Postcolonial Ecocriticism: A Study of Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water*,
Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, Robert Barclay’s *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

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Introduction

There is a pervasive belief in the Western academia that environmentalism is a phenomenon peculiar to the rich nations of the North, and that it is essentially a move toward ‘postmaterialist’ values among the people of North America and Western Europe.¹ The American social scientist Ronald Inglehart has thus argued that environmentalism is central to a value orientation that emphasises belonging, self-expression and the quality of life over economic and physical security. A corollary to this thesis is the idea of the absence of any environmental concern among the poorer sections of the postcolonial Third World countries of the global South. Such a belief in the absence or indifference of environmental concerns among the people of the Third World countries becomes clearly evident in, and through, the statement made by the American political economist Lester Thurow in his book The Zero-Sum Society (1980): “If you look at the countries that are interested in environmentalism, or at the individuals who support environmentalism within each country, one is struck by the extent to which environmentalism is an interest of the upper middle class. Poor countries and poor individuals simply aren’t interested.” (qtd. in Guha, Environmentalism... 98) It may be argued, however, that Thurow’s argument is not only environmentally skewed but is also theoretically unfounded since there does in fact exist a vibrant body of both environmental activism and environmental literature in the countries of the global South which amply prove the presence of a distinct environmental consciousness among the people of these countries. As literature gives an imaginative redefinition of various issues at stake, an ecocritical reading of the literature from the postcolonial countries will help one to uncover the varied ignored ecosophical voices of the subalterns of the global South.

Ecocriticism as a form of literary and cultural criticism began to gain prominence in the Western academia in the 1990’s. Simply defined, “ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment.” (Glotfelty xviii) Glotfelty
points out that ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnection between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. Thus ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint. Texts are evaluated for their environmentally useful and harmful effects. Beliefs and ideologies are assessed for their environmental implications. Ecocriticism challenges the human centred discourse to be the sole subject and concern of literature. Thus the specific concern of ecocriticism lies in what Robinson Jeffers calls the shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man, the rejection of human solipsism and the recognition of transhuman magnificence (Jeffers as cited in Brophy 117). Ecocriticism in fact gives increased attention to literary representations of nature, shifting critical focus from social relations to natural relationships, and views the individual as a member of the ecosystemic as well as human patterns of organisation. Ecocriticism, as William Rueckert envisioned, underscores the ecological tenet that “everything is connected to everything else” (108) and attempts “to see literature inside the context of an ecological vision” (105). Most of the early major works of ecocriticism in the 1990’s focused almost exclusively on British romanticism and American nature writing, with particular attention paid to the works of Henry David Thoreau and “became especially identified with the project of reorienting literary-critical thinking toward more serious engagement with nonhuman nature.” (Buell, Ecocriticism... 89) Yet, it is important to note that ecocritical readings of texts are not limited to works self-evidently about nature. Various canonical texts which do not have the environment as their principal themes may also be interpreted ecocritically. As Scott Slovic points out, “there is not a single literary work anywhere that utterly defies ecocritical interpretations” (“Ecocriticism: Trajectories in Theory and Practice.” qtd. in Arnold).
If postmodernism insist that there is no privileged discourse, ecocriticism ends up privileging a particular environmental narrative. Most scholarship theorizing the development of ecocriticism and environmentalism in the West has limited itself to the American eco-theoretical model of scientific conservation and wilderness preservation, a theoretical discourse derived from the Euro-American environmentalism of the 1960s and ‘70s. This cult of conservation and the wilderness preservation advocates a love for the last remains of the pristine natural spaces of the earth and is represented at the activist level by the “deep ecology” movement which favour a “biocentric” attitude to Nature in opposition to an anthropocentric “shallow attitude”. This overt reliance of ecocriticism on the American eco-theoretical model has been subjected to a critique by Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell — the two stalwarts largely responsible for the development of ecocriticism, who argued for the expansion of the range and scope of ecocriticism. Glotfelty, in 1996 pointed out the tension implicit within ecocriticism, when in the “Introduction” to The Ecocriticism Reader she asked “Where are the other voices?”, and went on to argue that “[e]cocriticism has been predominantly a white movement. It will become a multi-ethnic movement when stronger connections are made between the environment and issues of social justice, and when a diversity of voices are encouraged to contribute to the discussion.” (xxv) Similarly, Buell observes: “No treatment of environmental imagination can claim to be comprehensive without taking account of the full range of historic landscapes, landscape genres, and environmental(ist) discourses.” (Writing for an... 08) Despite such noble intentions, both Glotfelty and Buell were to a certain extent unable to accommodate the multiplicity of voices that would have made ecocriticism much more capacious and theoretically rich. While most of the contributors of Glotfelty’s now canonised book The Ecocriticism Reader were Anglo-American, Buell’s The Environmental Imagination “was a broad study of environmental perception, the place of nature in the history of western thought” (01) especially the
“American environmental imagination” (02), with special reference to Thoreau. As one enters into an in-depth study of ecocriticism, one comes across illuminating books by other influential ecocritical scholars such as Harold Fromm, Daniel Payne, and Scott Slovic. Interestingly, all their books try to canonize the same self-selecting genealogy of American writers: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, Wendell Berry, and Gary Synder, giving the impression that ecocriticism is an offshoot of American studies. Authors and environmental issues of non-American nations or people of colour outside the North American continent hardly find a place in these books. The observation of Rob Nixon becomes very pertinent here, for he points out that “we should be careful not to confuse American multiculturalism with international diversity, or assume that the latter flows automatically from the former.” *(Environmentalism and... 244)*

This national self-enclosure of ecocriticism is disturbing. Since a concern for the environment cannot be limited to any particular national or regional zone, ecocritical scholarship should have been much more transnational than any other field of literary enquiry. Instead it ended up being much more parochial, steeped with concerns about North American regionalism. Nevertheless, gradually a growing voice of dissent began to be heard from ecocritics of the postcolonial Third World countries of the global South and later on from critics of the West, who started to point out that the seemingly universal voice of ecocriticism often did not represent the lives or the views about environmental concerns by people from postcolonial countries. Thus Anthony Vital pointed out in 2008 that ecocriticism “has tended to reflect the interests and concerns of the countries of the North.” (87) Other commentators noted too that mainstream American ecocriticism’s focus on the most superficial aspects of the environment only served to concretise the “split between nature and culture that founds structuring antimony even in the face of constitutive and intractable
hybridities.” (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen xx) Postcolonial ecocritical scholars came to argue that there is a considerable difference between the egalitarian environmental concerns of the rich countries and the environmental concerns of the poor countries of the postcolonial Third World. However, while recent scholarship on ecocriticism and environmentalism has located Europe and the United States as the epistemological centres, it has also created the impression that the other countries, particularly those of the global South, due to material or other ideological reasons, have a less focused commitment to an environmentally sustainable future despite the fact that the global South has for long contributed to an ecological imaginary and discourse of environmental activism that is not a derivative of the Euro-American environmentalism of the 1960s and ‘70s. Many scholars involved in the study and teaching of environmental literature continue to look upon literature and environmentalism from the global South as outside of and secondary to the mainstream American ecocriticism; they consider the global South as an exotic new arrival on the scene of global environmental consciousness. Postcolonial ecocritics are also critical about ecocriticism’s fascination about deep ecology being hailed as the spiritual, philosophical, and political vanguard of American and world environmentalism since deep ecology not only fails to understand the dynamics of environmental degradation in Third World countries or countries of the global South but also fails to address more fundamental issues of environmental degradation in the Third World such as overconsumption by the industrialised world and by the urban elites of the Third World, unequal development, resource conflict and the growing militarization. As William Slaymaker argues in his paper “Echoing the Other(s): The Call of Global and Green and Black African Responses”, Black African writers take nature seriously in their creative and academic writing, but many have resisted or neglected the paradigm that informs much of global ecocriticism. Slaymaker points out that superimposing Thoreauvian ecocriticism on postcolonial landscapes are “another attempt to ‘white out’ Black Africa by colouring it
green.” (132) Graham Huggan in his paper, “Greening Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives” expresses his concern that the mainstream American ecocritical movement “[ran] the risk of turning itself into another, late-capitalist form of ‘ecological imperialism’” (702). Further, ecocritical scholars from postcolonial countries point out that an ad-on solution devised in line with Euro-American environmentalism and applied indiscreetly is damaging to the environment of the postcolonial Third World countries. Such a belief is substantiated by the Indian sociologist and environmental thinker Ramachandra Guha’s observation that: “first [...] deep ecology is uniquely American, and despite superficial similarities in rhetorical style, the social and political goals of radical environmentalism in other cultural contexts (e.g., West Germany and India) are quite different; second, that the social consequence of putting deep ecology into practice on a worldwide basis (what its practitioners are aiming for) are grave indeed.” (1989)² Again an obsessive preoccupation with the tenets of deep ecology and wilderness preservation has often morphed into hostility towards humans who for generations have resided within or around the wilderness area. Thus John Muir’s aversion of the “marauding shepherds”, Edward Abbey’s ranting at the Mexican immigrants and even the antipathy of the government forest officials towards the residents of the Sundarbans in India are all evidence of a strain of hostility against subaltern humans running through American environmentalism based on the ethics of deep ecology and wilderness conservation (Guha, Environmentalism... 56). Finally, American literary environmentalism often appears to be hypocritical since it is preoccupied with environmental concerns within its national boundaries only while remaining amnesiac about the environmental concerns abroad. As Rob Nixon points out: “If your frame is Red Rock country, the United States may seem quintessentially a nation of questioners who seek to ‘create rather than to destroy.’ But from the vantage point of the 1 million Vietnamese still suffering the health consequences of Agent Orange, or from the perspective of vulnerable
microminorities in Nigeria, Equador, or West Papua, places where American extraction industry giants like Texaco, and Freeport McMoran run rampant, a reluctance to destroy may not seem as definitive an American value.”(Environmentalism and... 237-238) Thus there are important distinctions between what Lawrence Buell calls “environmental imagination”, something produced by the privileged of the northern hemisphere and what Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Allier calls “environmentalism of the poor” associated with the countries of the global South (Buell, The Environmental... 02; Guha and Alier, Varieties of... 75 ).

