the British to the natives was celebrated on Kichwele Street with a lot of fanfare. The street henceforth was renamed as Uruhu Street as the word 'uruhu' in the local language meant freedom. The ceremony is described from Pipa's point of view who watches the familiar red-white-and-blue flag that he had first seen at ADC's office at Kikono, being taken off and its place is taken by the new flag, carving a new identity for Tanzania. The ritual of changing of flags was followed by the farewell speech by the Queen's husband and African leader Mwalimu's speech making promises to his people. The narrator Pius remarks that the early years of independence were the years of political euphoria and self-confidence in the new nation. Soon the need for an alignment was felt which fell eastwards paving the way for an earnest socialism.[9] The inevitable change thereafter led to governmental control over all institutions including that of the Boyschool where Pius served and was made to accept retirement as according to the rules of the government he was past his age of retirement. This serves as an example of how the change in power and policies affected people at large. In the course of unravelling a much broader plot dealing with

the impact of colonization on the history of the world, the writer also juxtaposes the fate of two liminal zones namely Kikono and Dar es Salaam: one went into oblivion and the other rose to fame as the most important city in modern Tanzania.

Throughout the novel Vassanji uses select untranslatable vocabulary from the native African language as a tool for substantiating the process of decolonization as suggested by famous postcolonial writer-critic Salman Rushdie who opines, "The language, like so much else in the colonies, needs to be decolonized."[10] By intertwining personal history as well as history of a place, the writer has explored the subtle impact of change over people and places and how both remain in constant flux given the dynamics of change in political borders and power structures. The novel also throws light upon the impact that colonization has brought about over the history of the entire world.

NOTES

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2 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.19.
3 Vassanji, M. G. *The Book of Secrets*, (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 1994), p.19.
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Rotted Bones, Shackled Volcanoes: Igneous Landscape and Négritude in Aimé Césaire's Poems

Apala Bhowmick

There occurs a distinct nexus between human bodily matter, forms of fire, and stone in Aimé Césaire's poetic pieces throughout his oeuvre. This phenomenon is observed, most notably, in two texts: his long poetic work *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939) and a longer collection, *Ferraments* (1960). He places these seemingly disparate components in a relationship of entanglement with each other through a poetics of landscape—a strategy he invents in order to lend vitality to his political project of writing about the dual movements of anticolonialism and négritude. This paper will parse the ecocritical tendencies present in Aimé Césaire's texts, and demonstrate the ways in which the author relies on an underlying subtext of posthumanist language in order to articulate his aesthetics of anticolonial thought. In other words, he seems to claim that the question of colonial subjugation is not one that remains confined to, simply, human bodies but come to bear upon the existence of elemental and nonhuman-animal bodies too; that violence upon one "genre" of organic existence—to borrow from Sylvia Wynter's concept—is impossible to separate from the other.

WHY FLESH: GEOLOGIC, BIOLOGICAL, AND VEGETAL ENTANGLEMENTS

In *Notebook*, as well as in the poems collected under the title *Ferrements*, Césaire tries to draw out the tension brewing under the surface of his political times. He attempts to mold language in his efforts to encapsulate the spirit of protest that fuels such anticolonial

thinking. He demonstrates, in his poetry, how the future is not foreclosed for the oppressed, despite being subjugated by imperial agents of racial capitalism as long as they manage to sustain their desire for decolonisation. Césaire's repeated use of images of blood, bones, festering sores, and other leakages and organic phenomena of the body itself is fairly revolutionary use of language for his literary era. If the slave is reduced to his capacity for production, a mere machine described by the oxymoronic presence of a single part of his body—his back or his pair of hands—then Césaire pushes back against this dehumanization by foregrounding the rest of his bodily parts and components. By referring to their functions, through a set of Surreal images that are juxtaposed against one another like so many disparate pieces of a puzzle, he brings out the sense of fragmentary spiritual existence, which the dehumanizing plantation system reduces the unified being of a human body to. In fact, when he does refer to leaking infections on the body, it is carried out in accompaniment with references to lack of noise—often articulated through ominous language—exemplifying the lull before the metaphorical political storm, for instance, in the line, "an aged silence bursting with tepid pustules".[1]

My argument, of course, is not that Aimé Césaire was consciously writing ecopoetry. Such a claim would not only be appropriative—ecocriticism being a school of critical thought which was inaugurated largely within Western university departments—but also anachronistic, since the discourse of biodiversity destruction in light of capitalist extractive practices are rooted firmly in scholarly conversations which take place in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. However, it is absolutely undeniable that his poems rely quite heavily on a rhetoric of the natural environment, with reference to the flora and fauna present within the Caribbean islands as well as in various parts of the continent of Africa. In fact, Aimé Césaire was, by no means, the only member of the Négritude school of thought writing about the entanglements between the corporeality of the black body and

elements present in the natural environment vis-à-vis the paradigms of coloniality and power. His partner, and fellow poet and essayist, Suzanne Roussi-Césaire had begun to talk about how the artistic mode of Surrealism managed to successfully yoke together nature and culture into a language of powerful aesthetic protest for the oppressed and the enslaved in her various essays and poetry.[2]

However, for the sake of organization, my paper will deal primarily with Aimé Césaire's poetic oeuvre without delving into too many details about Suzanne Roussi-Césaire's creative production, even though she remains a stark presence in the cultural scene of the times. An examination of the messages of his polemical poetry without also doing due dilligence to an analysis of his rhetorical strategies would remain an incomplete work of literary criticism. Césaire wrote during a time when a language of protest for the enslaved masses existed neither in the popular imagination, nor in the linguistic tactics of the official sphere. He carved out a space for his activism as an anticolonial poet by rendering the French language malleable to the spirit of rebellion felt only affectively, outside the existing discursive sphere of his times. In defense of my examination of Césaire's polemical poetics through language, it could be crucial to turn to what Paolo Virno writes in *When the Word Becomes Flesh*:

> Politics is not a form of life among many, tied to a specific language game, as is believed by some excessively prudent Wittengensteinian thinkers. It does not find its roots in a circumscribed region of verbal activity, but is inherent to the very fact of having language. The biological configuration that allows us to speak and to act politically is one and the same. If anything, the political inclination of human speech constitutes the one presupposition for all different forms of life and language games (among which, of course, the cognitive and productive ones stand out for their importance). The study of language as biological organ for public praxis is not a marginal

> task . . . but the crux of every inquest on human nature.[3]

To speak to my point on language, again, while *Notebook* was published in 1939, Césaire's poetry collection *Ferraments*—a name which immediately evokes images of smelting metal as well as igneous metaphors in any reader's mind—was published in 1960. Evidently, the place of Mount Pelée—with its volcanic rocks and landscape formed by congealed metallic ashes—has remained on his mind as an inspiration. The paper will incorporate a significant amount of analysis of Césaire's references to this place, trying to understand the (environmental) motives behind his allusions, and attempt to make connections between the rhetoric utilized by him in order to speak of the visceral pain felt by dark human bodies, the visual invocation of a literally black landscape, and their harnessing of vegetal metaphors to demonstrate human entanglements with non-human elements suffering under the aegis of imperialist extractivist projects.

Keith Louis Walker argues that the "richness and variety of his lexical choices suggest that for Césaire being is everywhere, in everything, in the zoological, the biological, the botanical, the geological, in fire, air, earth, water, flora and fauna. Césaire nearly always contemplates human nature on the level of its relationship to these multiple phenomena".[4] Further, quoting from an interview with Aimé Césaire conducted by him in 1977 (Walker's translation), he adds that the poet claimed this of himself:

> I consider that if there is a criticism to be made of human society, of colonial, Caribbean, Martiniquan society, it is that it has not known how to give a human expression which is on a par with the animal expression or the floral expression. I have somewhat the habit of saying that in Martinique everything is beautiful, everything is magnificent, it's all ablaze.[5]

In the following example from *Notebook*, Césaire roots his poetic

praxis in the material reality of the Martinican soil and claims, simultaneously, to be one with it bodily. In a connection which follows an incontrovertible line of associations between earth/stone and flesh, the poet writes:

> To go away . . . I would arrive sleek and young in this land of mine and I would say to this land whose loam is part of my flesh: 'I have wandered for a long time and I am coming back to the deserted hideousness of your shores'.[6]

This linkage stands also to bolster his own claims about being in search for a language to articulate his corporeal racial reality[7] when the linguistic or imaginative tools were lacking.

That Césaire grounds his language in environmental elements within a geological territory serves also to collapse epistemological boundaries between human/anthropogenic and natural/planetary histories. Paolo Virno further argues:

> Naturalist historians . . . care only about events that can only be deciphered through an analysis of verbal language, of labor, of political praxis. The focus of 'natural history' is limited, therefore to the history of human forms of life . . . If we expanded the concept of historicity to include the myriad of unique, unrepeatable, unnecessary and even casual events crowding the annals of geology and biology, we would acquire a panoramic view . . . Nature, which is transient and mortal because it is traversed by the arrow of time, takes on the aspect of a historical drama, while achieved historical facts assume the rigidity of fossils.[8]

In this paper, especially with regard to his poems occurring in *Notebook*, I have focused on the poet's deployment of transferred epithets that connect nonliving objects with living human bodies,

and volcanic metaphors in his poems. Moreover, Aimé Césaire—with almost all his transferred epithets in the poem involving human-elemental-non-human entanglements—forcefully foregrounds the natural venue of human protest as a predominant actor in the text. Often, he directly parallels the dark sands and soil of Martinique—upon which, plantations serving colonial profitmaking ventures have been established—with the black slave bodies that are coerced into backbreaking labor for the same purposes of generating capital. He cleverly inverts associations between the weapon of violence and the biological—the former causing damage to the latter—in the lines:

> To me the whip's corolla.
> Beauty I call you the false claim of stone.
> But ah! my raucous laughter
> smuggled in
> Ah! my saltpeter treasure![9]

Whereas saltpeter is a white crystalline salt which occurs naturally in niter, it is utilized, too, for manufacturing gunpower, which is black in color. Further, from both poetry texts, the "voluptuousness of quirts,"[10] meaning, slave whips indicate that not the whips themselves, but the human bodies that are being whipped, are voluptuous, thus, drawing a connection through the fact of proximity of both and ascribing the quality of voluptuousness to the weapon of violence. A similar logic can be applied to parts of poems where he refers to the branding iron placed on human flesh and vegetal metaphor of lilies. How does something as beautiful as lilies—considered a symbol of innocence, purity, even naivete in certain European cultural contexts—stand as indexical of such terrible violence the minute the race equation is reversed? His Surrealist technique, of juxtaposing unlike elements to stir up affect in his readers, rears its head here once more. In the endnotes for my text of *Notebook*, it says that lilies were an emblem of the French Bourbon Dynasty, which owned slaves

in the lesser Antilles, where Martinique is located, and it is possibly this same association which Césaire gestures toward:

> and the fleur de lys flowing from the red iron into the fat of my shoulder
> ...
> the shackles
> the rack
> the cippus
> the head screw[11]

Moreover, the imagery of the whip, a chicote in particular, that shares intimacy with the human flesh, mediated by a transferred epithet occurs in the poem, "The Time of Freedom" as well. It is important to note that "anger" and "fire" are consistently connected to black bodies, and the sense of rage boiling over to engender people's protest is present as well:

> History I tell of the awakening Africa
> of the men who
> when under the composite memory of chicotes
> piled up the knotted black fire
> whose anger like the angel pierced
> the thick green night of the forest[12]

WHY STONE: MOUNT PELÉE AS A FIGURE AND A CHARACTER IN *NOTEBOOK*

The speaker, in *Notebook*, as well as his subjects in the poem, are placed in a visceral spatial environment where neither the human subjects nor the nonhuman and elemental ones are well-served. Both kinds suffer under the aegis of colonialism where each of them are wrung dry of their capacities for labor for European profitmaking ventures.

By virtue of black bodies residing within a landscape populated by other black elements—the sands, black cliffs, igneous rocks (formed from frozen cooled lava)—there is an ipso facto aesthetic mirroring taking place between both. This aesthetics is visual, for one, but also sonic and spiritual. Hence, it is established that both the human (enslaved) and the stone (igneous, or stratified) are composite beings cohabiting in the Caribbean colonies. Although Césaire references volcanoes in several of his poems across both mentioned texts, Mount Pelée is referred to explicitly, at least once, in *Notebook*. By this relationship of cohabitation and physical proximity then, coupled with the unpredictable, rebellious agency of volcanoes, Mount Pelée comes to stand as a cameo character in the poem. It is a volcano in the northwestern part of the island of Martinique, which erupted in a violent explosion in 1902, destroying plots of sprawling landscape and the entire city of St. Pierre.

An overt reference to the actual volcanic eruption at Mount Pelée where the whole city of Saint Pierre was destroyed by tidal flows of molten matter, thereby, the fire spreading through a city comprising living bodies through the presence of ignited human bodies made of flesh occurs in this excerpt:

> Words? While we handle quarters of earth, while we wed delirious continents, while we force streaming gates, words, ah yes, words! but words of fresh blood, words that are tidal waves and erysipelas and malarias and lava and brush fires, and blazes of flesh, and blazes of cities.[13]

Moreover, his negritude isn't mute or unmoving like stone in its fully-formed, static state. It possesses, instead, the robustness and full-bloodedness of lava liquefied under intense, inhumane pressure. That the fact of his negritude has earned him the whiplashes, assault from quarts and chicotes, and made him vulnerable to being confined in iron chains, impels this dynamic spirit of resistance that flows in him.

Volcano metaphors occur frequently in *Ferraments* too. Some, though not all, complicate the idea of an idyllic space by emphasizing the capacity for terror of an active volcano against the luxuriant natural bounty contained by the scenic Martinique island. In the poem, "Hail to Guinea," "[v]olcano blaze your muzzle attentive // to the fierce vigil over this most rare treasure".[14] The volcano is zoomorphized into a beast—by all indications, a guard dog—which is playfully, but attentively, keeping watch over its master's booty. This way, the destructiveness of the volcano is seen as an addition to the troop of slave bodies who will lead rebellion against the colonizers in their attempts to seize from the hands of their masters the rich natural resources which are exploited just as their labors are.