It follows from this that there is an urgent need for ecocritical methodologies to be adapted for a rethinking of postcolonial literatures, as well as a recognition on the part of mainstream American ecocritics to rethink in more globally nuanced terms. In order to do this, ecocriticism has to be brought into dialogue with postcolonialism, for it is only this that would make ecocriticism much more accommodating of what Rob Nixon calls “a transnational ethics of place.” (Environmentalism and... 239) Despite postcolonialism and ecocriticism being two unique and separate fields in literary studies, it is a truism that the relationship between the two is one of reciprocal indifference and mistrust. While postcolonial critics remain silent on ecocritical literature and theory, a similar silence characterise the stance of most ecocritics towards postcolonial literature. Mention may be made in this context of Rob Nixon’s essay “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism” which brings out four epistemological gaps between the two fields that have prevented an engagement with each other. Nixon argues that the large number of postcolonial theorists from Homi Bhabha to Edouard Glissant have foregrounded hybridity and cross-culturation as the chief feature of postcolonialism. American ecocritics on the other hand are drawn towards the discourse of purity — virgin wilderness, the remains of the last tracts of untouched wilderness of the earth, a retreat from the social and political pollutions of the modern day
society. Secondly, while postcolonial theory and criticism have largely concerned themselves with issues of displacement, migration and diaspora created as a result of colonialism and globalization, ecocritical theory and criticism have tended to prioritise issues of the ethics of place and belonging. Thirdly, the postcolonial framework is critical of nationalism and favours cosmopolitan discourses of the city and the production of transnational literatures. American ecocriticism on the other hand has limited itself within a parochial framework of wilderness preservation and conservation. Finally, Nixon points out that different models of historiography are followed by postcolonialism and ecocriticism. Postcolonialism tries to exhume the marginalised precolonial past by exposing the machinations of colonial and historical erasures. By contrast, within much of environmental literature, history is often repressed or subordinated to timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature (Environmentalism and... 235).

Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley in their “Introduction” to Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment try to merge the gaps that exist between postcolonialism and ecocriticism as pointed out by Nixon. DeLoughrey and Handley point out that Nixon’s argument about postcolonialism foregrounding hybridity and cross-cultural exchange and American ecocriticism emphasizing a desire for a primordial natural purity is essentially based on Guha’s important critique of deep ecology. Rather, one should also reconsider this schism by foregrounding the complexities of other forms of American ecocriticism, particularly ecofeminism and environmental justice movements that have either critiqued or avoided the dominant American paradigm of the wilderness and natural purity and have turned towards poststructural, urban, cybernetic, and even microscopic spaces of the ecological imaginary. Second, DeLoughrey and Handley indicate that though Nixon argues that the postcolonial framework focuses on the diaspora and displacement created through colonialism and globalisation, one has also to understand that both the positions are integral
to speaking about the history and the phenomenology of the environment. It fact, this helps explain why ecocriticism has been much more attentive to indigenous literatures than postcolonial studies. Third, although DeLoughrey and Handley agree with Nixon that postcolonial studies is embedded in cosmopolitan discourses of the city and the production of transnational literatures in opposition to mainstream ecocriticism which favours wilderness narratives and national literary frames, particularly of the United States, they would like to follow the lead of Raymond Williams and Leo Marx to suggest a dialectic between city and country, culture and nature, and metropole and country. DeLoughrey and Handley cite as examples many postcolonial coming-of-age narratives such as Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* from Zimbabwe and Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack Monkey* from Trinidad which suggest “migration from rural to urban space replicates the alienation of the postcolonial subject from a naturalized homeland, and that while urbanization offers educational opportunities to the protagonist, the very spatial structures of the city often replicate the alienating racial hierarchies of colonialism itself.” (24) Finally, DeLoughrey and Handley accept that different models of historiography are followed by postcolonialism and ecocriticism, but they add that any conception of history that is not contextualized is problematic. DeLoughrey and Handley thus stress that “Nixon’s distinctions are exceedingly useful in pointing us toward general differences between postcolonial and ecocritical methodologies, but we can interpret a land ethic in ways that are not irreconcilable with a historicization of nature.” (24)

Yet, despite these points of departures pointed out by Nixon, one has to nevertheless understand that a mutual engagement between postcolonialism and ecocriticism is essential in order to understand the postcolonial realities of the environment in Third World countries and that being academically myopic to the categories of race, class, gender, colonial and postcolonial (even, neo-colonial) inequities, only serve to marginalise the long history of the
critique by indigenous ecosocialist environmental justice scholars and activists who have repeatedly tried to expose the relation between power, subjectivity and place for many decades. In the “Editor’s Note” to the special issue of *ISLE* in 2007 Scott Slovic hence argues that “[s]ome might find the yoking together of ecocriticism and postcolonialism a bit of a stretch, but I hope this issue of *ISLE* [...] will help to show the value and necessity of this combination of perspectives.”(vi) In line with this, Graham Huggan in “Greening Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives” argues that “postcolonial criticism has effectively renewed, rather than belatedly discovered, its commitment to the environment.” (702) Subsequently in the 2007 issue of *ISLE*, Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughrey collected a number of papers on postcolonial ecocriticism from a wide number of sources ranging from Ramachandra Guha to ecofeminist works to point out that:

“[p]ostcolonial topics [...] should not be viewed as entirely new directions in the field of ecocriticism as much as they represent increased visibility to an western-based audience who is rethinking the limitations of US national frameworks that had occluded other perspectives. To suggest that postcolonial ecocriticism is new is to give a normative status to ecocriticism’s institutional origins without questioning the limitations of its foundational methodologies and focus.” (73)

Christine Gerhardt in her paper “The Greening of African-American Landscapes: When Ecocriticism Meets Post-Colonial Theory.” tries to bring Afro-American ecocriticism in conversation with postcolonialism and argues that “[o]n the one hand post-colonial theory provides very specific critical tools that help to explore the ways in which black literature addresses intersections between racial oppression and the exploitation of nature”, while on the other, “a post-colonial perspective draws attention to the ways in which the questions typically asked by ecocriticism need to be rephrased [...] particularly with regard to discussions of nature and race that do not participate in the very mechanisms of exclusion
they are trying to dismantle.” (516) Byron Caminero-Santangelo in his paper “Different
Shades of Green: Ecocriticism and African Literature” somewhat similarly links African
environmental literature to the politics of decolonisation, a politics which might be
overlooked if read from a strictly mainstream American ecocritical perspective. Upamanyu
Pablo Mukherjee crucially explains how the two fields, ecocriticism and postcolonialism, are
mutually inclusive in order to arrive at our understanding of the environmental conditions of
the global South:

Surely, any field purporting to theorise the global conditions of colonialism and
imperialism (let us call it postcolonial studies) cannot but consider the complex
interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration
with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre,
visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretative importance to
environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social,
historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions
and species. (144)

Postcolonial ecocriticism tries to explore the roots existing between environment and
the empire by bringing environmental histories and colonial legacies in conversation with
each other, which earlier, the mainstream American ecocriticism, for whatever reason did not
feel compelled enough to engage with. Postcolonial ecocriticism gives voice to these
complex conversations since, as DeLoughrey and Handley argue, “to deny colonial and
environmental histories as mutually constitutive misses the central role the exploitation of
natural resources plays in any imperial project.” (10) Postcolonial ecocritics believe that the
landscape of the postcolonial global South stand as a testimony to the violent process of
colonialism; landscapes that have been saturated with the trauma of conquests. Postcolonial
ecocriticism argues that the environmental issue is not only central to European and North
American conquest and domination but that it is inherent in the very ideology of colonialism and imperialism itself. This relationship between imperialism and environmental degradation has been put forward by the British historian Richard Grove in his book, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of the Environmentalisms, 1600-1860*, which shows that “the colonial experience was not only highly destructive in environmental terms but that its destructiveness had its roots in ideologically ‘imperialist’ attitudes towards the environment.” (06) It needs to be noted too that this relationship between landscape and colonialism had been pointed out earlier by the Palestinian scholar Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*:

> Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and brought under control. For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of the locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored... (77)

Some of the earliest conservation practices were instituted outside Europe in the tropics, in the erstwhile European colonies in Asia and Africa. Richard Grove argues that, “[e]arly environmental concerns, and critiques of the impact of western economic forces on tropical environments, in particular, emerged as a corollary of, and in some sense as a contradiction to, the history of the mental and material colonisation of the world by the Europeans.” (*Green Imperialism*... 02) However, such environmental practices had very little to do with love for the environment; rather it was devised but to control the rapid environmental degradation which resulted as a consequence of colonial expansion attended by intensive cash-crop plantation and the clearing of forests for agriculture and ship construction.⁵ Since the material resources of the colonies were important for the survival of the metropolitan centre, conservation practices were established there which in turn also served to screen the colonists’ earlier environmental exploitation. A prominent example of this is the Caribbean
Islands which because of resource exploitation by the British, lost most of its forest area for the commercial cultivation of cash crops such as sugarcane and coffee. As a result of large scale deforestation, a major portion of the islands lost its ability to retain water. The colonial induced drought made the Caribbean Islands heavily dependent on tourism. This is well expressed in Rob Nixon’s wry gloss that, “ironically, a place scarred by a long history of coercive labor and violence has been reinvented as an Edenic retreat where Europeans and North Americans can experience nature as pure — a paradise beyond reach of work and time.” (Environmentalism and... 241) A similar history of environmental degradation may be traced back to the colonial rule over India by the British. The British forest management system in India left the forests of India in a much worse state than they were when scientific forestry had not been instituted. Indeed, as Ramachandra Guha puts it (citing a Scottish forester): “Is it not the case that the history of civilized man in his colonization of new countries has been in every age substantially this — he has found the country a wilderness; he has cut down trees, and he has left it a desert.”(Environmentalism... 28) This is precisely how the contours of current Western environmentalism may be traced back to a period of imperial environmental destruction, of a colonial exploitation which has often been mystified through the invocation of the conservation of a paradiisiacal Edenic landscape. In fact, as DeLoughrey and Huggan points out: “the environmental sciences that tell us that we can no longer afford to ignore our human impact on the globe are an ironic by-product of a global consciousness derived from a history of imperial exploitation of nature [...] Thus the nostalgia for a lost Eden, an idealized space outside of human time, is closely connected to displacing the ways that colonial violence disrupted human ecologies.” (12-13)