Commenting on the collection's title in 1960, Césaire remarked, "[Ferraments] are quite simply the iron shackles the slaves wore during the time of the slave trade. It's a word that belongs to the vocabulary of the slavers." With reference to the poem "Ferment", which plays on homophony with *Ferraments*, he added in the same interview that the poet's and the poem's role is "to be the ferment of the daily need to make hope rise".[15] Thus, expressions like "rebellious fires"[16] can be read sufficiently well as gesturing towards anticolonial protest movements. Further, a scene of entanglement of metal (which is derived from solidified molten lava) and flesh occur in the poem, "Fangs":

> No remittance
> straight up along the stones
> straight up along the bones
> of copper weight shackle weight heart weight
> venoms caravaneers of the bite
> at the tepid cutting edge of fangs[17]

Black labor is utilized the same way that metal is mined from ores. While he never used the word extractivism during his lifetime, I

wonder whether he may have thought of, and alluded to the definition of such a concept, in his poetic works as well as interviews. In places of Notebook, lithic agency is thwarted, albeit in anthropomorphic terms. His skill with transferred epithets is present here also. It is the slaves who are really shackled, and not the volcanoes; instead, by transferring the characteristic of being constrained from the physical human bodies to nonhuman elemental presence, he deftly draws out a constructed similarity without reducing the same to any kind of simplistic analogy:

> At the end of daybreak, lost puddles, wandering scents, beached hurricanes, demasted hulls, old sores, rotted bones, vapors, shackled volcanoes, shallow-rooted dead, bitter cry. I accept![18]

In the description of the geological spaces of the poem, which are physical and can be demarcated upon the material surface of maps, sensuous geographies reside. He charts them out by borrowing the language of animal physiological terms. The beach which the street named rue Paille opens onto is one where "the sand is black".[19] In an animal-elemental relationship of proximity, Césaire compares this black beach being constantly washed by foaming waves to a ferocious black dog who will assault and maul its victims. The sands are black, like black bodies of enslaved peoples. "I would rediscover the secret of great communication and great combustions,"[20] declares the poet, before moving on to drawing numerous concatenations of relations between the earth, the human animal body, and the beast (poet's phrasing).

When Césaire states, "beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of miseries is not a proscenium, a man screaming is not a dancing bear",[21] he marks a distinction of the spectator versus the spectacle. It further reminds one of freak shows in Victorian England where black bodies would

be on display—egged on by a trainer, often in pain—to perform for a gathered mass of onlookers. The spectators here would greedily, lasciviously consume the pain of the racially-suppressed person. They would likely have paid a ticket fare to view such a show.[22] The threat of the spectacular emanating from the threatened spectacle—both kinds of threats bleeding into each other, and indeed, the latter's plight of suffering triggering the other—occurs again later:

> — a dragged man on a bloodspattered road a rope around his neck
> — standing in the center of a huge circus, on my black forehead a crown of daturas
> voum rooh
> to fly off
>
> higher than quivering higher than the sorceresses toward the other stars ferocious exultation of forests and mountains uprooted at the hour when no one expects it the islands linked for a thousand years![23]

His associations of a blood-soaked rope and a crown of flowers, both placed upon the organic flesh of vital black bodies, prefigure the reader to translate the potential for blood spilled through violence as being a fruitful force (bearing flowers, if you will) for rebellion. And, followed on the heels of this visceral-vegetal association, the onomatopoeic "vouh rooh" invokes a sonic sense of explosion at a professedly unexpected moment in historical time.

FIRE MEETS VOLCANOES: PROBLEMATIZING THE IDEA OF PARADISE

Volcanoes exist in two states: that of dormancy, and that of activation. When dormant, it is impossible to know when—and whether, if

at all—it will erupt. In a similar vein, Césaire seems to say that the silence of the black enslaved peoples should not be confused with uncritical complacency or mute acceptance, that there is a real possibility that fiery notions of rebellion are brewing in their minds. His use of volcanoes is radical in another sense—one which is often glossed over while addressing the black psyche—that of interiority. The lava ensconced within the heart of a mountain is symbolic of the interiority of the black poet-activist's, or that of any oppressed black person's. Césaire constantly invokes the image of a volcano in his poems in order to signal towards this deficiency in hermeneutics, and to amend it albeit through the primary texts of his poetry. His aesthetic purpose is, primarily, to destabilize narratives of the Caribbean Islands as Edenic places of Paradise where nature quietly thrives and tourism flourishes. He dismantles orientalist notions of lush tropicality and languid lifestyles housed by the Caribbean Islands. What lies beneath the tranquility—of both the picturesque natural environment and the apparently passively laboring slave—is, in fact, an urge to resort to violence to overturn the status quo. While he does refer to the beauty of Martinique—with its azure sea, rocky cliffs, and verdant lands, he also goes on to call Notebook an anti-poem. An anti-poem which, in my opinion, reads best as an anti-idyl or even an anti-pastoral, as a work of poetry which goes to great lengths to portray the Caribbean landscape in its potential for terror and beauty alike.

An instance of the aforementioned modes of problematization occurs in *Notebook*, where the idea of Paradise and the idea of home are dual sides of the same coin. One is complicated by the lack of the other since they share this inextricable, almost Glissantain sense of relation:

> my temperamental father gnawed by one persistent ache, . . . drive[n] to towering flames of anger;
> . . .

> [T]he shack chapped with blisters, like a peach tree afflicted with curl, and the thin roof patched with pieces of gasoline cans, which create swamps of rust in the stinking sordid gray straw pulp, and when the wind whistles, these odds and ends make a noise bizarre, first like the crackling of frying, then like a brand dropped into water the smoke of its twigs flying up. . . . [A]bove [my grandmother's] bed, in a jar full of oil a dim light whose flame dances like a fat cockroach.[24]

Here, their childhood home, which is meant to be a place of safety and refuge, is converted to a veritable smokestack. There is, in fact, no physical or spiritual asylum—no succor to be had—neither in the literal habitus not in the company of a parent. The father, being the male parent figure in a society arranged along a patriarchal axis, would be the strongest voice in the household, and hence, the one whose words have the most valence. The colonial state is a paternalistic one too. What is present in this passage, however, is ample fire imagery. He traces a genealogy of volcanic explosion in a natural setting within the microcosmic setting of a household, and thereby, creating an inverted paradise: a Dante-esque description of Inferno (as place). He addresses négritude and muteness, in conjunction with each other, later on in the same text. A sense of rage as well as threat are inherent in these lines:

> silo where that which is earthiest about earth ferments and ripens
> My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against
> the clamor of day
> …
> my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
> it takes root in the red flesh of the soil
> it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky
> it breaks through opaque prostration with its upright patience.[25]

Even in his use of the island's mythologies among the enslaved, invoked by Césaire in the poem, are those involving the process of ignition, for instance, in the case of the tree that "plucks the maroons from the fire".[26] In the following extract, Césaire describes a pyroscape, created by the eruption of volcanoes, where the dream of the slaves has folded in on itself. The future is unsustainable for the European imperial actors who serve as victor in this equation. The subaltern subject may be silent for now, but won't remain so forever. The two m-dashes spatially mark a dystopic futurity for the slave post in Martinique:

> At the end of daybreak, on this fragile earth thickness exceeded in a humiliating way by its grandiose future—the volcanoes will explode, the naked water will bear away the ripe sun stains and nothing will be left but a tepid bubbling pecked at by sea birds—the beach of dreams and the insane awakening.[27]

In a fittingly moving ending to *Notebook*, both fire and flesh unite:

> wind …
> to you I surrender my conscience and its fleshy rhythm
> to you I surrender the fire in which my weakness smolders[28]

In his poems, across the two texts, *Notebook* and *Ferraments*, Césaire inaugurates a poetics of entangled violence. By harnessing igneous metaphors connected with volcanoes, stone, and soil and placing them in relation to human flesh and weapons of violence, he comes up with a mode of ecopoetics which straddles the zone between polemic and object-oriented discourse. Although it would be anachronistic to claim him as an anticolonial ecopoet, I hope to have demonstrated of why such a claim would not, in fact, be entirely unfounded.

NOTES

1 Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of A Return to the Native Land,* trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 2.

2 In her essay, "Leo Frobenius and the Problem of Civilization," Suzanne Césaire likens the identity of an Ethiopian to that of a botanical existence. She writes, "[t]he Ethiopian does not seek to understand phenomena—to grasp and dominate facts outside of himself. He lives and lets live, in a life identical to that of plant, confident in the continuity of life: germinate, grow, flower, bear fruit, and the cycle starts all over again." (Césaire 2012, 5) Further, she adds, in a different essay titled "The Malaise of A Civilization," her postulations about an ontologically-hybrid entity that she calls *l'homme plante* (the plant-human). She asserts that "[l]ike a plant, [*l'homme plante*] abandons himself to the rhythms of universal life. There is not the slightest effort to dominate nature. . . . [H]e lives in a plant-like manner. His indolence? That of the vegetal. Do not say 'he is lazy,' say 'he vegetates,' and you will speak the truth for two reasons. His favorite phrase: 'Let it go,' By that, understand that he lets himself be carried along by life, docile, light, un-insistent, non-rebellious—in a friendly way, lovingly. Obstinate moreover as only a plant can be. . . . And is always everywhere in the slightest manifestations, the primacy of the plant, the plant trampled underfoot but still alive, dead but reviving, the plant free, silent, and proud." (Césaire 2012, 30) Roussi-Césaire was likely using the same negative traits ascribed to the black population of the enslaved and reclaiming them, through her use of vegetal metaphors, as signifiers of resistance.

3 Paolo Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*, translated by Guiseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 41-42.

4 Keith Louis Walker, "In Quest of the Lost Song of Self: Aimé Césaire and the Problem of Language." *Callaloo*. Vol. 17 (1983): 27.

5 Aimé Césaire, interviewed by Keith Walker, March 1977.

6 Césaire, *Notebook*, 13.

7 In a significant turn away from basing a conversation on the workings of power on the visible color of the African worker's body—in other words, their discernible ontological origins—Frantz Fanon coins his two concepts of "epidermal schema" and "corporeal schema" to refute such essentialization. Important to note, too, that Fanon was Aimé Césaire's student, and despite having been taught by the Négritude generation, viewed much of his teachers' ideas as defenses of passive resistance to the colonial state. Fanon, unlike Césaire and his generation of thinkers, discusses activism and anticolonial resistance in terms of its potential for bringing about radical change through enactments of self-organized protest. In a sense, he almost deemed the Négritude movement's ideas of passive resistance obsolete and ineffective. To this effect, Frantz Fanon

writes, in his influential text, *Black Skin, White Masks*: "[o]ntology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. . . . Beneath the body schema I had created a historical-racial schema" (Fanon 2008, 91). Fanon argues that the dialectical play between the epidermal schema and the corporeal schema is key to identity formation within the subjective self of the raced person, in relation to those of the powerful person's, within a racialized system of social organization. The racialized person must be understood against a rubric of cultural signification and colonial power, and a mere knack for polished polemic—which, arguably, is what Césaire's generation thought was the means towards emancipation from prejudice and oppression—is not quite the means to true liberation.

8 Paolo Virno. *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature,* translated by Guiseppina Mecchia. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 171-72.
9 Césaire, *Notebook*, 17.
10 Césaire, *Notebook*, 25.
11 Césaire, *Notebook*, 40.
12 Césaire, Complete Poetry, 599.
13 Césaire, *Notebook*, 23.
14 Césaire, *Complete Poetry*, 537.
15 Césaire, *Complete Poetry*, 525.
16 Césaire, *Complete Poetry,* 569.
17 Césaire, *Complete Poetry*, 561.
18 Césaire, *Notebook*, 42-43.
19 Césaire, *Notebook*, 11.
20 Césaire, *Notebook*, 12.
21 Césaire, *Notebook*, 13-14.
22 Philip McEvasoneya discusses how black bodies were cast in the role of "commercial display of living people as exotic curiosities or anthropological specimens" (McEvasoneya 2013, 26) with special emphasis on the example of Sara Baartman who was treated in this manner between 1810 and 1815. She was ferried across various parts of England, Ireland, and France. Karen Ruth Kornweibel discusses how a spectacle was made of such exhibition of black bodies in imperial Europe and how the performances were given an almost theatrical dimension in modes of production and aesthetic organization.
23 Césaire, *Notebook*, 20-21.
24 Césaire, *Notebook*, 10.
25 Césaire, *Notebook*, 35.
26 Césaire, *Notebook*, 18.
27 Césaire, *Notebook*, 2.
28 Césaire, *Notebook*, 50.

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"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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The Idyllic Absence: Locating Afghanistan Through Memory and Landscape

Ritobina Chakraborty

INTRODUCTION

Fariba Nawa remarks that Afghanistan "does not fit into any regional categories—it's not South Asia, Central Asia, or the Middle East."[1] The unspecified locale both geographically and psychologically becomes two distinctly different places coexisting at the same time through memory. Therefore, to understand Afghanistan, it is imperative to understand the landscape, as the trauma imbibed by the landscape and the inhabitants of the country become co-dependent, through which an immigrant from Afghanistan tries to locate oneself in a foreign land.

THE IDYLLIC PAST

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that resulted in the Soviet-Afghan war between 1979 to 1989 between the pro-Communist Afghan troops aided by the Soviet government and airpower, and the American-funded seven mujahideen rebels, became the gateway for Taliban establishment in Afghanistan. Collison between the seven mujahideen troops in the aftermath of the Soviet retreat resulted in a civil war between them. Qaderi writes, "for two years, we held our breath, unaware that this lull would soon be followed by a storm of discord and civil war."[2] 1990 onwards, the Taliban, which in Arabic means "students", "aided by drug traffickers, the Pakistani government, and rich Gulf Arabs such as Osama bin Laden, ruled the country under a mysterious one-eyed leader, Mullah Omar."[3] The

Taliban gained control over ninety percent of Afghanistan between 1990 and 1994. The Mujahideen in 1994 reunited under Ahmed Shah Massoud but could only establish power in the northeast which comprised ten percent of the country. The Taliban established Sharia Law all over Afghanistan.

> Soon I realized that they were very different from all the other fighters we had seen. They were not only dusty and depressing looking but ruthless and angry, too . . . Taliban implemented sharia law in Kandahar. They closed all the girls' schools. Women and girls were forbidden to leave their houses. The Taliban ordered that no woman's face or form should be seen anywhere in public. Burqas became mandatory, and a woman who had a good reason to be on the street had to be accompanied by a *mahram*. Slightest infractions subjected women to public whipping with cables. Women accused of adultery were to be stoned or shot.[4]

Taliban rule forced several families to flee Afghanistan.

> Herat was in ruins. Tens of thousands of people had died. Young people, the generation born in the 1970s and '80s, had been decimated, either killed in the wars or turned into refugees living in squalid tents beyond Afghanistan's borders. The face of my lovely city had been stripped of its beauty; only a jumbled skeleton remained.[5]

The protagonists of my primary texts, through their writing, depict the loss of the idyllic past. Their memories of childhood, teenage, and war are heavily embedded in the landscape of the country. Hashimi's protagonist Fereiba travels with her three children, Saleem, Samina, and Aziz, from Afghanistan to London where her sister lives. She travels through Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Greece,

Italy, and France, finally arriving in the United Kingdom. It is in London that she confesses for the first time that all her and her children's documents are forged and that they are refugees. Saleem, her teenage son gets separated from her in Athens and has to take a separate lonely route to arrive in London. Saleem oscillates between his love and respect for his father Mahmoud and his anger towards him. Saleem believes that even his mother silently accuses her husband of not leaving Afghanistan at the right time when others like Fereiba's sister were eloping from Afghanistan after the Taliban started gaining control. Saleem believes that had his father left the country early, without succumbing to his love for his homeland, not only would he have been alive, they could still be together with other relatives. Fareiba says, "one day, we will not look over our shoulders in fear or sleep on borrowed land with one eye open or shudder at the sight of a uniform. One day we will have a place to call home."[6] Her "home" however has to be created as far away as she can. Unlike Saleem, Fereiba knows that London cannot be a completely new beginning for her because her sister is married to Fereiba's former lover. Fereiba's present and past will always be intricately related to Afghanistan through memories.

For Qaderi, Afghanistan becomes a land that has denied her of her motherhood. Unlike Fereiba, Qaderi's story is not fictional; she also did not escape Afghanistan to become a refugee. Qaderi protested as she refused to be reduced to a number when her husband decided to take another wife. After Qaderi's husband divorced her, she went to the USA to enroll in a creative writing program. However, the Afghan government denied Qaderi of her son's custody and her husband never allowed her son to even learn that his mother was alive: "I heard that they've asked you about your mother and that you cried when told that your mother is dead."[7] In between the letters she writes to her son with the hope that they will reach him one day, Qaderi narrates her memories of Afghanistan.

> Qaderi writes, "the area across the small river in front of our house had been turned into an arid wasteland by years of Soviet bombing and tank treads and the subsequent destruction of the civil war."[8]

Continuous warfare quite literally turned Afghanistan into a barren land. Not only has warfare destroyed important monuments like the Bamiyan Buddhas, people's homes, offices, and schools, but also the fertility of the land. In addition to warfare, the drought that occurred across Afghanistan forced several people to migrate from the rural to the urban areas. During this time, the Taliban monopolised opium cultivation. Both Qaderi and Nawa explore how Taliban purchased weapons and paid their troops by using the money they acquired through the opium trade.

> One day I asked Baba-jan why God had punished the apple trees. It wasn't the fault of those trees that men had planted opium. My grandfather threw me a stern look. "If the wrath of God comes to a forest in the form of fire, it will burn all the trees, whether dead or alive."[9]

Even though war, bloodshed, trauma, and loss are highlighted in both narratives, it is impossible to not notice the pastoral images that are associated with Afghanistan. Qaderi and Fereiba remember Afghanistan through the lush green gardens, the extensive mountain ranges, the colourful flora and fauna, and the bird's songs. Fariba Nawa in *Opium Nation* (2011) describes her grandfather's house as the "orchard home"[10] which was her "sanctuary".[11] Nawa eloped to Afghanistan with her family after the Taliban government took over the country. On returning after eighteen years, she referred to her grandfather's house as the orchard home even though most of it had been destroyed by the continuous war.

> I throw my burqa on the ground as soon as the rusted red gate closes and I sprint toward the living quarters, imagining my family's laughter ringing inside the hallways. But there is no one there; the place is silent. The doors of each of the eight rooms are locked shut; some of the windows are broken. I run out to the field, looking for the mulberry and pomegranate trees under which we used to have picnics. I find the trees—but no fruit, due to the drought. The small creek is parched . . . But here, in my refuge, I envisioned ripe, colorful fruits, verdant fields, and water flowing through the creek. I climb the roof overlooking Herat and find even more changes caused by the war.[12]

Nawa, despite the vivid transformation that the city has undergone, still clings to the memories of the ripened fruits, creek, and verdant fields. The idea of the pastoral is present in the Quran. Prophet Muhammad has used the metaphor of the shepherd, "All of you are shepherds and each of you is responsible for his flock",[13] and as Shackford remarks the "Good Shepherd…in the pastoral has never really faded away but has come back again and again with persistent appeal".[14] It is important to consider if the idyllic conception has been influenced by the regular reading and studying of the Quran. Through memory, Afghanistan becomes the "absent present"[15] which Derrida describes as "the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience."[16] Derrida suggests that absence leaves a "trace";[17] in Afghanistan before the Russian and Taliban invasion, the "absent present" idyllic homeland is evoked through the memory of the protagonists. Fereiba's journey from Afghanistan to London becomes a symbolic move away from the pastoral land. However, the movement is more psychological than geographical. The geographic distance becomes overshadowed by the psychological "absent present"

that consistently keeps Afghanistan alive as an idyllic homeland even though the political reality has forced both Fereiba and Homeira to leave Afghanistan. Fereiba even when acutely aware of the present scenario which has forced her away from her homeland, holds on to the landscape to describe the minute details of her childhood. "My father, too, owned land—an orchard, to be exact—and worked as a local official in our town, Kabul, the bustling capital of Afghanistan tucked away in the bosom of central Asia. Geography would become important to me only later in my life."[18] Hashimi's attempt to locate Afghanistan geographically accurately in Central Asia contradicts Nawa's claim that Afghanistan cannot be compartmentalised into a regional category. Hashimi's attempt is imperative to emphasize the distance between Afghanistan and the United Kingdom. The cartographical space along with the war-ravaged reality cannot eradicate the memories of the past. Her description of her father's land as "an orchard-to be exact", is another instance that proves that the idyllic past continues to exist in the memory.

> A month before that, Laila had learned that the Taliban had planted TNT in the crevices of the giant Buddhas in Bamiyan and blown them apart, calling them objects of idolatry and sin . . . Taliban had gone ahead and detonated their explosives inside the two thousand-year-old Buddhas. They chanted Allah-u-Akbar with each blast and cheered each time the statues lost an arm or a leg in a crumbling cloud of dust. Laila remembered standing atop the bigger of the two Buddhas with Babi and Tariq, back in 1987, a breeze blowing in their sunlit faces, watching a hawk gliding in circles over the sprawling valley below . . . "[19]

Memory becomes an important factor to note the changing landscape of Afghanistan. Through Fereiba, Homeira, and Laila's narrative, we see the past glory and the present shackles of a country. However,

irrespective of the present debacle, memory continues to cling to the glorious landscape which becomes a sense of refuge for all three of them. How does the memory of the past then provide a sense of belonging for Homeira and Fereiba?

THE MOTHER AND THE MOTHERLAND

The protagonists imbibe in them the trauma inflicted on their homeland. Trauma, therefore, becomes shared by the inhabitants and the landscape. There is a visible uprooting in Homeira and Fereiba's lives. Homeira writes to her son that she would avoid taking him outside the four walls of their house as, "I didn't want Kabul to become your graveyard, as it had been for so many."[20] This dire wish to not see Afghanistan as a graveyard is perhaps why both of the protagonists emphasize the beauty of the landscape even through the trauma. Homeira and Fereiba's Afghanistan still has the orchard homes, red pomegranate trees, birds and valleys, where they spent their childhood. Both Fereiba and Homeira know that they cannot come back to Afghanistan again. Fereiba's husband was murdered by the Taliban for not accepting their ideologies, and Homeira cannot go back to Afghanistan as she cannot be the "ideal wife".[21] She was the "wife who published books, a wife who spoke in public, a wife who came home late from teaching at the university, a wife who was recognized in her own right. A woman who behaved like this was never going to be an ideal wife to the average Afghan man."[22]

Fereiba leaves Afghanistan because she knows that she cannot raise her three children alone in a Sharia land. Homeira knows that she cannot be a woman recognised on her own in Afghanistan. Motherhood propels one to take on the daunting journey to a different land, while motherhood is snatched away from another owing to the laws of the homeland. The three mothers, Homeira as a mother, Fereiba as a mother, and Afghanistan as the motherland, become intertwined and interdependent. Homeira is constantly

reminded by her mother that "the soil of my homeland is full of disappointments".[23]

The mothers through the generations have known that Afghanistan is a man's land. Both physical and psychological pain that has forced the two mothers to seek refuge in foreign lands get intertwined with Afghanistan as the motherland which has experienced similar trauma. Therefore, in a foreign land, the memory of the idyllic past becomes the umbilical cord that still keeps Fereiba and Homeira attached to the motherland.

The relationship between the mother with the motherland is painful for both protagonists. Fereiba lost her mother as an infant. Her stepmother KokuGul did not mistreat her, but Fereiba knew that she was not KokoGul's own. Unlike her children, KokoGul did not let Fereiba attend school, for if Fereiba went to school with her sisters, who will do the chores at home?

> KokoGul was not an evil woman. She did not starve me, beat me, or throw me out of the house. In fact, she fed me, bathed me, clothed me, and did all the things a mother should. When I stumbled upon language, I called her Mother. My first steps were toward her, the woman who nursed me through childhood fevers and scrapes. Yet all this was done at arm's length. It didn't take long for me to feel her resentment though it would be years before I could give it a name.[24]

Fereiba secretly misses her birth mother. She knew how her Madar-Jan had protected her brother Asad from "evil eyes",[25] and how her father was "pleased that his wife was taking such care to safeguard his progeny."[26] She describes her life to be "haunted"[27] by the death of her mother, for her life becomes a "series of misfortunes".[28] The lack of a mother figure becomes another "absent present"[29] that coincides with the loss of the motherland.

> My birth was haunted by the death of my mother and, while Boba-jan mournfully whispered the azaan in my ear, a very different prayer was being said over my mother's depleted body. The azaan, spoken in my grandfather's voice, wove its way through to the fabric of my being, telling me to keep the faith. My salvation was that I listened. My mother was buried in a newly dedicated cemetery near our home. I didn't visit much, partly because no one would take me and partly because of my lingering guilt.[30]

As Fereiba begins the fateful journey across the world to reach London, Fereiba realises that as a mother she has to choose her children's future. She does not want Samina to grow up in a land that is not for a woman. She does not want Samina to grow up without a mother as she did. Hence, the motherland is remembered as an idyllic landscape that has been violated. The trauma of the motherland, the loss of serenity, beauty, and the essence of Afghanistan become synonymous with the loss that Fereiba experiences throughout her life. The loss of her birthmother, the loss of her mother-in-law, and the loss of her husband, Mahmoud, in the hands of the Taliban, compel her to leave resulting in the loss of her motherland, Afghanistan.

> Qaderi writes, "the area across the small river in front of our house had been turned into an arid wasteland by years of Soviet bombing and tank treads and the subsequent destruction of the civil war."[31]

Continuous warfare quite literally turned Afghanistan into a barren land. Not only has warfare destroyed important monuments like the Bamiyan Buddhas, people's homes, offices, schools, but also the fertility of the land. Qaderi writes that once the Taliban took over, "the streets were barren of women."[32] The association of the

barrenness of the land with the city signifies how the women and the motherland had become one. Even if the women could give birth to children, the children would be known by the father's name.

Homeira knows that Afghanistan is not a land for women, something which is repeatedly reminded of by her mother and grandmother. Unlike Fereiba, Homeira grows up under the protective eyes of her mother and grandmother. However, her relationship with her motherland becomes complicated when her motherhood is challenged by the laws of the land.

> Later, when your father brought in the identity registration card, once again my name, as your mother, was nowhere to be seen. Even in your passport, they didn't ask for my name. Your mother's name does not appear in any paper document. My son, in your motherland the mentioning of a woman's name outside the family circle is a source of shame. And no child is known by its mother's name.[33]

Homeira's inability to accept that she is fated to be a woman known by her husband's name, who must remain strictly within the four walls of her home, step out when it is necessary, and be always accompanied by another man, complicated her relationship with her motherland. Her relationship with the motherland worsened when her infant son was taken away from her.

> I was a bright, playful child, too young and energetic to understand fear, whether of invisible bullets buzzing through the air or of Russian tanks rumbling in the street outside our house. Inside those walls, there was a courtyard filled with apple and mulberry trees, and red and green grapes growing on the vine. We were three generations living there: Baba-Jan and Nanah-Jan, their four daughters, my aunts Kurbra, Hajar,

> Zahra, and Azizah, my uncles Naseer and Basheer, Agha and Madar, plus my baby brother, Mushtaq, and me. Nanah-Jan always said, "A girl should have fear in her eyes." I spent a lot of time in front of the mirror turning my eyelids inside out, hoping to detect the shape or color of fear. Madar often said, "The night this girl was born, we were surrounded by fire. It felt like the city was giving birth. Before Homeira heard her own cries, she heard other people's screams. No wonder she isn't afraid of anything."[34]

The image of the "city giving birth"[35] metaphorically linked with the screams of the people associates Homeira with the landscape. Here, by personifying the city as a mother, Homeira directly acknowledges how she has imbibed the trauma inflicted upon the land. Her birth and the birth of the city become synonymous. The loss of the pastoral in the hands of the Taliban, and the loss of her child because of the laws of the Taliban, combine the two mothers who cling to the memory of the past which provides them with a sense of refuge. The existence of the "courtyard filled with apple and mulberry trees, and red and green grapes growing on the vine"[36] inside Homeira's house is the idyllic Afghanistan that still exists in memory in opposition to the "invisible bullets buzzing through the air"[37] outside the four walls.

> My childhood world was within the bounds of a small window, low in the wall of our house, and a mother who was always trying to keep me away from that window. She knew bullets could pierce the glass. She tried her best to keep me surrounded by four solid cement walls. My mother was like a spider trying to safeguard me within her web.[38]

Homeira's symbolic movement away from inside the house, the idyllic safe space, under the protective eyes of her Madar-Jan and Nanah-Jan (mother and grandmother), and into the reality that

threatens existence with "invisible flying bullets" after her marriage, breaches the separation of the individual from the motherland. Homeira is no longer separated from the scarred motherland. She sees the beloved Herut and Kabul turning into "graveyards". Unlike Fereiba who says that her life becomes a "series of misfortunes"[39] as her birthmother died before she could ward off the evil eyes of strangers by pinning "an amulet to my gown, before she could whisper nam-e-khoda, before she could look at her fingernails, and before she could lovingly waft the espand over my head",[40] Homeira's misfortunes begin after she realises that she is no longer an "ideal wife" to her husband in Kabul. Through their experiences, the protagonists share the trauma between each other and the motherland. Afghanistan ceases to remain external. Even though both of them had to leave Afghanistan, the memory of the land, the lamentation and nostalgia of the lost glory of the land, and the acknowledgment of reality associates the three mothers with a unique bond.