Colonial expansion also led to the promotion of the Western discourse of scientific ideas. There is ample scholarship, as DeLoughrey and Handley argue, “demonstrating that Western discourses of nature and environment have been shaped by the history of the
empire.” (10) It all started in the eighteenth century with the European mania for plant collection, especially New World flora, backed by an emerging Western Enlightenment theory which resulted in the production of Carolus Linnaeus’s binomial taxonomy, a hierarchical categorisation of initially the plant kingdom which was later extended to other life forms. Gradually, a new way of mapping the global space was instituted by the imperial powers through the common language of Latin, a process by which the whole planet was biotically reconfigured. This phenomenon of biotic reconfiguration through taxonomic classification has been compared by the Indian scientist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva to the current practice of patenting of life forms and indigenous knowledge by transnational corporations, practices which only produce a “monoculture of knowledge” (Biopiracy 5), which Richard Grove alternatively calls “green imperialism”.

There can be no doubt that the roots of the current environmental concerns of the Third World lie in the fact of European global expansion during colonial times. However, it is important to note that while it is possible to link the issue of environmental concern with the history of empire and imperialism, there has also been an increased necessity felt to study the new forms of environmental concern emerging out in the post-colonial era that explores the relationship between environmental degradation and neocolonial and neoliberal orders. Although colonialism has formally come to an end with the end of World War II, informally it inaugurated a period of more intensive and sustained exploitation of the erstwhile colonies. Edward Said makes just this point when in Culture and Imperialism he argues that the “Westerners may have physically left their old colonies in Africa and Asia, but they retained them not only as markets but as locales on the ideological map over which they continues to rule morally and intellectually.” (27) Later in history, with the end of the Cold War, the balance of global power shifted increasingly from the Europeans to the North Americans, chiefly the United States — a nation which has come to be regarded in recent times as the
vanguard of modern environmentalism, but ironically which “has done far less than one might reasonably expect to protect the global environment but far more than it could possibly have hoped to ‘reinvent the imperial tradition for the twenty-first century’ (Lazarus 2006: 20) — a country that has actively and aggressively contributed to what many now acknowledge to be the chronic endangerment of the contemporary late-capitalist world.” (Huggan and Tiffin 01) The reinvention of the imperial tradition for the twenty-first century, as cited by Huggan and Tiffin, refer to “a historical condition of intensified and sustained exploitation of the majority of the humans and the non-humans of the former colonies by a cartel composed of their own and ‘core’ metropolitan European/north American elites [...] The globalized ruling classes of this postcolonialism, whose interests are often embodied in gigantic transnational corporations and the labyrinthine world of speculative financial transactions, are often called the new cosmopolitan.” (Mukherjee 06) Rob Nixon likens this to “an era of resurgent imperialism, an era in which — sometimes through outright, unregulated plunder, sometimes under camouflage of developmental agendas — a neoliberal order has widened, with ruinous environmental repercussions, the gulf between the expanding classes of the super-rich and our planet’s 3 billion ultrapoor.” (Slow Violence... 37) Although rarely referred to by American ecocritics, the “chronic endangerment” posed by the U.S to other countries derives from excessive consumption (even of Nature as something that is consumed by the rich elites for their aesthetic pleasure), pollution and the neoliberal forms of globalization, militarization and development. Linda Colley very pertinently remarks that, “We may be living in post-colonial times, but we are not yet living in post-imperial times.” (“What is Imperial History Now” quoted in Nixon, Slow Violence... 233)

One of the central tasks of postcolonial ecocriticism is to contest and not unoccasionally to provide an alternative to the western ideology of development and globalization. Given the history of international model of development that landscapes and
restructures national spaces, the people of the postcolonial nations do not have the luxury to be oblivious of crucial environmental pressures. The various developmental schemes initiated by the IMF, WWF and World Bank such as keeping aside places for conservation projects, resource extraction, the use of agrichemical fertilizer and patented seeds have all radically changed the environment of the Third World. Critics of the Third World see this model of development “as little more than a disguised form of neo-colonialism, a vast technocratic apparatus designed to serve the interest of the West.” (Huggan and Tiffin 27) As De Rivero points out, this myth of development taking false support from the Western Enlightenment ideology of progress and the Darwinian survival of the fittest, enjoins the less ‘advanced’ Southern nations to close the gap with their wealthier counterparts, and in so doing to subscribe to a capitalist growth model that is not only unequal but also has a devastating environmental cost. Vandana Shiva has rightly indicated that in case of the Third World countries, development has been coterminous with industrialization, and that “[t]he dominant model of development and globalization is inherently violent because it deprives the poor of their fundamental right to food, land and livelihoods.” (04)

Greg Garrard in his book Ecocriticism has pointed out that “the relationship between globalisation and ecocriticism [...] has barely been broached.” (178) Globalization literally means a global transfer and accessibility of trade and ideas between and across nations. (Izarali 91) However, “[p]resent day globalization”, as Oswaldo De Rivero argues, “is the result not so much of free global competition among nations, but of a network of agreements and productive and financial activities among the transnational corporations.” (29) De Rivero stresses that in contrast to the erstwhile colonial powers who often tried to balance their national ambitions with their international responsibilities such as the protection of human rights and environmental degradation, the executives of the transnational companies, in conformity with neoliberal policies, do not want to establish any link between their global
negotiations and the devastating environmental problems they cause. (33) A similar sentiment has been expressed by Arundhati Roy through her observation: “I think of globalization like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can’t be seen. Once you get used to not seeing something, then, slowly, it’s no longer possible to see.” (qtd. in Nixon, *Slow Violence...* 01)

Postcolonial ecocriticism has come to explore the environmental repercussions of the American foreign policy, especially the transnational fallout of the American environmental practices, the disproportionate impact of the U.S. global policies and ambitions that have had and are having a serious effect on socio-environmental landscapes internationally. As Rob Nixon argues, U.S. foreign policy has had a long history of reinforcing “asymmetrical relations between a domestically regulated environment and unregulated environment abroad” (*Slow Violence...* 35). This phenomenon he terms “superpower parochialism”, meaning by this “a combination of American insularity and America’s power as the preeminent empire of the neoliberal age to rupture the lives and ecosystems of non-Americans, especially the poor, who may live at a geographical remove but who remain intimately vulnerable to the force fields of U.S. foreign policy”. (*Slow Violence...* 34) A corollary to this “superpower parochialism” is the environmental racism implicit within the U.S. foreign policy. Environmental racism, defined by the American environmental philosopher Deane Curtin is “the connection, in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other” (*Environmental Ethics for a Postcolonial World*, 2005: 145 as qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 04) Huggan and Tiffin defines environmental racism as:

“a sociological phenomenon, exemplified in the environmentally discriminatory treatment of socially marginalised or economically disadvantaged peoples, and in the transference of ecological problems from the ‘home’ to the ‘foreign’ outlet (whether
discursively, e.g. through the more or less wholly imagined perception of other people’s ‘dirty habits’, or materially, e.g. through the actual rerouting of First World commercial waste.)” (04)

This idea of environmental racism is implicit in the words of Lawrence Summers, the President of the World Bank who in 1991 said:

I think the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest-wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that...I’ve always thought that countries in Africa are vastly under polluted; their air quality is probably vastly inefficiently low compared to Los Angeles...Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the Least Developed Countries? (Confidential World Bank memo, December 12, 1991, qtd. in Nixon, Slow Violence... 01)

Lawrence Summer’s argument for the migration of the dirty industries to the least developed countries is in line with the economic logic of neoliberalism where transnational corporations try to internalise profits and externalise risks. Summers, through his toxic distribution argument doubly discounted the peoples of the Third World countries: he claims that they do not possess an environmental concern of their own, and he literally ignores the peoples of Third World as human entities. Thus one of the corollaries of postcolonial ecocriticism is that in case of the postcolonial Third World countries of the global South, social and environmental issues are so interlinked with each other that there can be no environmental justice without social, political and cultural justice.

It needs to be emphasised, however, that an understanding of all this is not to dismiss the bioregionalism or the ethics-of-place environmentalism outrightly. Rather, the intention is to bring into public visibility the environmental realities and aspirations of the poor citizens of the postcolonial global South whose environmental concerns were henceforth
overshadowed by a misanthropic, xenophobic, racially blinkered, jingoistic and amnesiac celebration of wilderness, which despite positing itself as planetary was grossly inadequate to address the environmental issues of the Third World. Again it has to be understood that while postcolonial ecocriticism is distinct from mainstream American ecocriticism, there are also certain areas of overlap.

The four chapters of this thesis cover a number of connecting themes which points out not only the heterogeneity and plurality but also the internal complexity of the environmental issues extant in the global South. They involve the application of an everyday environmental perspective, a regarding of the conflicts arising out of the unequal distribution of environmental resources, a concern for environmental justice, a recognition of an environmentally destructive colonial past, and an appreciation of an equally threatening postcolonial environmental present. All these in totality may help to ground and de-exoticise the reading of the postcolonial environment in literature. Specific themes have been highlighted in each chapter; but taken together they present a picture of the reality of the environment of the global South. The following pages of this thesis will try to explore how three postcolonial novelists, viz. Helon Habila, Indra Sinha and Amitav Ghosh individually and collectively present a picture of the postcolonial environment of some of the countries of the global South — countries like Nigeria and India in particular. This thesis also tries to explore how Robert Barclay, the American novelist (American by birth but brought up in the Marshall Islands), by presenting the realities of the postcolonial environment of a country like the Marshall Islands attests to the arguments of the postcolonial ecocriticism in general, and to the perception of the other three postcolonial novelists in particular. The texts selected for study in this thesis are not only written by authors from diverse countries — India, Nigeria and the Marshall Islands but also reflective of diverse issues. The aim of this study is to bring into conversation the diverse environmental realities of the marginalised countries of
the Third World and to accommodate their voices into the mainstream of ecocritical
discourse. By the term “environment(al)” this thesis will refer, in line with Lawrence Buell’s
proposition, to both “‘natural’ and ‘human-built dimensions of the palpable world’” (Writing
for an... 03) Although the selected texts do count as environmental literature according to
Lawrence Buell’s definition of the environmental genre, what is of paramount importance is
that the readings of the texts are themselves environmental.6

Notes

1. The term ‘postmaterialism’ was first coined by American social scientist Ronald
Inglehart in his book The Silent Revolution: Changing values and Political Styles Among
Western Publics (1977).

2. “In the context of American environmentalism, there are at least two legitimate
claimants to the ‘radical’ label. The first is the strand in the wilderness movement known as
‘Deep Ecology’. This dates its origin to an essay published in 1972 by the Norwegian Arne
Naess, which called for environmentalists to embrace an ethic, termed biospheric
egalitarianism that would place humans on a more or less equal footing with other species. 
Biospheric egalitarianism would be truly ‘deep’ ecology, in contrast to the ‘shallow’ ecology
which concerned itself merely with pollution or resource depletion without going to the roots
of the ecological crisis. Recast in philosophical terms, this can be stated as the distinction
between anthropocentrism, the belief that humans stand apart and above the rest of creation,
and biocentrism, which rejects a human-centered perspective by looking at history from
perspective of other species and nature as a whole.” (Guha, 84-85, 2000)


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CHAPTER I

Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water: Environmental Justice, Social Justice, Micro-
minority Rights and the Politics of Oil in the Niger Delta.*

The year 2005 came with a surprise when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to
Wangari Maathai, an environmental activist from Kenya, Africa. Wangari Maathai was the
cofounder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya which helped women in Kenya to develop
tree nurseries and plant trees in order to combat the rapid deforestation which the country was
grappling with. In a way Maathai and the Green Belt Movement played an important role in
the fight against Daniel arap Moi’s kleptocratic regime which was plundering the country’s
natural resources and thereby putting at risk both the future of the country and its citizens for
private gains. Maathai’s memoir *Unbowed* gives a narrative shape to her vision of a social
and environmental regeneration of Kenya. Maathai’s attempt may be assumed to be almost a
rejoinder to the assertions of the American political economist Lester Thurow, made some
time earlier when he pointed out that “environmentalism is an interest of the upper middle
class. Poor countries and poor individuals simply aren’t interested.” (*The Zero-Sum Society* as
qtd. in Guha, *Environmentalism...* 98) However, Maathai was not the lone figure or the first
African to put forward the environmental cause of Africa. Even earlier, as early as in 1992,
Ken Saro-Wiwa along with his supporters was protesting against the environmental and
human rights violation in the Nigerian Delta. Saro-Wiwa was an African novelist, poet,
memoirist and essayist who in such of his writings as *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni
Tragedy* (1992) and *A Month and A Day* (1995) was recording the tragedy of the
environmental realities of Nigeria. Surprisingly, even though both Maathai and Saro-Wiwa
were active at a time which saw the rapid greening of the Humanities throughout the world,
especially in North America and Europe, the writings of both failed to find a place in the
ecocritical canon. One reason for such exclusion might be that the writings of both failed to show any debt either to Thoreau and the wilderness preservation tradition, or to that of Jeffersonian agrarianism. Instead, the often fraught relationships between pollution, environmental justice, social justice and resource distribution animated their writings. Hence, both Maathai and Saro-Wiwa were left behind and (as Rob Nixon aptly put it), “bracketed as African, the kind of writer[s] best left to the postcolonialists.” (Environmentalism and... 234)

In a way, both Saro-Wiwa and Maathai’s literary endeavours marked a move away from the centre, an attempt to carve out a niche of a distinct tradition of environmental literary discourse from Africa since the dominant ecocritical paradigm of Thoreau or Robinson Jeffers was not suitable for the voicing of the environmental aspirations of the Africans. Saro-Wiwa and Maathai’s writings raised the bare and stark environmental realities of the Africans never shown before, and often offered much required solutions. In his paper, “Towards an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and Life & Times of Michael K”, Anthony Vital argues about the necessity of developing an African ecocriticism:

[T]here is no good reason not to develop an African ecocriticism, one which engages in debating what a society’s assigning of significance to nature (in varieties of cultural products) reveals both about its present and past. Such debate, by opening to question the ways modernity in African contexts transforms human relations with nature and, as a result, the impact of societies on natural environments, would join the struggle to enable social worlds find more equitable, sustainable, and healthy ways of inhabiting their place — as well as strengthening historical self-understanding ... Ecocriticism, if it is to pose African questions and find African answers, will need to be rooted in local (regional, national) concerns for social life and its natural environment.

This chapter is an attempt to study the novel Oil on Water by the Nigerian novelist Helon Habila in the light of ecociticism and to understand how various socio-political, historical and
environmental realities are intertwined in Nigeria. The purpose of this study also extends to our examination of the cause for not only a Nigerian but also a distinct African ecocritical discourse.

Born in 1967, Helon Habila is a Nigerian novelist and poet. Habila worked for the magazine *Hints* and later with the newspaper *Vanguard* as its literary editor during the initial days of his career at Lagos. Habila won the Music Society of Nigeria (MUSON) poetry prize in 2000 for his poem “Another Age”. The year 2001 saw the publication of his first collection of short stories titled *Prison Stories*. “Love Poems”, one of the stories of this collection received the prestigious Caine Prize for African Writing which launched him into the international literary limelight. His debut novel *Waiting for An Angel* came out in 2002 and was an elaboration of his earlier collection of short stories and which won him the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize of the Africa Region. In 2005, Habila was invited by Chinua Achebe to become the first Chinua Achebe Fellow at Bard College, New York. Two years later Habila’s second novel *Measuring Time* was published in 2007, and this was nominated for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, the Dublin IMPAC Prize, and went on to win the Virginia Library Foundation Prize for fiction in 2008. His third novel *Oil on Water* was published in 2010. The novel became an international bestseller and was nominated for a number of literary awards such as Pen/Open Book Award (2013), Commonwealth Best Book Africa Region (2012) and The Orion Book Award (2013). Apart from writing novels, Habila also edited a number of anthologies including the British Council’s *New Writing* (2005), *Dream Miracles and Jazz* (2006), and *The Granta Book of African Short Story* (2011). Habila is also a board member of African Writers Trust, an organization started by the Ugandan writer Goretti Kyumuhendu for the promotion of the African writer and African writing. Habila has also served as the contributing editor to the *Virginia Quarterly Review* since 2004. Currently, Habila is working on a forthcoming novel, tentatively titled *The Fortress*. 
Habila’s debut novel *Waiting for An Angel* (2002) was originally written in the form of a series of short stories, the first of which titled “Prison Stories” won him the Caine Prize for African Writing. The novel is set in the chaotic and brutal political environment of Nigeria in the 1990’s under the despotic regime of the military dictator General Sani Abacha. The novel follows the story of Loomba, a quixotic, apolitical student in the capital city of Lagos who is apparently more interested in soul music, girls and the lyric novel that he is writing in his shabby tenement of Poverty Street than in the political environment of his country. Loomba also works as a journalist covering the arts for a city newspaper *Dial*. But gradually the circle of the incidents around him grows tighter and tighter, and he along with his friends and colleagues find themselves in the midst of a number of disturbing and politically violent incidents. The repressive Abacha regime cracks down all forms of personal and social freedom leading to a crackdown on the media, arbitrary arrests and brutal quelling of all forms of protest. Loomba’s roommate is brutally attacked by soldiers, journalists are arrested all over the city, the *Dial* offices are set on fire, and his first love is forced to marry a rich but old man. His neighbours in Poverty Street plan to hold a demonstration protesting against the violence all around them, and Loomba decides to take part in this pro-democracy protest which ultimately leads to his arrest and imprisonment for three years without trial. In the novel, through his narrative, Habila blurs the distinction between fact and fiction and much of the novel has both a documentary and an autobiographical feel. His reference to real life events, especially the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa, lends the novel both immediacy and authenticity.