Fereiba says that her brother Asad, "In the two short years my mother nurtured him, he had gained enough strength to secure his place in the world."[41] She associates her homelessness with her mother's death. Asad secured his place in the world because he was protected by his mother, and secondly because he was a man. As Fereiba travels with forged documents in cars that transport refugees from Afghanistan to Iraq, or in vessels that transport refugees to Turkey, she keeps on revisiting her past. Fereiba shares how she spent her childhood, adolescence, her teenage years under the familiar shade of the mulberry trees in the orchard behind her home. Even though everyone, including KokoGul, was scared to go to the orchard after dark, Fereiba would go to pick ripe berries. Her attachment to the lost landscape of Afghanistan can be described as what Robert Tally calls "transcendental homelessness"[42] in his book *Spatiality* (2012). Tally writes "the map is one of the most powerful and

effective means humans have to make sense of their place in the world, whether in a wide-ranging and abstract sense of transcendental homelessness".[43] Hashimi's book begins with the illustrated map that shows the route undertaken by Fereiba to arrive in London. Fereiba says in the prologue that she understood the importance of the map later in her life, "the geography would become important to me only later in my life."[44] Fereiba's memory of the beauty of the landscape provides her with a sense of existence. Even when she is thousands of miles away from Afghanistan, her acute awareness of belonging to Afghanistan provides her with what Tally refers to as "transcendental homelessness". Her sense of existence is further enhanced by the memory of the beautiful landscape that is destroyed because of continuous warfare. Even when Fereiba was taking shelter from the rain in a park, covering Samina and Aziz with plastic, the knowledge that miles away once she had a home and a loving husband, provided her with a refuge.

> Afghanistan is the land of invisible bullets and the land of a death foretold, the land of doomed destinies, and the land of dejected and disgruntled youth, waiting forever for dreams that will never come true. This is how Madar, my mother, Ansari, and Nanah-Jan, my grandmother, Firozah, described my homeland to me when I was barely four years old.[45]

George Lukács describes a novel as a response to "transcendental homelessness."[46] The individual with the help of the novel attempts to create a "cosmos in order to make his own existence intelligible and meaningful".[47] The idyllic space becomes a cosmos for both Fereiba and Homeira which provides them with an anchor. Through memory, Afghanistan remains alive as a land of tranquillity before the Russian invasion. What effect does imbibing the trauma afflicted on the landscape have on the protagonists?

Afghanistan as a dual reality

"Why did you come back to Afghanistan for work?" he asks.

> "Because there's a lot to write about," I tell him. "Is that all? I mean is there something about Afghanistan that made you want to return?" "Yes, look around," I say. "It's beauty, for one." "You haven't seen the ugliness, have you?" "Yes, I have. When I was a child during the Soviet invasion, I saw the ugliness of war. But that's what makes it fascinating, that combination of beautiful and ugly."[48]

On returning to Afghanistan eighteen years after Fariba Nawa left, she still emphasises the "beautiful and ugly". Even though Nawa has seen the cruelty, the ugliness, "Darya, the bartered bride, and Gandomi, the widow whose daughter self-immolated because she feared her brothers-in-law would rape her; in the destitute men who beg on Herat's streets to support their drug addiction; and in the drug lords such as Haji Sardar, who prey on women like Gandomi",[49] she would "rather focus on the exquisiteness of Afghanistan." In both the books *Dancing in The Mosque and When The Moon is Low,* Afghanistan is represented as a beautiful country and at the same time a country that only knows bloodshed and violence. This representation establishes Afghanistan as a dual reality, one which exists in the memory, and the other embedded in the present. Afghanistan's location, therefore, becomes geographical which locates the country in the geopolitics of the world, and psychological which provides the refugees like Fereiba or the diaspora like Homeira with a sense of familiarity, an anchor that helps them to make meaning of their existence as Tally suggests.

The title of the book *Dancing in The Mosque* is inspired by a chapter named the same in the book. As the Taliban closes all schools for women, Homeira starts teaching the girls of her colony inside her house. She is acutely aware of the fact that if the Taliban somehow

gets a hint, they will kill Homeira and her entire family. Despite that, she undertakes the task of educating young girls in her house. Very soon, the refugee children who lived across the river started requesting that Homeira allows them inside the classroom. After consideration, Homeira started teaching the refugee children inside the Mosque. One afternoon, the children decided to dance inside the mosque. As the Taliban had banned all forms of music and dance from the land, Homeira decided to keep an eye on the Taliban check post as the children inside the Mosque danced.

> "Suddenly, I heard a noise beyond the fabric wall. I froze. I saw a stick lifting the heavy curtain that formed the door to the mosque. The muzzle of a rifle appeared . . . Our noise must have drawn Talib's attention on his way to the checkpoint. I flew to the center of the mosque, hoping the shadows would hide me. The children must have seen the fear on my face. They scattered like frightened pigeons before a stalking cat . . . Then the Talib stepped inside. His voice rang out through the tent. My heart stopped.[50]

Homeira was saved by another young Talib that day who decided to not punish the children. Amidst all the chaos, the shouting of the Talib, and the fear of being killed, Homeira could not help but laugh at a student sitting on his books to hide them. The Mosque becomes a liminal space between a river and a Taliban check post, between psychologically idyllic Afghanistan, and the present Taliban-governed Afghanistan. Inside the mosque, Homeira and the children could read, learn and write outside the vigilance of the Talibs. They could challenge the authority by laughing or dancing or even being together. The Mosque becomes a representation of the dual reality through which Afghanistan is represented in the books. Fereiba challenges the Taliban by fleeing Afghanistan. Hashimi writes that "refugees didn't just escape a place. They had to escape a thousand

memories until they'd put enough time and distance between them and their misery to wake to a better day."[51] As Fereiba takes the challenge to walk to Mashhad to reach the Iranian border, she secretly tells her husband that they have "made their way into tomorrow."[52] For Fereiba, a tomorrow brings the possibility of altering the history of the land.

> "Afghanistan is a land of widows and widowers, orphans and the missings. Missing a right leg, a left hand, a child,or a mother. Everyone was missing something, as if a black hole had opened in the center of the country, sucking in bits and pieces of everyone into its hardened belly."[53]

By crossing the border, Fereiba presents a chance of living a complete life for her children. It is perhaps the distance, that allows Fereiba and Homeira to remember Afghanistan through its beauty. Hence, the border becomes that liminal space that compels Fereiba to acknowledge the current political reality and the need to dissociate from the motherland physically, but also allows her to cling to Afghanistan, the nostalgia that propels Saleem to declare that he is from Afghanistan and he does not want to be a refugee in Turkey or Greece. The strong sense of attachment becomes the "cosmos"[54] that provides Fereiba and Saleem with a sense of belonging, and existence. Afghanistan here becomes a home away from home in their minds that contribute again to the dual representation of the country in the novel.

CONCLUSION

Homeira and Fereiba's "tomorrow" is completely different. They are not merely third-world women whose stories should be read as the stories of being repressed, an idea that Chandra Mohanty expresses in her essay *Under Western Eyes* (1991). Their struggles cannot be

homogenised. The two women took separate paths to challenge the Taliban authority. Qaderi writes,

> I always have and always will want to be a mother for you, but I also need to remain Homeira for myself. I could not trade my name for a number; I could not sacrifice my freedom or my dignity. I could not become just another humiliated woman, banished to the supposed sanctuary of our home. I cannot die under a blanket as an angry, pitiful, desolate woman; I am trying to save myself and, by doing that, perhaps save other women as well.[55]

Qaderi's quest to make a place for herself in the world is different from Fereiba's quest to provide her children with a better future. Fereiba says, "I will carry these children—my husband's children—as far as I can and pray that we will reach that place where, in the quiet of their slumber, I, too, will rest."[56] Through their separate journeys, they keep Afghanistan alive through memory. They do not allow pain and bloodshed to completely eradicate the beauty of the land. Memory becomes significant in understanding the history of the landscape. Both the novels, *Dancing in the Mosque* and *When The Moon is Low,* through fact and fiction respectively, establishes the idyllic loss and the simultaneous idyllic presence that provide Afghanistan with two different identities, one rooted in the psyche and the other rooted in the current geopolitical map of the world.

NOTES

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6 Nadia Hashimi, *When the Moon Is Low*. (New York: Harper Collins USA, 2017), prologue.
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8 Homeira Qaderi, *Dancing in the Mosque*. (London: 4th Estate, 2020), 57.
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20 Homeira Qaderi, *Dancing in the Mosque.* (London: 4th Estate, 2020), 129.
21 Homeira Qaderi, *Dancing in the Mosque*. (London: 4th Estate, 2020), 131.
22 Homeira Qaderi, *Dancing in the Mosque*. (London: 4th Estate, 2020), 131.
23 Homeira Qaderi, *Dancing in the Mosque.* (London: 4th Estate, 2020), 75.
24 Nadia Hashimi, *When the Moon Is Low*. (New York: Harper Collins USA, 2017), 10.
25 Nadia Hashimi, *When the Moon Is Low*. (New York: Harper Collins USA, 2017), 3.

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"The Song of Mud": Landscape, Memory and Poetry of the First World War (1914-18)

Argha Kumar Banerjee

Robert Graves's poem "A Dead Boche" explores a world beyond "blood and fame" culminating in the helpless outburst: "War's Hell!".[1] Graves vindicates his realization against the backdrop of the "Mametz Wood". The village of Mametz was captured on 2nd July 1916, on the second day of the Battle of Somme. In early July, the 38th Welsh Division launched an attack through the mutilated landscape of the woods incurring heavy casualties on both sides. It was this corpse ridden landscape that Robert Graves discovered upon his arrival in the wood following the momentary end of the hostilities. In his autobiographical work *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Graves describes the transformed landscape while delivering his routine duties on the battlefield: "Going and coming, by the only possible route, I passed by the bloated and stinking corpse of a German with his back propped against a tree. He had a green face, spectacles, close-shaven hair; black blood was dripping from the nose and beard."[2]

The Great War as the first major technological conflict inflicted heavy casualties, unmatched in the history of Britain. However, much beyond the loss of thousands of human lives, most readers remain oblivious to the other silent victim of the war: the surrounding landscape, that recurs as an omniscient backdrop to the carnage and bloodbath unleashed by the violent war. Bereft of a voice, the war ravaged landscape speaks volumes through the cadaverous farmlands, ghastly scorched trees and murky swamps intermingling human blood with the mud of the battle field. As Tait Keller rightly observes in "Destruction of the Ecosystem":

> History books typically regard the environment as the backdrop for battle or as collateral damage, if they consider the natural world at all. Such is the paradox of the environment in times of war: nature is both omnipresent and invisible. Yet only by taking the environment into account can we fully understand the trauma of the Great War and how this conflict shaped the most basic levels of human existence for years afterwards.[3]

The environment bore the brunt of the first major technological warfare. The images of the battle scarred landscapes in British war poetry testify to this observation, especially the destroyed landscapes adorned with barbed wires, pits, craters and trenches impregnated with casualties. Besides the poets, British war painters like Paul Nash, Charles Nevinson, John Nash, William Orpen and Muirhead Bone among several others also recurrently captured the war torn landscapes in their works. Occasionally, some of the celebrated war poems seem to correspond with the portrayal of violence on canvas.

Paul Nash's painting entitled "Mud" captures the horrific reality of the devastated landscape, especially the long stretches of wastelands on the war front. Ironically, the world of mud often served as "liquid graves" for the dead combatants in the Great War. Echoing Nash's work of art, Mary Borden's poem "The Song of Mud", portrays "the invincible, inexhaustible mud of the war zone" as "obscene", "filthy" and "putrid"; which also serves as "the vast liquid grave" of the armies, with combatants being gradually subsumed in the muddy world of the war ridden landscape:

> Slowly, inch by inch, they have gone down into it,
> Into its darkness, its thickness, its silence.
> Slowly, irresistibly, it drew them down, sucked them down,
> And they were drowned in thick, bitter, heaving mud.[4]

On similar lines, Nash's "Mud" (1918), "We are Making a New World" (1918) and the "Caterpillar's Crater" (1917), also find a verbal expression in Mary Borden's "The Song of the Mud" as it contrasts the life giving nature of the mud with its destructive capacity in the trenches. The "pale yellow glistening mud that covers the hills like satin" is also the "frothing, squirting, spurting, liquid mud that gurgles along the road beds."[5] Borden's "The Hill", much in tune with Nash's "Hill 60", narrates a graphic description of the war-ridden "monstrous landscape" with its "naked" fierceness, over which "crawled things of iron"[6] to destroy humankind. The "faded grass" "shattered wood" and "naked tree" in Carola Oman's "The Menin Road, March 1919"[7] literally articulates Nash's "The Menin Road". Describing the war devastated landscape in his painting, Nash wrote: "Evil and the incarnate fiend alone can be master of this war, and no glimmer of God's hand is seen anywhere. Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man . . .".[8]

Akin to Mary Borden's and Carola Oman's experience as a nurse, portrayals of devastated landscapes recur in the poetry of soldier poets and other forms of verse of the First World War. But why do images of the landscape tend to dominate poetry of the Great War? What purposes do such portrayals serve in verse? This analysis specifically intends to explore the various socio-cultural factors that contributed to the artistic pre-occupation with landscapes in war poetry. In order to probe the reasons behind such a poetic preoccupation, it is important to re-trace the British literary sensibility on the threshold of the twentieth century, especially in the years leading to the First World War that definitely contributed to recurrent evocations in verse.