Habila’s second novel *Measuring Time* (2007) is much broader in scope than his earlier novel and tells the story of a village Keti in Nigeria, right from its conversion to Christianity by white missionaries, through its political disturbances in the present day. The novel is based on the stories of the twin brothers LaMamo and Mamo who grows up in the
comfortable home of their widowed father Lamang, a prosperous cattle merchant who is bent on carving out for himself a prestigious political career. But, Lamang is an unloving and indifferent father and both the brothers want to escape their village and war seems to be the best way for them to attain fame and glory. But while LaMamo is an energetic and vigorous youth who acts before he thinks, and who runs away to join the war brewing in the neighbouring countries, Mamo who has inherited congenital sickle cell anaemia is unable to accompany his brother and stays back at home. With time he becomes much more reflective and withdrawn from his surroundings. For almost a decade LaMamo travels across Africa participating with various rebel groups in the war while Mamo becomes a village school teacher in history. While LaMamo’s horizons broaden temporally as his understanding of politics is effected by his first hand experience of violence and death in the wars, Mamo’s mind stretches to take in temporal considerations of history and its relevance to contemporary events. LaMamo’s infrequent letters to Mamo gives him an idea of the complexities and perils of African nationalism. Habila juxtaposes the story of Mamo’s intellectual growth along with the story of Lamang’s self-destructive ambition. Mamo’s life takes a change when he contemplates about what history really means and how history should be written — as he comes to realise that history is much more about people than about geography. Thus the village Keki becomes a microcosm of Nigeria composed of multiple cultures, languages and people. In a fascinating story within a story, when Mamo is invited to write the biography of Mai, the local chief, Mamo realises how history in the wrong hands may become political propaganda. The novel ends with Mamo’s resolution to write the biography of his people — the story of their survival, through their interaction and communication with other cultures and their respectful and peaceful assimilation.

In *The Granta Book of African Short Story* Habila presents a vivid collection of diverse short stories from across the continent of Africa — from Morocco to Zimbabwe,
Uganda to Kenya. Contrasted to the earlier volumes of African short stories, Habila in his book gives space to newer writers to create a picture of a new and more liberated Africa. The book includes stories by new African writers such as Fatou Diome, Aminatta Forna, Manuel Rui, Patrice Nganang, Leila Aboulela, Zoe Wicomb, Alaa Al Aswany, Doreen Baingana, and E.C. Osondu. These writers are characterised by their engagement with issues of the wider world offered by the opportunities of post-apartheid era, the end of civil wars and dictatorships and the possibilities of free movement.

In *Oil on Water* Habila continues the dialogue he had left behind in his first novel *Waiting for An Angel*, a novel that had been based in the 1990’s during the regime of the despotic leader Sani Abacha, who was accused of siphoning out huge amount of Nigerian resources with the help of his State military and in collusion with the transnational oil companies. Abacha did not allow any democratic protest from any section of the public and any note of dissent from anywhere was dealt with the utmost severity. Thus journalists were routinely arrested, jailed and tortured as was the central character of *Waiting for An Angel*. The narrative of *Oil on Water* begins almost ten years after *Waiting for An Angel* ends. In the oil rich and environmentally devastated landscape of the Niger Delta, Isabel Floode the wife of a British oil engineer has been kidnapped, and held for ransom by a rebel group which is supposedly fighting for the protection of the environment of the Niger Delta. They issue an open invitation to the country’s media. Rufus, a young and energetic journalist with an uncertain job future and Zaq, an alcoholic but once a veteran reporter, accepts the challenge to go on in search of Mrs. Floode. However, even after nine days of their leaving Port Harcourt they fail to get in touch with either Mrs. Floode or her kidnappers. While the other journalists in their group give up, Rufus and Zaq continue with their search upstream in a small canoe looking for clues about those who might be holding Mrs. Floode.
This journey into the heart of darkness is narrated mainly by Rufus as he sees everything for the first time — the environmental devastation wrought by the oil companies in the otherwise fertile Niger Delta on which the lives of thousands of people living in the region depend. Rufus gives graphic descriptions of the oil pollution in the region as he comes across sights of abandoned villages, burnt out villages, entire villages bought up by the oil companies, devastated by their pollution, and the often hellish existence of the locals caught up between the rebels and the government soldiers. Rufus’s meeting with the military chief and with the Professor — the chief of the rebel groups operating in the Niger Delta — gives an idea about their point of views regarding the unofficial war that is going on in the region on issues of the environment and resource distribution.

The narrative through temporal shifts, shifts back and forth in time, thereby giving readers a portrait of the real condition of Nigeria. In the middle of their journey into the heart of darkness, Rufus also reminisces and introspects about his own past, about how he became a journalist thereby opening up the scope of the story and indicating how the common people of Africa continue to live their lives under a corrupt and oppressive government. As the novel progresses, Rufus starts to slowly uncover the mystery behind the kidnapping. His interview with the husband of the kidnapped woman gives Rufus the point of view of an oil engineer, an insight into the horrors of the oil drilling in the region, even as it sheds light on the string of incidents which led to the kidnapping of his wife. The story of his fellow journalist Zaq, who is almost twenty years older than Rufus, gives the readers an idea about the cultural and political evolution of Nigeria from 1980 to 1990.

The novel ends inconclusively, almost in the vein of the continuing stagnation of the socio-political situation of the Niger Delta with Rufus returning to the husband of Mrs. Floode with new messages from the Professor and new conditions set for the release of Mrs. Floode. But Habila’s novel though apparently written about the journey of two journalists in
search of the kidnapped wife of a British oil engineer is in reality an exploration of the continuous environmental degradation of the Niger Delta.

Ecocriticism was and still is, with varying degrees of plausibility, a distinctly North American and Eurocentric literary and cultural movement which often failed to realize the environmental aspirations or the environmental concerns raised by non-North American or non-European postcolonial texts. A writer like Helon Habila whose rise to fame on the literary stage has mainly been during the last ten years, has often been either eluded or ignored or relegated to the periphery with reference to both the issues he has raised in his novels, or for an ecocritical approach of his writing. Hence, in looking at *Oil on Water*, a novel that has not yet been subjected to an ecocritical inspection, this chapter will draw on social studies which may not focus on Habila’s works *per se* but may provide significant leads into the socio-political, cultural, economic and environmental background on which his works are based.

In a paper titled “Rethinking Militancy and Environmental Justice: The Politics of Oil and Violence in Nigerian Popular Music” Ogaga Okuyade explains how Nigerian popular music has repeatedly been given to the Niger Delta Question. Okuyade explains that for more than three decades Nigeria has remained in the world news not because of her oil wealth, nor the rise in the nation’s index for human or infrastructural development, but because of the Niger Delta Question. The Niger Delta is the most marginalised geopolitical zone in Nigeria but because of the huge oil wealth the region has given birth to immense wealth on one hand and abject poverty on the other. The media has often been preoccupied with the Niger Delta Question, but it seems to have forgotten that the main aim of the concern was with the easing of the infrastructural development in the region and with the articulation of the idea of ecological and human justice. Only too often was the media distracted by the idea of militancy itself and not concerned with the cause of the doubly marginalised people of the
Niger Delta. Okuyade’s essay examines how popular music in Nigeria has become the new site for political activism offering by the Nigerian populace an alternative hegemonic space and position, thereby engaging both the society and the government on the pressing postcolonial and environmental issues of Nigeria, especially the Niger Delta Question.

In another paper “Shifting the Center: A Tradition of Environmental Literary Discourse from Africa”, the author Byron Caminero-Santangelo tries to understand the memoir *Unbowed* by the African environmental activist Wangari Maathai as an example of what Lawrence Buell calls “indigene pastoral”. Caminero-Santangelo examines whether such a memoir merely signals a new direction in the area of African indigenous pastoralism or if it voices a distinct environmental concern. He points out that Maathai’s work is in line with a distinct tradition of African pastoral writings which has often eluded the attention of many ordinary readers. Although just like any other pastorals, the earlier African pastorals written mainly during the anticolonial period do not refer to any specific environmental concern as they have “more to do with reinvention of the non-European world as a mirror-opposite of certain European norms” than with “actual environments” (Lawrence Buell as quoted in Santangelo), the environmental issues inherent in them can no way be dismissed. Thus Santangelo finds in African literature a tradition of environmental literary discourse as opposed to the often assumed position of the West that literature from Africa is devoid of any environmental sensibility as such.

In the chapter “Pipedreams: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Environmental Justice and Micro Minority Rights” in the book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* Rob Nixon tries to understand the issue of environmental concerns in such far off and less developed countries like Nigeria. His arguments go a long way to show that environmentalism is not a full stomach phenomenon affordable only to the rich or the upper middle class of a society. The poor have their own concerns for the environment which are
much more imminent and rooted in reality. Nixon tries to understand the environmental concerns and realities of the Niger Delta, and especially the environmental realities faced by the people of Ogoniland in Nigeria. Nixon focuses on Saro-Wiwa’s career as an environmental activist and his writings since Nixon feel that he was the “first African writer to articulate the literature of commitment in expressly environmental terms.” (Slow Violence... 109) He focuses on how Saro-Wiwa through his environmental activism and writings waged a crusade against the exploitation by the Nigerian government and the government backed transnational companies, thereby voicing his concern for environmental and social justice and the micro minority rights of the people of the region.

In the absence of any substantial criticism of Habila’s Oil on Water, this chapter will therefore attempt to study how Habila in this novel has constructed an environmental narrative that draws together narratives of environmental concerns in contemporary Nigeria with the social, political and historical realities of the region. In consonance with Santangelo’s argument, it would be plausible to argue that Habila’s text is not the first in the African tradition to explore environmental issues in Africa. Rather, Habila’s Oil on Water is in line with the tradition of an environmentally rich literary discourse which was in existence in Africa ever since the colonial period. Thus, Habila’s environmental narrative can justifiably be connected even to literatures of Negritude during the 1930’s or anticolonial African texts such as Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958), Okot p’Bitek’s Song of Lawino (1966)/Song of Okol (1967) and Ngugi wa Thiongo’s A Grain of Wheat (1967).