In his book *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell devotes an entire chapter entitled "Arcadian Recourses" to trace the link between the pastoral world and the war. In the section "The British Model World" Fussell defends the connection:

> If the opposite of war is peace, the opposite of experiencing moments of war is proposing moments of pastoral. Since war takes place outdoors and always within nature, its symbolic status is that of the ultimate anti-pastoral. In Northrop Frye's terms, it belongs to the demonic world, and no one engages in it or contemplates it without implicitly or explicitly bringing to bear the contrasting "model world" by which its demonism is measured. When H.M. Tomlinson asks, "What has the rathe primrose to do with old rags and bones on barbed wire?" We must answer, "Everything".[9]

Fussell moves on to assert that the notion of pastoral had a decisive role to play in fostering a deep sense of national identity among the British soldier-poets of the Great War. Yet beyond the rich pastoral tradition in verse, there were a host of other cultural factors that contributed to glorification of "rural England" landscapes in diverse forms of art, especially in the years immediately preceding the war. As historian Alun Howkins argues in "The Discovery of Rural England", "a strain emerged within English politics and ideas in the 1880s and 1900s which linked the rural to a general crisis in urban society".[10] The latter part of the nineteenth century had already started witnessing a steady decline in England's manufacturing aspirations along with a marked simultaneous rise of its imperialist ambitions. In tune with contemporary observations there was wide spread alarm at the social degeneration that accompanied the shift in focus on urbanism, industrialism and colonialism. In fact, London as the epicentre of the large expanding colonial empire was frequently described as a place of "idleness and corruption". In search of a plausible paradigm for imperial England, historians like Edward Gibbon linked it with considerable dismay and concern to the "racial degeneration" that had afflicted the city life of ancient Rome. In fact, in the decade leading to the First World War, there was an element

of desperation in the air: "If London destroyed men and women in three generations and there were no replacements in the rural areas the race was doomed."[11] This proliferating anxiety of an impending industrial, urban and racial catastrophe in turn contributed to a desperate search for alternatives. One redemptive option rigorously advocated by the state lay in the resurrection and glorification of the idea of rural England. In the years leading to the First World War, all political parties: Liberal, Labour and Conservative, all actively mooted plans to boost the lure of the rural England. In sharp contrast to the urban life, "the country and country people came to be seen as the essence of England, uncontaminated by racial degeneration and the false values of cosmopolitan urban life."[12] In tune with the greater cultural anxiety Rudyard Kipling's "The Islanders, 1902" records how the urban recruits for the Boer War were thought to be lacking the commensurate vitality for military service:

> Yet ye were saved by a remnant (and your land's long
> suffering star)
> When your strong men cheered in their millions while
> your striplings went to the war.
> Sons of the sheltered city—unmade, unhandled, unmet—
> Ye pushed them raw to the battle as ye picked them raw
> from the street.[13]

However, beyond the political and economic ramifications, there was a growing pressure to re-write and celebrate the cultural history of England and discover a "new Englishness". The "recent past" with its focus on industrialism, urbanism and imperialism was described by a historian like G.K. Chesterton in *Short History of England* as "un-English", and the overall cult of so called progress was blamed for hoodwinking the "ordinary Englishman", "out of his possessions" including "his original rural life".[14]

There was desperation in the air to stem the omniscient "decay

of national life" and return to natural rural roots of the country. As Howkins further observes in *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside Since 1900:* "This revaluation took many forms, ranging from the rediscovery of British traditional music and folklore to garden cities; from schemes for peasant proprietorship to the invention of a vernacular style in architecture. All were concerned with making the link between national identity and rural Britain."[15]

The roots of obsession with landscapes and the natural world in then contemporary verse and subsequently in the years of the war were inevitably linked to this overall cultural milieu in which there was a renewed interest and celebration of the rural England. The popularity of Edward Hudson's Country Life and Georgian anthologies of verse further testify and confirm the mood of the hour. It also doesn't come as much of a surprise that a poet like Wilfred Owen was "reading Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus"[16] in December 1917 at the Front. It is further interesting to note that even social or class differences did not stand as a hindrance to this nascent cult of celebration of rural England. On the contrary, it acted as a binding factor of social cohesion and unity. As Howkins points out:

> First the external point of reference in most war poems (where there is one) is Southern England or some ideal of the rural. Sassoon, Blunden and Thomas all follow this . . . this vision seems to have spread downwards. Many, if not most, soldiers seem to have had good relationships with their immediate superiors. Both Lyn Macdonald's book on Passchendaele and Martin Middlebrook's on the Somme . . . stress the 'love' felt by ordinary soldiers for many of their officers. This created in the trenches, if not when out of the line, a *classlessness* based upon a shared experience of suffering very like the pre-war metaphors of a united agricultural community working together in the face of adversity.[17]

Love for rural England, though inherent, was quite often an outcome of prolonged exile from home—as during the war, or as a reaction to the growing industrial nature of the state. Even for the soldiers in the trenches, the "English idea of domesticity was inseparable from the image of a well-kept gardening allotment".[18] Evocation of the rural landscapes from memory in verse served various purposes for the male war poets writing from the trenches. First and foremost, it served the twin purpose of both "gauging the calamities of the Great War and imaginatively protecting oneself against them".[19]

Memories of rural landscapes also had another key purpose to serve. In his work *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery & National Identity in England & the United States*, Stephen Daniels asserts that, "protective images of landscape have played a role in cultural resistance to outside aggression".[20] "National identities", continues Daniels, "are co-ordinated, often largely defined, by 'legends and landscapes', by stories of golden ages . . . promised home-lands with hallowed sites and scenery".[21] Daniels' notion of "hallowed sites and scenery" was perhaps echoed by Edward Thomas, when writing from the Front to his friend Gordon Bottomley, Thomas asked him: "must I see only Huns on these beautiful hills eastwards?"[22] In his war poetry, Thomas "examines and cherishes those aspects of the country he had enlisted to defend".[23] In a rare and unparalleled use of the pastoral, in his poem "Lob", Thomas not only conjures up a true feeling of rural history but simultaneously conveys three important messages. First, by celebrating the creative energies of Lob he glorifies the "naturalised" man; secondly, Lob stands as a representative of the rural country which is quintessentially England for the poet and thirdly, as symbol of rural England he is eternal. The obvious implication is the poetic expectancy that England will overcome this crisis of the war and move on: "He is English as this gate, these flowers, this mire. / And when at eight years old Lob-lie-by -the -fire / Came in my books, this was the man I saw."[24]

For poets like Edward Thomas or Ivor Gurney or Edmund

Blunden, the fight was "not so much for the nation as for the land", but it was also for "a territory with a culture and a way of life" that "was disappearing, even before the war."[25] Through his pre-war compilations of verse like *The Harbingers and Pastorals*, Blunden commemorated the last vestiges of traditional strongholds of the Kent countryside. Naturally, for all these various reasons, evocation of rural landscapes in war verse, especially ones written during the early years of the war are replete with images of nationalist fervour and Englishness. In his sonnet "The Soldier", Brooke affirms the notion of pastoral "England" as an integral part of a combatant's national identity. Written early during the war, the octave of the sonnet evokes the idyllic beauty of rural England with its rich bucolic surroundings. The patriotic notion of the state is here distinguished for the rich storehouse of "her flowers to love", the "rivers" and the eternal assurance of peace "under an English heaven".[26] Brooke's poem, as Howkins points out, is a direct extension of the then contemporary resurging faith in rural England: "He had been a ruralist, a reviver of the Tudor in the Marlowe Society at Cambridge, a seeker after country life in a caravan, and a socialist in Blatchford's mould. Yet it was in his Englishness that he found some kind of justification for his life and actions."[27] Similarly, Gurney's "Strange Service" perceives the landscape of the Cotswolds "as an embodiment of the order and harmony" that has direct bearing on his war poetry.[28] Addressing the personified motherland in the poem, he asserts: "Little did I dream, England, that you bore me/Under the Cotswold hills beside the water meadows, / To do you dreadful service, here, beyond your borders/ And your enfolding seas . . . "[29]

In sharp contrast to the male poets, during the years of the First World War landscapes served as an apt metaphor, a sad reminder of the caged existence of women during the early twentieth century. In this context, rural landscapes mirrored the deep sense of void and isolation that engulfed the female psyche during the calamity of the war. Such a rendering in verse served as an elegy to women's

existence in the war-time. In her poem "Picnic: July 1917", Rose Macaulay, ventilates her frustration as regards the 'guarding walls' of the surrounding hills which symbolise the entrapment of hapless victims: "We are ringed all round by guarding walls, / So high, they shut the view. / Not all the guns that shatter the world / Can quite break through."[30] Similar images of entrapment, also recur in H.D.'s verse. However, in this context it is important to bear in mind that if landscapes reminded women of social entrapment and political isolation, it also opened up new opportunities for exploration of the rural world during the years of the war. The circumstances of the war, for the first time directly planted women in the "maternal hills", to bring about a rare inversion of the earlier male-centered vision of the world in real life. While pre-war idyllic visions of the artists' pastoral world were being desecrated following the onset of the violent war, *The Landswoman* magazine on the other hand was busy in exploiting erstwhile male bucolic celebrations to lure more women for land work.[31] Thus indirectly, the Great War paved the way for neo-politicisation of earlier landscape painters like George Stubbs and Jean Francois Millet, as their works proved to be politically expedient in attracting more female recruits for required land work. Articles like "The Poet and the Land Lass" (carried by *The Landswoman*, July 1918), citing verse extracts from Wordsworth's "Solitary Reaper" and other literary works, were aimed at concretising such dreams on a wide scale due to sheer necessity and shortage of man-power during the war. Alice Meynell's ecstatic celebration of "The Shepherdess", immaculately portrays this alternate vision of the rural landscape during the war: 'She walks—the lady of my delight— / A Shepherdess of Sheep—/ Her flocks are thoughts, she keeps them white . . . She roams maternal hills and bright / Dark valleys safe and deep . . . "[32] The experience of the land girls, no doubt opened up new vistas of pastoral experience for women, even though it may have been for a short span of time during the war.

Evocation of landscape serves as a recurrent motif in the poetry of the First World War. As this analysis tries to explore, multiple socio-cultural factors had resulted in such an artistic preoccupation. A close scrutiny of the significant contemporary developments in the decades leading to the war traces the socio-cultural roots that effectively contributed to the exploration of landscapes in diverse forms in war poetry. It also underscores the persistent evocations of landscape in the artistic commemoration of the memory of the Great War.

NOTES

1 Robert Graves, "A Dead Boche", *World War One British Poets: Brooke, Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg and Others*, Ed, Candace Ward, Mineola, (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), 44.
2 Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, (London: Penguin, 1960, 1st published Jonathan Cape 1929), 175.
3 Tait Keller, "Destruction of the Ecosystem", https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/destruction_of_the_ecosystem
4 Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone*, (London: Heinemann, 1929), 179 https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57329/at-the-somme-the-song-of-the-mud
5 Mary Borden, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57329/at-the-somme-the-song-of-the-mud
6 Borden, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57329/at-the-somme-the-song-of-the-mud
7 Carola Oman, *The Menin Road and Other Poems*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1919), 12-13.
8 Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*, (London & Indiana: Penguin Books & Indiana University press, 1981), 138-139.
9 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 231
10 Alun Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England' in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, ed. Robert Colls & Philip Dodd (London: Crook Helm. 1986), p. 63.
11 Howkins, 67.
12 Howkins, 69.

13 Rudyard Kipling, *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* made by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 129.
14 G.K. Chesterton, *Short History of England,* (London: Chatto, 1917), 131.
15 Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside Since 1900,* London & New York: Routledge, 2003, 25.
16 *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 520.
17 Howkins, 81.
18 *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 234.
19 Ibid,. 235.
20 Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery & National Identity in England & the United States,* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 7.
21 *Fields of Vision*, 5.
22 *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley,* ed. R. George Thomas, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 283.
23 Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas,* (London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 92.
24 Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, with a foreword by Walter de la Mare, (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), 55.
25 Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War, (*London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 88.
26 *The Poems of Rupert Brooke* edited and introduced by Timothy Rogers, (Mohndruck: Transworld Publishers Ltd, 1987), 133.
27 Howkins, 'The Discovery of Rural England', 79.
28 *Ivor Gurney: Rewards of Wonder, Poems of Cotswold, France,* London edited by George Walter, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000), 14.
29 *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney,* Chosen, edited and introduced by P.J. Kavanagh, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 31.
30 Macaulay, *Augustan Books of Poetry*, Second Series, No. 6. Ed Humbert Wolfe, (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), 11-12.
31 Paintings of artists like Stubbs (Hay Carting, The Haymakers) and Millet (The Gleaners) were used to lure more women for landwork. (July-Oct 1918, The *Landswoman*)
32 As cited in *The Landswoman*, Vol. 1, No. 11, 1918, 233.

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Narrating the Picturesque: Reading Tagore's Landscape from His Memory to His Art

Sanghita Sanyal

"Every landscape is, as it were, a state of the soul."
[Henri-Frédéric Amiel]

Analogous to this insight of Amiel, in his formative text *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama also holds on to an opinion that, "[T]he landscape is a work of the mind, another compartment in the cultural baggage we all lug about. The scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock, shaped by the same rich and complex traditions that frame other aspects of our cultural world."[1] Such memory, we see, can be applied in various ways in literature: to establish the historical-temporal context, or to create an individual or cultural identity, or to simply instil a feeling of nostalgia in the text.[2] Now, what Schama makes us inquisitive about is, whether the memory of landscape that enables creative art, is only bound up by remembering, recollecting, reflecting, memorialising personal specifics of geography or a beautiful moment, or whether it blends the artist's personal/spiritual perception of landscape as well. In that case, such a kind of scene would certainly pack in much more than the visual landscape only, and facilitate a glance into the artist's transcendental attainment beyond the dimensional limitations of the canvas. In fact, the painting in a way, would enable a deeper plunge into the artist's mind. In this paper, I would perpend specifically the ('revelations' through the) landscapes that Rabindranath Tagore used to 'construct' in his various paintings. In this paper, I argue that the landscape paintings of Tagore are not just a sheer transcript of his visual memory, but a glimpse of a transcendental spirit with which

he felt connected to the Immanent—something which has been pervasive in the core of his oeuvre.

An instance can be cited from a different context: on 23rd October, 1926, at Hotel Imperial, Vienna, Tagore wrote (which later formed the preface to his collection of poems *Banabani*,) about a letter that he received from Shantiniketan; this letter took his heart away to the memory of the environs of Uttarayan, that served as a perpetual solace for his mind which was tired of traveling. This landscape of his memory always wove a kind of nostalgia and transmuted itself into a mystic state which can perceive Eternity in even the minutiae of the mundane. In his Art, Tagore had always shown a sustained and deep impact of the rural landscape of Silaidah and Bolpur, along with other natural settings that created a memory, a virtual setting which would leave an indelible mark on his consciousness. Tagore would not only recreate them in his prose, poetry or letters, but also in his paintings, which he began much later.

However, specific to my study, I propose that his 'nisarga' or painted landscapes too, emerge from this innate connection of memory and transcendental creativity. The main focus here would be to explore his creative content and strain out specific references to the nature and landscape of a space, and analyse how it played an integral role in shaping his spirituality and philosophy behind his own creation. In other words, our method would involve closely observing a combination of a few landscape paintings of Rabindranath Tagore and read how his verbal reminiscences seemed to be wonderfully coordinated, connected and manifested smoothly into those canvases. It is best described in Tagore's own words:

টুকরো যত রূপের রেখা
সঞ্চিত রয় মনের চিত্রশালে
কখন ছবির আকার নিয়ে
জোড়া লাগায়ে শিল্পকলার জালে।।

> Fragments of forms stored in the mind
> Combined in pictures at the magic touch of art.
> [*Chitralipi*, 1940][3]

ABOUT TAGORE'S PAINTINGS

It is a widely-known fact that from doodles and scribbles, Tagore had finally shifted to mature, serious painting rather late in his life; and such a shift had attracted interest as well as criticism. Although he immersed himself completely into art at one point, Tagore had always maintained mixed and somewhat detached reactions to his own creations. He considered his own painting activity as a companion to spend time in idle playfulness ("খেলার ছলে বেলা কাটাবার সঙ্গিনী"—*Khelar chhale bela katabar songini*)[4] as told to Rani Chanda in his letters and most often expressed a facetious diffidence about their quality, especially after they were duly accepted and lauded or even sharply criticised in India and abroad. According to critics like Ahmed Rafique and N.C. Bhattacharya, Tagore himself was largely responsible for activating tenebrous and problematized feelings around his art of painting. It was difficult to shed off prejudices around his stylized art, all the more because he stoked them most often with his jesting and playfully 'apologetic' stance. In 1930 he wrote:

> An apology is due from me for my intrusion into the world of pictures . . . I, as an artist, cannot claim any merit for my courage, for it is the unconscious courage of the unsophisticated, like that of one who walks in dream on perilous path, he is saved only because he is blind to the risk . . . "[5]

As a result, Tagore was most often considered a kind of 'outlandish', 'émigré' in the discourse of Art. Even renowned critics like W.G. Archer (1959), Shivnarayan Ray (1973), Pranabranjan Ray (1977),

Francis Watson (1986), even Andrew Robinson (1989) gravitated to sharp conclusions like Tagore took to painting as a refuge to counter his "death anxiety", or as a subliminal expression of sexual desire or simply because he wanted to restore his fame and popularity in the Western world following the political flak he faced after 1917. Probably, Tagore's paintings would not have attracted such controversial opprobrium if he had only been an artist, painting throughout his life. As a polymath who has consistently left finest and deepest footprints of a master in all that he has composed—from poetry to fiction, to music, drama, essays, political treatise—Tagore's aesthetic and intellectual range was so overwhelmingly wide that perhaps when finally, he treaded into the world of canvas and the paintbrush and started delivering masterpieces there as well, it was not a matter to be easily accepted.

However, when seen objectively, it makes a lot of sense to read Tagore's paintings as not a shift, but as an obvious, instinctive exploration of a different form of expression, narration—only possible for a litterateur of his depth. Tagore never really had to shift from one form of expression to another, that is, verse to novels, to short stories to prose poems or songs or dance drama in any watertight chronological order. He could and would compose simultaneously. With that argument in mind, it would be easier to believe that Tagore's interest and action of painting could also be an exploration of just another narrative form by the master storyteller.

It is perhaps for a painting's capacity of universal expression, that Tagore felt a pull, a need to explore it for the very sake of his own satisfaction and creative joy. In 1941, Tagore wrote to Rani Chanda:

> অনেক সময় মনে হয় যে, ছবির মার নেই। তার বিশেষ রেখা বিশেষ ফর্ম বদল হলেও রসের হানি হয় না। ছবিতে শিশু পর্যন্ত কিছু না কিছু একটা পায়। ভাষাতে তো তা নয়।[6]
>
> [Most of the times, I feel that nothing can take over painting.

> Form or style might alter, but that does not affect the sentiment. In a picture, a child also has something to take back. It is not so with language.]

Eminent scholar-critic Ahmad Rafique, mentioned earlier, makes a cogent observation in his book *Rabindranather Chitrashilpa*, which can be referred to, in this context. He observes:

> আসলে আত্মপ্রকাশের টানে, এক ফর্ম থেকে অন্য ফর্মে যাওয়া, বৈচিত্র্যের টানে মন দেওয়া-নেওয়ার কারণেই সাহিত্যের ভাষা থেকে রবীন্দ্রনাথের ছবির ভাষায় প্রবেশ, যা মোটেই অনুপ্রবেশ ছিল না। হতে পারে, সাহিত্যের ফর্মে যাকে প্রকাশ করতে অসুবিধা তার জন্যই রেখা-রঙের ফর্ম হাতে নেওয়া, অতৃপ্তি নিরসনের জন্যই ছবির ভাষায় কথা বলা।. . . ছবির ভাষা সর্বজনীন, সাহিত্য-ভাষার সীমাবদ্ধতা ছবিতে নেই। এমন একটি ফর্মকে কোনো শক্তিমান স্রষ্টার ছেড়ে দেবার কথা নয়, বিশেষ করে ব্যবহারের ক্ষমতা যদি তার থাকে।[7]

> [Actually, in order to express perfectly, shifting from one form to another, in order to bring variety in the emotiveness, Tagore had stepped into the world of visuals, from the world of words. Perhaps adopting the canvas was an attempt to redress the discontent that might have been often caused by the inadequacy of words in literary expressions . . . The language of paintings is universal, doesn't face the restrictive parameters of language, as in literature. No mighty artist would want to let go of such a powerful form, especially when he has the skill to utilize it.]

Hence it can be stated with conviction that to dismiss Tagore's painting as just a whim or a strategic effort of an artist to retain his popularity in his twilight days would be a way of trivializing and misprizing another aspect of his creative expression. Rather, we must consider beyond the obvious and perceive specially the landscape

paintings of Tagore as texts evocative of emotional memories, beyond the visual. Tagore's landscapes are probably the rarest of findings among the plethora of human faces or portraits—of men, women, self-portraits, animals et al. His style was distinctly original, although verisimilitude with abstract art was perceivable most often. Tagore explained it in *Chitralipi 2* (1940):

> It interests me deeply to watch how lines find their life and character, as their connection with each other develops in varied cadences, and how they begin to speak in gesticulations. I can imagine the universe to be a universe of lines which in their movements and combinations pass on their signals of existence along the interminable chain of moments. The rocks and clouds, the trees, the waterfalls, the dance of the fiery orbs, the endless procession of life send up across silent eternity and limitless space a symphony of gestures.[8]

NISARGA OR LANDSCAPES IN TAGORE'S PAINTINGS

Tagore's perception of nature was seen through a painter's lens. In 1900, a letter written from Silaidaha, Kushtia to friend Jagadish Chandra Bose confirms that among other literary practices, he was painting too, in his sketchbook. That means, beside the regular zamindari work, Tagore's '*asmaandari*' was also running at full swing. *Asmaandari* would be a difficult phrase to translate—it can be explained as Tagore's expression to define all his aesthetic, creative activities, and as a part of it, Tagore was immersing himself in writing prose, poetry and painting as well.

During his stay at Silaidaha, where he would visit the Tagores' zamindari estate periodically, our poet's mind was greatly moved by the natural exuberance of the locale. Away from the urban ennui of Jorasanko, Calcutta, Tagore's mystic mind was inspired by the natural environ surrounding him. The several facets of the beautiful Padma

River, the nature around and its people exerted a profound impact on the deeper portals of his consciousness. In 1892, he recounted:

> আমার সমস্ত মনটাকে কে যেন তুলিতে করে তুলে নিয়ে এই রঙিন শরৎ-প্রকৃতির উপর আর এক পোঁচ রঙের মতো মাখিয়ে দিচ্ছে, তাতে করে এই সমস্ত নীল সবুজ এবং সোনার উপরে আর একটা যেন নেশার রং লেগে গেছে। বেশ লাগছে।[9]
>
> [My entire being seems to have been taken up by someone on a paintbrush who dabs it over like a layer of colour on this autumnal landscape, and it feels as if, over and above this blue, green and gold, it is mixed as well, like another intoxicating colour. It feels nice.]

Swiss modernist painter Paul Klee believed that visualization is actually a manifestation of an artist's mindfulness which may not always be realized by everybody else. The artist fuses emotions with the physical and transcribes *that* on the canvas with his colours. The visual memory of the corporal blends with an intuition, an instinct and that enables a creation which is then no more a mere replication of an object or a scene, but a translation of a perception on paper as we see in Figure 1. Critical perspectives on Tagore's paintings almost seems incomplete without referring to Somendranath Bandyopadhyay's book *Rabindra-Chitrakala: Rabindrasahityer Patabhumika*. He perceived Tagore's visualization as similar to Klee's opinion:

> আসলে ল্যান্ডস্কেপগুলি বিশ্বদৃশ্যের নকলনবিশী অর্থাৎ প্রকৃতির মিথ্যাসাক্ষী নয়। এর হাতছানি নিসর্গরূপের অন্দরমহলে। রঙ রেখার স্বচ্ছ যবনিকার অন্তরালে যেন রহস্যঘন অশরীরী সত্তার অদৃশ্য নড়াচড়া লক্ষ করা যায়। সেই গা-ছমছম অনুভবকেই বোধহয় বিনিয়ন (Biniyon) নাম দিয়েছেন "cosmic significance of landscape"।[10]
>
> [Actually, these landscapes are not a blunt imitation of the

> surrounding world, that is, not a fallacious depiction of Nature. It calls one into the deeper portals of Nature's quintessential ethos. Beyond the transparent veil of the lines and colours, there can be sensed a pulsating presence of a mysterious being. Probably it is that uncanny sensation that Biniyon calls the "cosmic significance of the landscape"]

Among his corpus of paintings, landscape is the rarest form of expressions; rarest would mean, they are least in numbers, compared to the numbers of portraits, animals etc that he has painted throughout. Yet, rightly, Tagore's *nisarga* too has a strange beauty and strength in its visualization. It almost feels that when Tagore painted, the basis of each memory and visual would transcend into a kind of 'cosmic significance'—into a vision. It wouldn't be too dramatic to say that the landscapes attain a living character about themselves, probably much expected of a storyteller of Tagore's stature. We must remember Tagore himself had justified his paintings as "Their ultimate purpose is not to illustrate or to copy outer fact or inner vision, but to evolve a harmonious wholeness which finds its passage through our eyesight into imagination."[11] In a way, as Ahmed Rafique also puts it, "ব্যক্তি ও তার পরিবেশের মিথস্ক্রিয়ায় ছবির জন্ম" ["*byakti o tar poribesher mithoskriyaye chhobir jonmo*"] that is, "a painting is born as a communion of a personality and its surroundings." Tagore's paintings are most obviously examples of such a communion, between his visual memory and mystic vision as we see in the apparent formlessness of objects in his landscapes (Figure 2).

In November 1930, following an exhibition of Tagore's paintings in New York, a critic observed:

> The symbolism of many of the figure groups and landscapes is of the simple, poetic type that each may interpret for himself... The work fits into a habit of the mind that is essentially poetic and picturesque.... Despite Tagore's warning

> ["no significance attached"], we cannot help trying to retrace the journey from the subconscious, trying to visualize the mystic concept from which they spring.[12]

Tagore himself considered this capacity to create as a quest for freedom and called it "দেখার দৃষ্টি" ["*dekhar drishti*"] which is not a mere eye but a perception, of something 'beyond the visible'. In a letter to painter Jamini Roy he writes:

> . . . দৃষ্টির ওপরে দেখার ধারা আমাদের চেতনাকে উদ্রেক করে রাখে। . . . ছবি একটি নিশ্চিত প্রত্যক্ষ অস্তিত্বের সাক্ষী। তার ঘোষণা যত স্পষ্ট হয়, ততই সেই হয় একান্ত . . . যখন ছবি আঁকায় মনকে টানলো তখন দৃষ্টির মহাযাত্রায় মন স্থান পেলো। গাছপালা জীবজন্তু সকলই আপন আপন রূপ নিয়ে চারিদিকে প্রত্যক্ষ হয়ে উঠতে লাগলো। রেখায় ও রঙে সৃষ্টি করতে লাগলো যা প্রকাশ হয়ে উঠেছে। . . . এই যে নিছক দেখবার জগৎ ও দেখাবার আনন্দ এর মর্মকথা বুঝবেন তিনি—যিনি যথার্থ চিত্রশিল্পী।[13]
>
> [The propensity to look beyond the visible keeps our consciousness active . . . a picture is a witness to the presence of such a concrete reality, the clearer it gets, the more personal it is . . . when my heart was engrossed in painting, it was drawn into an eternal journey of a vision . . . The flora and the fauna gradually started to appear in their own appearance, and what is visible, started to get created with my strokes and colours. . . . This blend of the mere visible world with the joy of viewing them would be comprehended only by one who is a perfect painter.]

Again, in another letter Tagore writes:

> অনেক সময়ে ছবি দেখলে যে মনে হয়, আহা, এইখানে যদি থাকতুম — ঠিক সেই ইচ্ছেটা এখানে পরিতৃপ্ত হয়। মনে হয় একটি জাজ্জ্বল্যমান

ছবির মধ্যে বাস করছি। এখানকার রৌদ্রে ছবি দেখার বাল্যস্মৃতি ভারী জেগে ওঠে।[14]

[Often when we watch a photograph, we feel, ah, I wish I was inside this. Here, that very desire seems to be satiated. It feels I am located inside a brilliant picture. This sunshine evokes my childhood memories of watching pictures.]