Many would argue that literatures of Negritude and that works by Achebe, Bitek and Ngugi can hardly be categorised as environmental texts, and that the purpose of literature during Negritude may “usually be explained in terms of counter narrative: the effort to create stories challenging imperial representations in which Africa is defined by negation — the absence of history, development, civilization, and so forth — and in which the coming of the European
conqueror represents the advent of a proper ordering of (wild) nature”, (Santangelo 149) and that texts by Achebe, Bitek and Ngugi “prioritise the task of decolonizing culture and psyches in newly independent African nations; they remain focused on social justice, on lived environments and livelihoods, as well as on the relationships among constructions of nature, environmental practice, and structures of power and ownership. They pay little attention to nature and its protection apart from such concerns.”(Santangelo 150) However, to subscribe to such views would be to support a form of ecocriticism informed by narratives of mainstream environmental activism from the West that has created a dichotomy between Man/Nature. But, if one is to judge from the point of view of the “environmentalism of the poor”, a discourse that does not assume a division between Nature/Culture, these texts being designated as environmental would seem less outlandish since these texts focus on the zones of intersection between social justice and environmental justice.\(^2\) The struggles depicted in these texts are as much about struggles for environmental justice as they are about struggles against poverty, development and class. It is also precisely this ecocritical narrative of the intersection of social justice and environmental justice that ties Habila’s environmental narrative with the environmental narrative of texts from other parts of Africa. Such an ecocritical understanding of Habila’s text will not only usher in a change in perception of the environmental issues in Africa but will also help to bring into dialogue issues about what constitutes a proper environmental text.

It will be difficult to understand the environmental issues in the Niger Delta, issues which Habila tries to focus on in his novel, without an understanding of the history of the environment and the history of oil in Nigeria. The Niger Delta region is one of the most densely populated regions not only in Nigeria but also in Africa. Nigeria’s total population of 134 million consists of around 300 ethnic groups, the chief among which being the Abribas, Andonis, Edos, Effiks, Gokanas, Ibibios, Ejaws, Ika-Ibos, Ikwernes Isekiris, Isokus,
Kalaboris, Urhobos and Ogonis. Each of these ethnic groups is often divided into different kingdoms. The language spoken by each of the ethnic groups of the kingdoms is often different and is not understood by people from other kingdoms and groups. These ethnic groups have been living in the delta region for the last five hundred years and have evolved a culture that maintains an intimacy with the nature of the region, a connection both physical and spiritual. The traditional lifestyles of these peoples include fishing in the river and cultivating yam and cassava on the land. While the land is fertile and fit for agriculture, the cultivation of crops is done for subsistence and not for profit since for the people of the region the land and the water is much more than a source of food, being instead the living source of their culture and religion. Problems however started when the delta region began to be explored and exploited for the commercial exploration for oil and gas by a number of transnational companies. As Andrew Rowell, James Mariott and Lorne Stockmann explain in their study *The Next Gulf: London, Washington and Oil Conflict in Nigeria*, the exploitation of oil and gas in the Niger Delta dates back to the early part of the twentieth century when an extensive development scheme was launched by the British colonial administration in Lagos and overseen by the Colonial Office in London. (53, qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin) The scheme was initially tied to the lucrative business of the palm oil, rubber and timber industries in the region which helped to consolidate the colonial monopoly that was central to the oil exploration in the region. The official exploration of oil in the north of Lagos was begun by the German-owned Nigerian Bitumen Company, but it became an exclusive British interest after the defeat of Germany in the First World War (Huggan and Tiffin 36). The colonial government gave concessions to foreign companies for the exploration of oil in the region, and in 1936 a joint venture company was formed, the two main players of which were Royal Dutch Shell and British Petroleum (BP), who later on claimed a monopoly over Nigerian oil. Though the Second World War brought oil exploration in the region to a temporary halt,
explorations for oil resumed in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. To the Shell-BP conglomerate, the colonial government was more than a favourable government since the interest of Shell-BP in Nigeria and that of the British state were intertwined. Huggan and Tiffin argue that the exploration of oil in Nigeria had been “a political process from the very beginning, and there was the clearest of mutual dependencies between colonial financial and legal backing and the geological search.” (36-37) Even after the independence of Nigeria, Shell continued to dominate the oil production. A subsidiary of the Shell Oil Company, the Shell Petroleum Development Corporation, continues to produce almost 50 percent of Nigeria’s crude oil and controls almost 60 percent of the country’s oil producing lands. Despite an attempt by the military government in the 1960’s to indigenise the oil industry, an initiative that led to the setting up of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, the control of the oil industry has remained in the hands of the transnational corporations, especially Shell. The importance of oil in Nigeria’s economy is paramount. Oil accounts for almost 90 per cent of Nigeria’s export earnings and 80 per cent of the Federal Government’s total revenues. (Huggan and Tiffin 37) Moreover, following upon the discovery of oil, Nigeria has become a leading player in the global energy industry — Nigeria being the tenth largest oil producing nation in the world. With the ongoing crisis in the Middle East, key customers such as the U.S started relying highly on Nigeria for meeting their demands of energy. USA alone accounts for more than a 40 percent purchase of Nigeria’s oil. (Huggan and Tiffin 37; Nixon, Environmentalism... 234)

Because of the oil drilling in the Niger Delta there have been severe environmental consequences. The oil companies built pipelines across the farmlands and in front of homes; there were oil spills from the pipelines that polluted the farmlands and waters, and people were forced to live along with the constant flaring of gases. This devastating environmental assault smothered the farming lands of the people with oil, killed fishes and other aquatic life
in the river, made ground water toxic and unfit for drinking, and introduced acid rain in the 
area which further damaged the environment. The United Nations has declared the Niger 
Delta as one of the most endangered river deltas in the world. As Rob Nixon Argues:

Shell’s racism is manifest in Africa; the company waives onshore drilling standards 
that it routinely upholds elsewhere. Indeed 40 percent of all Shell oil spills worldwide 
have occurred in Nigeria [...] A 1995 World Bank report noted that 76 percent of the 
natural gas resulting from petroleum production in Nigeria was flared, while in 
Britain only 4.3 percent and in United States a mere of 0.6 percent was flared. This 
toxic practice foreshortened the life expectancy of the delta people [...] In the mid- 
90s, when flaring from Nigeria’s oil fields was pumping 12 million tons of carbon di 
oxide into the atmosphere annually, it was argued by some that this was the single 
greatest contributor worldwide to climate change. (*Slow Violence...* 113)

Thus the people of the region, who were chiefly dependent on their land and water for their 
living have been forced to face severe economic and health consequences. Since more than 
80 percent of the government revenue of Nigeria comes from oil exports, the government 
showed little interest to curb the insensitivity shown by the transnational oil companies to the 
Nigerian environment, to the country’s delta people and to life.

After suffering environmental abuse for more than thirty years, small grassroots 
protests started to form across the Delta. The first organised and visible movement against 
this environmental abuse was initiated by the Ogoni poet and novelist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 
1990 under the banner Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). Other 
factors which intensified the movement were the closure of the communal land decreed by 
the 1979 constitution and the government’s reduction of revenue allocated to state and local 
authorities. The MOSOP drafted an Ogoni Bill of Rights demanding environmental justice 
and protesting against the allocation of oil revenues. Saro-Wiwa organised a peaceful protest
of around 300000 people in 1993. However, the protest was severely dealt with by the then military regime of Sani Abacha. Saro-Wiwa was arrested and held without trial on charges of murder in 1995. This was the consequence of his organising of his community to stand up against the environmental abuse of their homeland by the transnational companies, chiefly Shell and Chevron, and his demanding of environmental justice and compensation for his people’s lost farmland and fisheries. Although the military Abacha regime of Nigeria came to an end in 1998 and was replaced by a democratically elected government, there has been no visible change in the environmental conditions of the people of the delta region. Only, the earlier peaceful protests have often been replaced by violent protests demanding environmental justice and resource control.³

“Forget the woman and her kidnappers for a moment. What we really seek is not them but a greater meaning. Remember, the story is not always the final goal [...] The meaning of the story, and only a lucky few ever discover that.” — says Zaq, the seasoned reporter to his fellow young journalist Rufus in Habila’s Oil on Water. Zaq’s words though uttered almost as a passing reference, as a piece of advice given by a mentor to a novice, are important words, for a critical study of Habila’s text would reveal that though on the surface the novel describes the adventurous journey by two journalists in search of the wife of a British oil engineer kidnapped by the militants, what the novel in fact is about is an exploration of the broader realities of the environment and the people of the Niger Delta region in Africa “who are trying to protect their environment from greedy multinational oil companies.”(Habila 135) Responding to a critique that Oil on Water was so politically loaded that it had thrown the narrative of the environment to the periphery, Habila retorted:

I did not want to make much of a political novel. I wanted to carry the reader into the landscape that’s being destroyed and show people who are also being destroyed. The big people — the oil companies and the government — that are in the background.
You have a sense that they are there, always pulling strings. But I wanted to draw attention to the environment and the people who are living on that land and who are really suffering. (“Rivers of Oil and Blood: PW Talks with Helon Habila”. Web.)

In his novel Habila clearly tries to look into the issue of the environment, in the Niger Delta through his depiction of the experiences of the ethnic minorities of the region who are barely visible even on the global economic periphery, communities who are pitted against the mighty transnational oil companies working with maximum governmental impunity. *Oil on Water* indicates how environmental justice can be of paramount importance. In a very real sense, the novel focuses on the unending struggle between the micro-minorities and macro-multinational oil companies in the region. Habila tries to fit in this novel a series of otherwise apparently ill-fitting series of causes — an African commitment to environmental and human rights, minority rights and the slow violence faced by the people of the region as a result of the environmental pollution by the multinational oil companies which Saro-Wiwa succinctly termed “ecological genocide”.