Tagore's paintings show a romantic tendency to feel one with the greater, mystic idea of Nature, yet his execution would be covertly Expressionistic. Again, beyond the memories of the Himalayas, Kalimpong, Mongpu, Darjeeling, or the mountains, landscapes of the western world, the rivers, flowers, trees, the scenery of Shantiniketan, the Kopai river where he would finally return, it was probably the memories of the times on and around the Padma River that had etched an everlasting image in his mind: a timeless image, which may not be simplified as just a memory (Figures 3, 4 and 7). That is why, probably, even while looking at the beauty of Kopai, he would remember Padma from the past:

পদ্মা কোথায় চলেছে দূর আকাশের তলায় /মনে মনে দেখি তাকে . . .[15]

[Where is Padma flowing under a sky afar/ In my mind's eyes, I can see her . . . "]

Particularly in this poem, we find Tagore is attempting a comparative description of the two rivers and the scenes around them and in no time, we realize, Tagore perceives two different worlds—bound in the nature and the characters about the rivers themselves. If Kopai is a young Santhal girl, living in the village, *pratibeshini*, more domestic, familiar, Padma is *swatantra*, patrician "লোকালয়ের পাশ দিয়ে চলে যায়—/তাদের সহ্য করে, স্বীকার করে না" ["passes by the localities—endures them, but does not acknowledge them"]

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

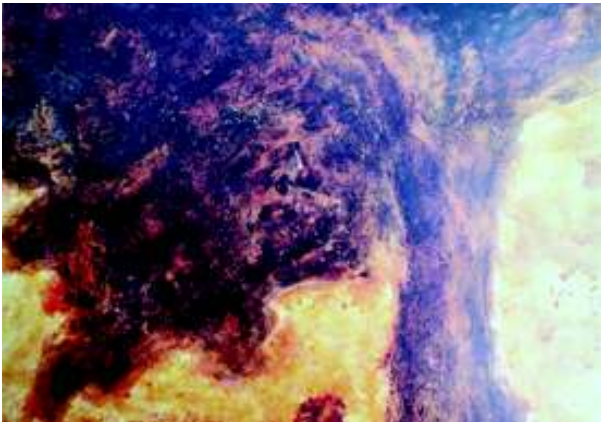

Figure 10

In the depths of his consciousness, perhaps Tagore felt a pantheistic presence of Life spread amidst the smallest elements of Nature—be it the waves, the clouds, the ubiquitous dewdrop on the tip of a grain, the trees quivering in the breeze—a momentary sighting would turn out to be a momentous renascence of wonder for the painter-poet. He would perceive a parallel living universe in those silent elements of Nature. He would try to capture *that* Life beyond the immediate scene on his canvas and there, his perception would intervene with his visuals. Specifically, my argument therefore shapes into observing two distinct aspects of Tagore's paintings and how they are interdependent—first, his subject and second, his style.

Here, we must mention that Somendranath Bandyopadhyay also makes two very pertinent observations which holds water for our discussions in the following segment: first, Tagore's landscapes are memory-based and mostly a visualization of Bengal, and second, his paintings of animals are imagination-based, and so seems more surreal, thus making a clear distinction between the two mental capacities of memory and imagination. However, we perceive Tagore's landscape paintings as his attempt to harness his own visual memories and meditate over them to a level, where the immediacy of the scene would transcend into something deeper and surreal. So, although not distorted like his animals, the landscapes are stylized and more eloquent in their meaningfulness and probably anticipates a special/lateral strain of Expressionism. One may be surprised to observe the sky in a painting of the bard (Figure 5), that eerily resembles that of Edvard Munch's Scream (1893).

Another general observation is that most of the landscapes Tagore painted showed nature bathed in the evening light, skies and forms coagulating into ominous silhouettes, thus invoking a mystery and a sense of disquiet and silence. As an example, we can refer to a few paintings where the trees and the architecture seem to be in a kind of dialogue. In fact, even in the absence of any human figure, the overpowering landscape's living presence becomes the sole subject of

the canvas; no single element in the painting can be considered to be in focus. Apparently made of somewhat "fugitive translucence, suggestive, tantalizing, never really articulate",[16] the paintings become the deeper perception of the artist that synthesizes them into a whole, where the presence of an eternal conversation between the dense trees, the small hut at a distance, the mansion with Gothic pillars, and the twilight hue of the sky cannot be missed (Figure 6).

Tagore believed that painting involves realizing a "principle of rhythm which transforms inert materials into living creations."[17] This action is typically romantic that upholds imagination as a higher capacity to perceive and realize the One amongst the many, the Infinite beyond the finite, the transcendent beyond the immanent. This personification gets very obvious in Tagore's visions. Between 1893 and 1895, as Rafique quotes from *Chhinnapatrabali*, a collection of personal letters written by Tagore to his niece Indira Devi Chaudhurani, Tagore creates a few scenes of the Silaidaha, Padma bank landscape with his words. We find such a perspective towards nature is obviously mystic, and they reflect heavily upon his *nisarga* paintings too. Standing at the bank of the Nagar River he watches the natural landscape and perceives it as a lonely, homeless woman with a golden veil, who draws it loosely and walks slowly, almost reminding us of the ubiquitous Byronic beauty as a parallel. Again, in a different context, he describes the overcast clouds at the Padma bank and writes that the clouds are scattered over the boundless river and from the mysterious interior of the river it seems a sublime goddess of light emerges in silent glory and the grey clouds above the paddy fields crouch like an immense lion that waits submissively—as if defeated by the power of this divine figure. These words weave a tapestry that has an uncanny verisimilitude with the paintings Tagore created later, where the scenes capture something ethereal, beyond the obvious. The three paintings (Figures 7, 8 and 9) can be seen as examples of the golden clouds touching the horizon and the trees and a nuanced use of darkness. The following two paintings can be seen

as examples of the golden clouds touching the horizon and the trees.

Interestingly, Tagore feels a strange lonesomeness engulfing nature at times. For instance, in a letter (1894) he describes a harvested field of Patisar as a vast stretch on which the abundance of moonbeams creates an elegiac overtone of universal separation, as if a white-clad woman is swooning over a huge sepulchral tomb, pining and yearning for someone. The painting titled The Last Harvest (Figure 8) can be set as an illustrative example that portrays a landscape in the twilight when the farmers gather after the day's work.

Unlike the observation with the preceding paintings, here, despite the presence of five human figures, the lonely, dark landscape becomes the sole subject of the painting.

Tagore often saw the Padma bank as a horizontal line of treetops that looked like a green cloud of leaves and the union of the land and the water seemed to him like two shy lovers approaching each other with a deep, passionate anticipation.[18] Such a tendency of personifying nature, attaching human attributes to the various natural elements is typically Romantic and is caught as a parallel in many more where we cannot miss the sublimity of Nature that Tagore perceives and translates on his canvas. What is also unmistakable is a stark use of solid colours, viz. yellow, black and dark red and green.

At this juncture, it is necessary to remember *Ranger Rabindranath* (1997)—Ketaki Kushari Dyson and Sushovan Adhikari's neoteric research on Tagore's use of colour and metaphors of colour in his art and literature. There, Dyson, in her attempt to point at the bard's supposed protanopia, gives exhaustive details of his in/ability to use colours and their subtle shades. At one point she refers to the play *Bhagnahriday* and speaks about how Tagore verbalizes '*andhakar*' or darkness. She says: অন্ধকার যে কত রকমের হতে পারে . . . (25) [A loose translation of which would be, that darkness can be of many kinds] and goes on to distinguish between a darkness that is pensive and melancholic, pertained to romantic realization of love and 'chaotic' darkness which even carries a subliminal sense of death. She observes:

বনের আঁধার মদত দিতে পারে মনেরই আঁধারকে। বিষাদ-আঁধার, বিষাদের প্রতিমূর্তি অন্ধকাররাশি, জ্যোতিহীন নয়ন . . . হৃদে একটু আঁধার। . . . (25)

[The darkness of the forest is like an extension of the darkness in the mind. A sad-darkness, darkness like a reflection of melancholy, the dim in the eyes . . . a dark speck in the heart]

Dyson directly asserts this overt metaphorization of darkness as an effect of Keats' poetry on Tagore:

কোন সন্দেহ থাকতে পারেনা, ইংরেজী সাহিত্য এই অন্ধকারচেতনা কে পুষ্টি জুগিয়েছিল, দৃঢ়তা দিয়েছিলো আঁধার-মৃত্যুর কানেকশনকেও।

[There can be no doubt that it is English literature which fed this consciousness of the dark in the poet, thus even cementing the archetypal connection between darkness and death.]

Dyson quotes *Ode to a Nightingale* and reminds us of its impact and impression on Tagore's poetry and how he often admitted his sense of close identification with the poetry of John Keats. According to Dyson:

কীটসের সঙ্গে কবিধর্মে রবীন্দ্রনাথের যে একটা গভীর মিল ছিলো তা যাঁরা উভয় কবির টেক্সটের সঙ্গে পরিচিত তাঁরা ভালোভাবেই জানেন। . . . দুই কবির মধ্যে একটা গভীর সাদৃশ্য আছে বলেই রঙের ব্যবহারের ক্ষেত্রে এঁদের মধ্যে যে সূক্ষ্ম তফাৎটুকু ধরতে পারা যায় তা প্রণিধানযোগ্য। . . . লক্ষণীয় কীটস কত স্বচ্ছন্দেই—এবং যথাযথ ভাবে বর্ণনায় টেনে আনেন গোলাপি, লাল, বেগনী রঙের বিভিন্ন শেডদের। ঠিক এই জিনিসটাই রবীন্দ্রনাথে আমরা পাচ্ছিনা।

[Rabindranath's profound similarity in poetry with that of Keats is well known to those who are familiar with the texts

> of both the poets. . . . Precisely therefore, the subtle difference in their use of colour is also reckonable. . . . It is to be noted carefully how easily—and aptly—Keats draws out the different shades of pink, red, purple in his description of nature. This is exactly what we do not get in Rabindranath]

Contextually, a few examples of such *nisarga* and Tagore's memories are necessary to cite here. It would be rather simplistic to define and write off the subjects of Tagore's landscape paintings to be just so—they capture a vision beyond the visible, where his perception fuses with the reality; where the scene from memory enlarges to accommodate something surreal, which hints at a much larger, mystic vision. As Ahmed Rafique puts it:

> গ্রামবাংলার নিসর্গ সৌন্দর্য্যকে . . . দেখার মধ্য দিয়ে প্রকৃতির অন্তর্লোকেরও যে রূপ তাঁর কাছে ধরা পড়েছিল তারই চিত্ররূপ প্রতিফলিত করতে চেয়েছেন রঙে, তুলি-কলমের টানে।[19] (139)
>
> [In the rural beauty of Bengal Tagore viewed an inner living world which he tried to reflect on his canvas with his colours and brushstrokes.]

Tagore then tries to realize this vision on the canvas through a style which is a kind of dystopic portrayal of that perception. The distinct absence of details itself emerges as a basic feature of his paintings. Bandyopadhyay almost resonates Dyson and goes further to hint at the presence of a sublime Being:

> রবীন্দ্রনাথের ছবির সাধারণ লক্ষণ—পুঙ্খতা-বর্জন এখানেও উপস্থিত। গাছপালা মাটি জল কোথাও কোনো details নেই। গাছের শাখা, পাতা, ফুল এমন-কি যাকে বলে কনস্ট্রাকশন অনেক সময় এ-সব কিছুই নেই, কিন্তু প্রাণ-সঞ্জীবিত একটা আস্ত গাছের জীবন্ত উপস্থিতি অনুভব করা যায়।[20]

> [A general observation common about Rabindranath's paintings is an absence of intricate details in them. The trees, land, water—nowhere can be seen an iota of detailing. In the indistinguishable branches of a tree or a leaf or a flower—which can be called a construction of aspects is not there. However, what one cannot miss is a sensuous perception of a full-sized living entity of a tree beyond the painted element.]

Contextually, he also quotes a German connoisseur's appraisal of Tagore's paintings, following the exhibition at Gallerie Moeller, Berlin in 1930: "New visions were seized in his pictures that descend to the depth, to the origin, of which the reality of the world is only a feeble copy, reflected light".[21]

On a different note, this form of art that Tagore created gets justified in its conscious contravention of established styles like expressionism, surrealism, automatism despite dabbling with almost all of them. He seemed to be seeking the same spiritual freedom even through his strokes and brushworks, and his paintings would defy any structure, measure or calculation. His strokes are spontaneous and automatized, capturing a kind of urgency, a frenzy to attain something which he has been visualizing beyond the scene, which is that "harmonious wholeness" that makes its way "through our eyesight into imagination".

Despite "grotesque", "bizarre", "sinister", "abysmal" and "haunting" being the commonly acquired epithets by which Tagore's paintings are described, we must also remember that the same is what Albrecht Dürer once said of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings: that nothing like them was ever "seen before nor thought of by any other man." (End note 22) It can only be a manifestation typical of a mystic's way of retrieving memory and pouring his personality into it, in a different medium.

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Remembrance of Things Past: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and the Landscape of Nostalgia

Shirsha Gooptu

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* examines the precarious balance between public and private memories and how memory is tinted with self-deception, guilt, pride, and nostalgia. The novel is structured as the first-person narrative of Stevens, the elderly butler of Darlington Hall near Oxford, who undertakes a six-day excursion into the English West Country—a journey that takes him through Salisbury, Dorset, Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall and finally ends in Weymouth. While a first-person narrative generally creates an impression of authentic utterance, Ishiguro's novel subverts this idea and shows how a first-person narrative can reveal as well as conceal things. Born in Nagasaki, Ishiguro deftly uses the premise of post-war dilemmas as the launching ground of the novel. He explained his interest in first-person narrators in an interview where he stated: "things like memory, how one uses memory for one's own purposes, one's own ends, those things interest me deeply."[1] Ishiguro's novel is as much about unreliability as it is about the conflict "between the public and the private personae, between professional and human duty, between the facade of duty and the expression of emotion."[2] This paper will explore the crossover between and gradual dismantling of two significant arenas in the novel—the landscape of memory within which Stevens's self-deceptive narrative unfolds, and the landscape of mythical England against which the complex political turmoil of the inter-war period is juxtaposed.

The frame story is set in 1956. Stevens is the ageing butler of an English stately home, once the residence of Lord Darlington, now

the property of a rich American. Encouraged by his new employer Mr. Farraday, Stevens takes a short holiday in the West Country. His private motive is to make contact with Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper at Darlington Hall during its great days between the Wars, when Lord Darlington hosted unofficial gatherings of high-ranking politicians to discuss the political crisis in Europe. Stevens embarks on the journey with the ostensibly professional purpose of bringing back Miss Kenton. However, the journey lays bare the undercurrent of his repressed desires, and as he travels, he recalls the past.

Stevens's self-deception operates in situations involving three characters to whom he is closely related: his father, Miss Kenton, and Lord Darlington. The narrative of Stevens's memory trip acts as an exposure of the repressed values that unravel at the end of the novel, on the sixth day of his journey. As the story progresses, he reveals to the implied reader and to himself more and more details that destabilize his previous positions. At the end there are two strains which work simultaneously and almost antithetically within Stevens's mind: the need to "redress" his culpability in the scheme of things and the wish to "reject remorse"[3] and make do with the 'remains of the day.'

One of the prominent features of the narration of self-deceiving characters exemplified by *The Remains of the Day* is their vacillation between elusiveness and authenticity. On the one hand, Stevens acknowledges that his recollections may not be entirely accurate: "It is possible this is a case of hindsight colouring my memory";[4] or "it is hard for me now to recall precisely what I overheard."[5] On the other hand, he is reluctant to acknowledge any details that can undermine his stated version of events. For example, Stevens's affection for Miss Kenton remains in the background until the last chapter. The word 'professional' becomes an important trope in the narrative. Stevens's actions throughout the novel—his omissions, misrepresentations, and evasions—point towards the fact that his self-

imposed garb of professional diligence severely obstructed his ability to exercise his free will, and that he curtailed his life to fit into the template of a perfect butler. Thus, the word 'professional' becomes "either a disguise for other, more emotional motives or a defense for his strangely unemotional behaviour."[6] While he explicitly justifies his visit to Miss Kenton as motivated by professional reasons and interprets certain statements in her letter as evidence of her desire to return to her former position, it becomes increasingly evident that he is also driven by personal motives, and that his interpretation of her letter is a projection of his unarticulated hopes. There is also a certain defensive tone in Stevens's discourse. His frequent use of phrases such as "let me make perfectly clear" and "I feel I should explain" signals his attempt to validate his actions and defend the values that have shaped him, but they simultaneously betray his growing uncertainty about those actions and values. Thus, the discourse of Stevens, according to Kathleen Wall, indicates "something of the preoccupations that have urged Stevens to undergo this narration, and consequently reveal many of the biases inherent in his interpretation of events."[7]

Stevens's unreliability is also seen in the conflict between the scenes he narrates and the interpretations that he assigns to those scenes. The discrepancy between the actual events recounted in the novel and Stevens's commentary on them is due to the value Stevens places on the concept of 'dignity'—a quality which "requires him to repress any feelings that are not 'professional,' or that do not accord with his duty to his master, or that reveal a momentary lapse from perfect dignity."[8] Stevens illustrates his notion of professional dignity and prowess through anecdotes about the restraint exhibited by a butler when faced with a tiger, or about the way in which his father dealt with certain arrogant guests. However, Stevens problematizes this idea by holding on to this definition of dignity even in moments of personal crisis. The restraint his father exercises during the visit of the general whose incompetence is responsible for the death of Stevens's brother indicates "a denial of personal feelings so extreme

as to be disturbing—especially as a model for conducting one's life."[9] Yet Stevens sees this as an exemplary demonstration of dignity and professionalism, and his comments highlight a fundamental conflict between the public and the private man: "The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: . . . he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of 'dignity.' "[10]

During his days of driving, Stevens's mind travels into the past, indulging his recollections of the glory days of Darlington Hall in the 1930s when Lord Darlington hosted many highly important foreign visitors on secret political missions. By adopting dignity as his primary value and by abandoning this facade only when he is entirely alone, Stevens proceeds on a path of self-abnegation that precludes any emotional or personal response to moments of crisis. His preconceived idea of dignity hinders his ability to express or analyse his feelings immediately following the death of his father. He avoids dealing with this emotionally difficult situation under the pretext of urgent professional duties. The fact that he grieves is only implied through the passing comments of Young Mr Cardinal and Lord Darlington, and Stevens dismisses his visible distress as "the strains of a hard day."[11] This displacement of personal commentary onto other characters who make note of Stevens's emotions is repeatedly observed in the narrative. According to Wall, "Stevens in some way acknowledges his grief precisely through the reports of others, largely because such reports will not violate his sense of dignity or decorum or will not tear the fabric that he has erected between his private and professional selves."[12] Likewise, after Miss Kenton receives the news of her aunt's death, Stevens notes his failure to offer her his condolences despite his evident concern for her.

Rather, he reprimands Miss Kenton on her failure to execute her professional duties.

While the transitory nature of memory allows omissions, its persistence is seen through the vivid recollection of crucial incidents. For Stevens, the most significant incident is the pivotal conference held at Darlington Hall in 1923. When Lord Darlington asserts his belief that the Treaty of Versailles is overly harsh on Germany and destructive to peace in England, he expresses a personal opinion about a public event. However, the solution that he offers later in the novel is ironic because it proposes the creation of a dangerously hierarchical system of power: "Germany and Italy have set their houses in order by acting.... Look at Germany and Italy, Stevens. See what strong leadership can do if it's allowed to act."[13] This situation, when placed against the backdrop of the Second World War, exposes Lord Darlington's collusion with the Nazi regime, and Stevens's failure to challenge these views makes him complicit in this scheme. The major objective of the 1923 conference is to convince the French delegate, Monsieur Dupont, to speak in favour of relaxations in the Treaty of Versailles during the official conference to be held later that year. The public and the private histories also come together as Stevens experiences this important juncture of national history while his father is on his deathbed. Lilian R. Furst draws attention to Stevens's disproportionate remembrance of "two problems that occur simultaneously on that evening: the blisters on the feet of M. Dupont... and the death of his father."[14] Stevens puts his obligations as a butler over any personal feelings he may have and recalls that evening with "a large sense of triumph" because of his ability to execute his professional duties perfectly in the midst of a grave personal crisis.[15] Seeing the night in the light of his success as a butler and through the lens of his notion of professional dignity allows Stevens to avoid any sense of guilt over his neglect of his father. His pride in his professional success also veils his moral complicity

in the events unfolding in the political arena. The narration again proves unreliable because Stevens fails to admit certain feelings.

There are two things which dilute the effects of Stevens's behaviour. One is his documented ignorance of world affairs and hence of the implications of Lord Darlington's dealings with the Nazis. The other more dominant and immediate one is his unswerving loyalty to his master, which he sees as a prerequisite of his employment. Even when Stevens is told that "the Nazis are manoeuvring [Lord Darlington] like a pawn," he adheres to his standard response: "It is not my place to be curious about such matters."[16] A butler's duty, he reiterates, "is to provide good service. It is not to meddle in the great affairs of the nation."[17] Even when Lord Darlington orders the dismissal of the two Jewish housemaids, Stevens's conduct is geared towards his fixed notion of how a great butler should behave. His decision to cling to his chosen role prompts Miss Kenton to ask, "Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you have to *pretend*?"[18] Steven's compliance effectively becomes a tacit endorsement of Lord Darlington's orders as well as a symptom of his complicity and consequent moral degeneration.

Stevens's unwavering loyalty to Lord Darlington is challenged by his public denial of his association with his former employer during the trip. In the episode at Mortimer's Pond, Dorset, Stevens conceals his previous association with Lord Darlington. Later, he justifies his stance, which further reinforces the oscillation in his constructed narrative. As David Lodge puts it, "The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter. . . . The narrator of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel is not an evil man, but his life has been based on the suppression and evasion of the truth, about himself and about others. His narrative is a kind of confession, but it is riddled with devious self-justification and special pleading, and only at the very end does he arrive at an understanding of himself—too late to profit by it."[19] The psychology

of Stevens's unreliability is complicated, as highlighted by Ishiguro: "He ends up saying the sorts of things he does because somewhere deep down he knows which things he has to avoid."[20]

The novel is anchored in the year 1956, which marks the decisive decline of British power. Ishiguro juxtaposes the days of imperial glory with its decline through Stevens's narrative. At the advent of his journey, Stevens's definition of dignity is presented as a corollary of his time, as he associates it with a complete lack of emotional demonstration. He further draws a parallel between the dignity of the perfect butler and the greatness of the English landscape, with its corresponding lack of excessive or "unseemly demonstrativeness."[21] For Stevens, Lord Darlington's position and demeanour epitomize the idea of greatness. His association with Darlington Hall marks his association with the greatness of England. Stevens views the world not as a hierarchical ladder but as a wheel, with the great houses of England forming the hub of the wheel. Thus, he perceives his unquestioned loyalty to Lord Darlington and his professional excellence as his personal contribution towards the building of the nation. The baggage of such an idea prevents Stevens from identifying the larger resonances of Lord Darlington's actions. As Stevens undertakes his journey at the dawn of the empire's decline, the residues of the past still actively work in the associations he makes. Mr. Farraday's propensity towards banter seems to be a burden for Stevens, and this illustrates his fixed adherence to "an antiquated mode of conduct as well as of speech."[22] Stevens' rootedness in the idea of being a perfect butler hinders his ability to recognize changes in the political climate.

Ishiguro brings in the idea of the old country house in his post-war fiction to subvert what he calls the "nostalgia industry."[23] The country house represents the glory of the past and a sense of historical continuity, which had little resonance in the fragmented aftermath of the Second World War. The only fixture of the country

house is the butler, Stevens, who is unable to let go of a past that has lost its anchorage. He stands as a remnant of a bygone era. In Ishiguro's words, "there is an enormous nostalgia industry going on with coffee table books, television programs, and even some tour agencies who are trying to recapture this kind of old England. The mythical landscape of this sort of England, to a large degree, is harmless nostalgia for a time that didn't exist."[24] The intersection of past memories and present changes in the political milieu provides Stevens with a space that illuminates the "diachronic quality of history."[25] He looks at his present through the shades of the past, and this creates a conflict between his former life of unwavering allegiance to an illusory idea and his gradual movement towards self-realization in the present. In differentiating between mourning and melancholia, Freud defined melancholic identification as a process of becoming the object of loss to compensate for the loss.[26] Stevens's trajectory exemplifies this melancholic identification. His allegiance to the past glory of the British empire and to Lord Darlington as the embodiment of British ideals forces him to reconstruct the past. As a remnant of the past, Stevens emulates and upholds those values as a yardstick and stunts his life to fit into the mould of his fabricated narrative. Even when he is in the employ of Mr. Farraday, he harps on the absence of the necessary functions of dignity in this new regime, because dignity is inextricably linked to Lord Darlington in Stevens's mind.

Stevens's loyalty to Lord Darlington and his activities as a butler in Darlington Hall are based on a form of misinterpretation. As the narrative progresses, it is increasingly evident that Lord Darlington is morally compromised, but Stevens chooses to overlook this. Furst notes that "it is not only time that is scrambled in [Stevens's] set of memories but also levels of significance."[27] When he elaborates on the meeting between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop that is facilitated by Lord Darlington at Darlington Hall, he glosses

over the seriousness of its political ramifications, choosing instead to focus on the remembered lustre of the perfectly polished silver. His relationship with Miss Kenton is premised on a similar ground of misrepresentation. His misreading of Miss Kenton's letter as an expression of her desire to return to Darlington Hall is in reality his own way to seek anchorage in a past which is absent. Throughout his recollection, he establishes their relationship in terms of professional co-existence. His framing of relationships within set boundaries is a result of his concocted definition of dignity. His final meeting with Miss Kenton punctures this narrative too.

The crucial episodes in Stevens' life are sandwiched between his effort to justify them and his nostalgic yearning for a past which he relentlessly pursues as a driving force for his present and future actions. Ishiguro depicts Stevens's interaction with Harry Smith in the last leg of his journey as a deliberate challenge to Stevens's lofty idea of dignity. While Stevens's notion of dignity involves self-erasure and submission to authority, Harry Smith defines dignity in terms of freedom, equality, and democracy:

> "That's what we fought Hitler for, after all. If Hitler had had things his way, we'd just be slaves now. The whole world would be a few masters and millions upon millions of slaves. And I don't need to remind anyone here, there's no dignity to be had in being a slave."[28]

This statement upends the fundamental premises that have dictated Stevens's life. When his journey finally culminates in his meeting with Miss Kenton (now properly referred to as Mrs. Benn), the latter's remark that "there's no turning back the clock"[29] leaves Stevens with the realization that there is no redressal for his past actions and mistakes that robbed him of the opportunity to be the driving force of his own life. It also becomes clear that the unmistakable

nostalgia for Darlington Hall that Stevens reads in Miss Kenton's letter is actually a self-fabricated narrative.

In an attempt at self-justification, Stevens unconsciously distorts the narrative of his life. Wall notes, "Ishiguro does not suggest that there is something inherently wrong with 'dignity' or 'professionalism'; rather, he suggests that at some point . . . Stevens's absolute adoption of those values forced him to deny parts of himself or parts of his experience, thus shaping his life in ways he now regrets."[30] The final pages that describe Stevens's encounter with the man at the pier bring the narrative together as Stevens arrives at the long-awaited moment of self-realization. He reflects that while Lord Darlington at least "had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes," Stevens lacks the agency to make the same claim for himself.[31] His reflection on the old man's statement that "The evening's the best part of the day" makes him realize that he has to make do with what remains of the day.[32] Ishiguro stated in an interview, "In some political and moral ways, most of us are butlers. By that I mean, even in democratic countries, we find ourselves oddly far removed from the real power . . . So I was attracted to this figure who wanted to be so good at being a butler, everything was about serving his employer. But he thought it was beyond him to question how his contribution is being used."[33] Stevens's journey symbolizes a return of all the things that have been repressed throughout his life. Kathleen Wall, in examining the theories of the unreliable narrator implicit in *The Remains of the Day*, places the word 'truth' in quotation marks and maintains that "Ishiguro foregrounds the problem of 'truth,' perhaps challenging us never to figure out 'what really happened.'"[34] Ishiguro's novel is premised on the tenuousness of memory and how tracing back the past reveals more than it soothes by laying bare one's culpability in the course of events.

NOTES

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2 Kathleen Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," Journal of Narrative Technique 24, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30225397.
3 Amit Marcus, "Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*: The Discourse of Self-Deception," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 4, no. 1 (January 2006): 136, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/244587/pdf.
4 Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (1988; New York: Vintage, 1993), 87.
5 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 95.
6 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 24.
7 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 24.
8 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 25.
9 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 25.
10 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 42-43.
11 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day,* 105.
12 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 25.
13 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 198.
14 Lilian R. Furst, "Memory's Fragile Power in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* and W. G. Sebald's "Max Ferber," *Contemporary Literature* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 540, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27563769.
15 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 110.
16 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 222.
17 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 199.
18 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day,* 154.
19 David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction: Illustrated from Classic and Modern* Texts (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993), 155.
20 Graham Swift and Kazuo Ishiguro, "Kazuo Ishiguro by Graham Swift: Interview," BOMB *Magazine* 29, October 1, 1989, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/kazuo-ishiguro/.
21 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 29.
22 Furst, "Memory's Fragile Power," 542.
23 Allan Vorda, Kim Herzinger, and Kazuo Ishiguro, "An Interview with Kazuo

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25 David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," *Geographical Review* 65, no. 1 (January 1975): 11, https://www.jstor.org/stable/213831.

26 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14), ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953).

27 Furst, "Memory's Fragile Power," 539.

28 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 186.

29 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 239.

30 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 38.

31 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 243.

32 Ishiguro, *Remains of the Day*, 244.

33 TIFF Originals, "Kazuo Ishiguro on *The Remains of the Day* | Books on Film | TIFF 2017," YouTube Video, 53:59, October 5, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1P6c3yomp0.

34 Wall, "*The Remains of the Day* and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration," 30.

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