Just like a typical African pastoral, Habila’s novel describes the simple, pristine and beautiful life of the people of the Niger Delta living in harmony with nature prior to the arrival of the oil industries. Wandering in search for the kidnapped wife of the British oil engineer Zaq asks Chief Ibiram, the chief of the local village, about whether he and his people were happy living there. The Chief tells him that while they had once lived a happy and peaceful life in their land, at present their existence has come to be threatened again and again with the advent of the oil industries in the region:

Once upon a time they lived in paradise, he said, in a small village close to Yellow Island. They lacked for nothing, fishing and hunting and farming and watching their children growing up before them, happy. The village was close–knit, made up of
cousins and uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters, and, [...] they were happily insulated from the rest of the world by their creeks and rivers and forests (Habila 38)

Chief Ibiram also recounts how the oil companies set up oil stations one after another in their neighbouring villages and islands, and how with every passing day the oil-company men accompanied by the important political leaders of the time mounted pressure on the then head chief, Chief Malabo, to sell whole villages to the oil-company. The people were either politically pressurised to sell their lands or tempted with promises of their sons being sent to Europe and America for a better future. But, the people of the villages, who were attached to their lands, rejected such offers. To the people of the region the landscape of the region was intimately connected with their own identity:

This was their ancestral land, this was where their fathers and their fathers’ fathers were buried. They’d been born here, they’d grown up here, they were happy here, and though they may not be rich, the land had been good to them, they never lacked for anything. What kind of custodians of the land would be if they sold it off? And just look at the other villages that had taken the oil money [...] Their rivers were already polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grew only gas flares and pipelines...

(Habila 39)

Implied here is a vision of not only a prelapsarian, reciprocal and non-exploitative relationship to the land but also an environmental ethic that has a concern for an immediate environment which is responsible for survival and sustenance. There is a parallel to Habila’s description of this enchanted relationship between the people of the region and their environment in the language of holistic ecology penned by Ken Saro-Wiwa in *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy*:

To the Ogoni, rivers and streams do not only provide water for life — for bathing, drinking, etc.; they do not only provide fish for food, they are also sacred and are
bound up intricately with the life of the community, of the entire Ogoni nation.

(Quoted in Huggan and Tiffin 43)

*Oil on Water* indeed shows that the people of the Niger Delta shared not only a physical but also a spiritual relationship with their land and rivers. But the oil-company men continued with their task of sample collection in the village despite numerous protests from the villagers against environmental pollution. The confrontation between the villagers and the oil men is described well in the novel. One day after a brief skirmish between the village people and the oil-company men, Chief Malabo was arrested by the government soldiers. After the death of Chief Malabo in captivity, the oil company men, assisted by the government soldiers, occupied the village as per a claimed contract that the oil-company men had signed with Chief Malabo before his death. This narrative of the environmental plunder of the village of Chief Malabo is clearly indicative of the collaborative plunder carried out throughout the rest of the Niger Delta by the transnational oil companies.

One of the other ideas that Habila presents through *Oil on Water* is that in present day Nigeria, environmental justice and social justice are so intricately related that it is difficult to separate the one from the other, i.e., there can be so social justice without environmental justice and environmental justice remains incomplete without social justice. This was a concern foregrounded by Habila in an interview:

It’s one of the biggest wetlands in the whole world, the Niger delta. It’s a really beautiful place, and it’s systematically being destroyed by the activities of the oil company. It’s such a waste, such a shame that it’s happening. And for what? It’s for money, it’s for oil. It is the duty of the government to protect the country and the environment, and they are not doing that because they get money from the oil companies. (“Rivers of Oil and Blood: PW Talks with Helon Habila”. Web.)
Habila here unambiguously blames the joint collusion of the Nigerian government with the oil companies for bringing about the social plight and environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. In *Oil on Water* Habila graphically depicts widespread pollution and degradation of the environment of the delta, and he describes the region as a “ruined, decomposing landscape” (Habila 55). The pollution resulting from the oil industries becomes clear from the very beginning of Habila’s novel:

No, it was not a pipeline accident, as I told the white man, as I wrote in my published piece. But it might easily have been one, like in countless other villages. (Habila 03)

Habila gives vivid descriptions too of the paraphernalia of the oil drilling process in the villages of the delta affected by pollution:

The village looked as if a deadly epidemic had swept through it. A square concrete platform dominated the village centre like some sacrificial altar. Abandoned oil-drilling paraphernalia was strewn around the platform; some appeared to be sprouting out of widening cracks in the concrete, alongside thick clumps of grass. High up in the rusty rigging wasps flew in and out of their nests. A weather-beaten signboard near the platform said: OIL WELL NO. 2. 1999.15, 000... Behind one of the houses we found a chicken pen with about ten chickens inside, all dead and decomposing, the maggots trafficking beneath the feathers. We covered our noses and moved on to the next compound, but it wasn’t much different: cooking pots stood open and empty on cold hearths; next to them stood water pots filled with water on whose surface mosquito larvae thickly flourished. It took less than an hour to traverse the little village, going from one deserted household to the next, taking pictures, hoping to meet perhaps one accidental straggler, one survivor, one voice to interview. (Habila 08)
As the reporters Rufus and Zaq move along the river, they come across on the river water sights of “dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots.” (Habila 09) This visual of the consequences of general oil pollution witnessed by them is replicated equally in the next village:

The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and fragrant stench, the barrenness, the oil slick, and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return, In village centre we found the communal well. Eager for a drink, I bent under, mossy pivotal beam and peered into the well’s blackness, but a rank smell wafted from its hot depths and slapped my face; I reeled away, my head aching from the encounter. Something organic, perhaps human, lay dead and decomposing down there, its stench mixed with that unmistakable smell of oil. At the other end of the village a little river trickled towards the big river where we had left our boat. The patch of grass growing by the water suffocated by a thin film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker’s hands. (Habila 09)

The area is so polluted that even the Doctor at the Major’s camp finds the place to be “a dead place, a place for dying” (Habila 90). Even a place such as the Irikefe Island, a place where the worshippers live in, “a holy community”, and whose only purpose “is to bring healing, to restore and conserve”, (Habila 137) has not been able to keep itself aloof from such environmental damage. Gloria, the nurse helping Rufus and Zaq points out that “These islands used to be a big habitat for bats; now only a few dozen remain here and there […] She wordlessly turned and pointed at the faraway sky, towards the oil fields. — Gas flares. They kill them. Not only bats, other flying creatures as well.” (Habila 129) Oil on Water describes
too the omnipresence of the oil paraphernalia and the pathetic condition of the delta
landscape as Rufus thinks about the kidnapped lady, Mrs. Floode:

what could fate possibly want with her on these oil-polluted waters? The forsaken
villages, the gas flares, the stumps of pipes from exhausted wells with their heads
capped and left jutting out of the oil-scorched earth, and the ever-present pipelines,
criss-crossing the landscape, sometimes like tree roots surfacing far away from the
parent tree, sometimes like diseased veins on the back of an old shrivelled hand, and
sometimes in squiggles like ominous writing on the wall. Maybe fate wanted to show
her first-hand the carcasses of fish and crabs and the water birds that floated on the
deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by
the oil her husband was helping to produce. (175)

The social consequences resulting from the operation of the oil industries in the
Niger Delta as shown in Habila’s novel include the displacement of the inhabitants of the
region, the gradual poisoning of the land and even of the major body of the people of the
region as a result of the toxins released by the oil stations. Habila underlines the fact that the
discovery of oil had resulted in a kind of pseudo-growth that does not take into consideration
either the environment of the region or the well-being of the people living there. The novel
makes the point that the people endemic to the region had been displaced time and again to
make way for oil prospecting in the region. In response to Zaq’s question to Chief Ibiram
about whether they were happy living in that region, Chief Ibiram recollects about how life
was blissful earlier when they lived in close proximity with nature and how the advent of the
oil stations changed their entire landscape of their village and island as they had to face
repeated displacements:

The rigs went up. And the gas flares, and the workers came and set up camp in our
midst, we saw our village change, right before our eyes. And that was why we decide
to leave, ten families. We didn’t take their money. The money would be our curse on them, for taking our land, and for killing our chief. We left, we headed northwards, we’ve lived in five different places now, but always we’ve had to move. We are looking for a place where we can live in peace. But it is hard. So your question, are we happy here? I say how can we be happy when we are mere wanderers without a home? (Habila 40-41)

What Habila stresses here is the social violence that accompanies environmental violence. As the oil rigs permeate the landscape, one becomes a migrant, a refugee in the very land one had been born and brought up in. This forced spatial relocation kills men and women both physically and spiritually. In Oil on Water Habila in fact tries to explore the realities of the form of displacement which Nixon has ecocritically called “displacement without moving” (Slow Violence... 19), a process “that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable.” (Slow Violence... 19) If there have been environmental protests registered across the world, there have also been protests against displacement without moving, since with the loss of the land, the knowledge systems which helped people to sustain themselves in that part of the land became dysfunctional rendering it impossible for the people both culturally and economically to sustain their life even in other parts of the world. This notion of frequent displacement due to the rising toxicity of the river comes out in the discussion set out in the novel between the old man and Chief Ibiram:

I couldn’t understand their words, but I imagined they were speaking of the dwindling stocks of fish in the river, the rising toxicity of the water, and how soon they might have to move to a place where the fishing was still fairly good. (Habila 17)
One of the social curses of the booming oil economy in Nigeria was the result of the predatory alliance between the state and the oil companies in the form of growth without development for the local people. It is a fact that the oil economy in the Niger Delta is structured in such a way that the people residing in the resource exploitation area do not receive any benefit. On the contrary their land is continuously despoiled as a result of oil pollution. Habila describes in *Oil on Water* how the excitement among the villagers at the prospect of economic alleviation because of the setting up of oil station near their land proves to be destructive in the long run:

Yes, just on the edge of the village, by the water, there was oil in commercial quantities. The villagers feasted for weeks [...] And a year later, when the livestock began to die, and the plants began to wither on their stalks, I took samples of the drinking water and in my lab I measured the level of toxins in it: it was rising, steadily. In one year it had grown to almost twice the safe level [...] More people fell sick, a lot died [...] Almost overnight I watched the whole village disappear. (Habila 91-93)

Habila describes the environmental violence raging across the Niger Delta landscape, a form of violence which Rob Nixon terms “slow violence”. In his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon calls for a reconsideration of the conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act, as something that is event focused, time bound and body bound. Instead, Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” (2) The Nigerian government preferred to ignore all such environmental violence as if it was the price to be paid for development. Such developments represented by the physical presence of oil installations in the Niger Delta represents a promise of growth on the one hand while on the other the ground realities of the resource
control excluded the locals from the benefits of oil-related modernity. Such exclusion and marginalization often resulted in oil vandalism by the locals. Mr. Floode, the oil engineer of the British oil company describes in one place in *Oil on Water* how through such acts of vandalism the locals had effectively stalled the progress and development not only of their own community but also that of the state: “Our pipelines are vandalized daily, losing us millions...and millions for the country as well. The people don’t understand what they do to themselves...” (Habila 107). However, Rufus contradicts him by pointing out the socio-environmental realities of region:

Well, this place, Junction, went up in smoke because of an accident associated with vandalism, as you call it. But I don’t blame them for wanting to vandalize the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning the farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it but doesn’t have the will to stop it, the oil companies know it, but because the government doesn’t care, they also don’t care. (Habila 107-108)

Rufus, though a professional journalist, cannot help but express his reservations against the gross environmental violations committed by the oil companies as he reflects about the fate of Mrs. Floode:

what could fate possibly want with her on these oil-polluted waters? [...] Maybe fate wanted to show her first-hand the carcasses of fish and crabs and the water birds that floated on the deserted beaches of these tiny towns and villages and islands every morning, killed by the oil her husband was helping to produce. (Habila 175)
Habila in *Oil on Water* shows too that as a result of this gross socio-political and environmental degradation, there had emerged protests from the locals which evolved from being non violent to violent, protests to regain the land which the communities claimed belonged to them and which was lost to them by the machinations of the Nigerian State and the oil companies. The genealogy of this protest is linked to the narratives of belonging articulated by the local communities, and so when Zaq meets the rebels in the prison of the Major’s camp and asks them about the whereabouts of the kidnapped woman, one of the rebels answers back to him:

Is that all you want from me, to tell you whether some foreign hostage is alive or not? Who is she in the context of the war that’s going out there, the hopes and ambitions being created and destroyed? Can’t you see the larger picture? [...] We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand. (Habila 148-149) These words of the rebel explain how “the narratives of belonging and ownership of natural resources are reshaping the politics of claim making in many communities of the Niger Delta, and also how the politics of claim making is reshaping the politics of belonging.” (Adunbi 293) “[T]he larger picture”, referred to by the rebel indicates the reality of the terrorization by the transnational oil companies and the Nigerian State of not only the delta landscape but also its people. The novel indeed shows how the delta people are treated very much as dispensable. But together with this, Habila also introduces an argument about the propriety of the use of violence in the struggle for environmental justice. He shows in his text that on the one hand there is the environmental violence on an epic scale unleashed by the oil companies on the delta landscape and its people, the killing of the delta people in an unconventional way — by environmental means. Ken Saro-Wiwa’s words are extremely relevant here:

The Ogoni country has been completely destroyed by the search for oil...Oil blow-outs, spillage, oil slick and general pollution accompany the search for oil...Oil
companies have flared gas in Nigeria for the past thirty-three years causing acid rain...What used to be the bread basket of the delta has now become totally infertile. All one sees and feels around is death. Environmental degradation has been a lethal weapon in the war against the indigenous Ogoni people. (Ken Saro-Wiwa, interviewed on Without Walls: The Hanged Man---Nigeria’s Shame, Channel 4 (UK), November 15, 1995, qtd. in Nixon, Slow Violence... 110)

There is a clear definition of genocide by the United Nations: anything done to destroy a group of people. Now if you take the Ogoni case for instance, you pollute their air, you pollute their streams, you make it impossible for them to farm or fish, which is their main source of livelihood, and what then comes out of their soil you take entirely away and you say we will give you 1.5 percent or 3 percent, but we are not giving it to you [...] Now, if more people in Ogoni[land] are dying than are being born, if Ogoni boys and girls are not going to school, not primary not secondary, if those who manage to scale through [sic] cannot find jobs; if when they find jobs they don’t get promotion because promotions don’t even go by any standards at all, then surely you are leading the tribe to extinction. Ogoni people are going extinct.

(Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy, qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 42)

The plight of the Ogoni stand for the plight of all Niger Delta people, subjected to the losing combination of environmental and social justice. In addition to the environmental violence by the oil companies there is the violence used by the Nigerian army on the local communities to protect the commercial interest of the oil companies. The oil company Chevron has accepted transporting Nigerian forces to quell uprising in the oil camps in the Rivers State. Shell has imported arms for the Nigerian police, paid retainers for Nigerian army personnel, and made boats and helicopters available to them for using them against protesters. This vicious nexus between the Nigerian state and the oil companies, all part of the “militarisation of
commerce”, (Ake, qtd. in Graham and Tiffin 37) becomes explicit in a Nigerian government memo; December 5, 1994: “Shell operation still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activity and commerce.” (Quoted in Nixon, Slow Violence... 101) Habila gives expression to such acts and policies of ruthlessness by the Nigerian army against anyone in the Niger Delta protesting the despoliation of their lands. Talking to Rufus, the Major of the army describes the way he treats the rebels:

    I know these people. I’m the one who can handle them, the only one. They understand only one language: force. That’s all [...] You journalists, with your fancy ideas about human rights and justice... all nonsense. There are no human rights for people like them... The best thing is to line them up and shoot them. But, you people...” (Habila 97)

As a result of this use of violence by the Nigerian state and the oil companies, the locals protested, and often through violent means, and because of such use of violence by the locals they have often been labelled as militants and hostage takers. Habila clarified this issue in an interview:

    I care about the environment and I care about Nigeria, my country. People are taking up arms to fight the government over the land. You find that because of the activities of some of them, there is a tendency to dismiss all of them as criminals and thugs. Even if they are criminals, they are doing criminal things, what about the land?

(“Rivers of Oil and Blood: PW Talks with Helon Habila”. Web.)

Habila in Oil on Water gives voice to “their side of the story” (Habila 98), the story of those misfortunate locals trapped in an environmental nightmare because of the collusion between the neo-colonial Nigerian State and the transnational companies. Habila ends up showing tacit support to the cause of those people. In his novel he thus clarifies that the Professor — the leader of the militant group — “wasn’t a madman who shot people for fun” (Habila 207),
and that “he used to work for an oil company, and one day he grew disgusted with the environmental abuse and became a militant to fight for change.” (Habila 96) Talking to Rufus the Professor claims:

We are not the barbarians the government propagandists say we are. We are for the people. Everything we do is for the people, what will we gain if we terrorize them? I am speaking for myself and my group of course. I am aware that, out there, there are criminal elements looting and killing under the guise of freedom fighting, but we are different. Those kind of rebels, they are our enemies. That is why I am letting you go, so you can write the truth. (Habila 209)

The Professor points out that through their struggle they “will make it so hot for the government and the oil companies that they will be forced to pull out.” (Habila 208-09) He asks Rufus to write about ‘the truth’ when he returns back to the capital city of Nigeria:

Write only the truth. Tell them about the flares you see at night, and the oil on the water. And the soldiers forcing us to escalate violence every day. Tell them how we are hounded daily in our own land. Where do they want us to go, tell me where? Tell them, we are going nowhere. This land belongs to us. That is the truth, remember that. (Habila 209-10)

The Professor’s discourse on the environmental condition in the Niger Delta thus reverses the branding of the protesters as militants. The oil companies working in collusion with a vampire state become instead the real hostage-takers and militants, because it is they who have taken the environment of the Niger Delta hostage. This is the true meaning of the story which Rufus learns.

Thus does Habila’s Oil on Water explore the complex environmental realities of a postcolonial country like Nigeria where the issue of environmental justice is intimately linked to issues of basic human rights and social justice. The novel underscores the fact that
struggles for environmental justice are as much a struggle against environmental degradation as they are struggles against poverty and racism. Habila’s discourse in this novel constitutes a profound challenge not only to the concerns of mainstream Western environmentalism but interrogates global patterns of development that have only precipitated growing inequality, violence and pollution.

Notes


2. “Environmentalism of the poor” is a term used by Joan Martinex-Alier and Ramachandra Guha to contest the unequal distribution of natural resources and the environmental fallout of economic growth. The term is often used to understand the environmental realities of the global South. For details, see, *Environmentalism: A Global History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000 and *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998


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CHAPTER II

Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People: Corporate Inhumanity, Environmental Justice and the Toxic Narrative.

As the site of perhaps the “charismatic mega-trauma of recent globalization”, (Mahlstedt 59) the Bhopal Gas Tragedy that took place in the Indian city of Bhopal in 1984 is generally regarded as the world’s worst industrial disaster (Khare 12; Morehouse 475) and as the “Hiroshima of the chemical Industry.” (Morehouse 475) Given this, and despite the well researched, well documented and the heroic struggle of the people of Bhopal for justice, it is surprising that Indian literature has shown but little interest in representing the events of that terrible December night of 1984. There has been, however, quite a few popular street theatre, plays, poems and songs — mostly written and performed in Hindi and other non-English Indian languages. There has also been a Hindi film, Bhopal Express (1999) and a historical-drama, Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain (2014). But, it is the non-literary media — be it photography, sculpture or film documentaries that has best responded to the tragedy and its aftermath. Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People which is perhaps the maiden attempt to trace this theme in literature, allows us an opportunity to continue to investigate the environmental realities of postcolonial India.

Born in 1950 of an Indian naval officer and an English writer Irene Elizabeth Phare who wrote under the name of Rani Sinha, Indra Sinha attended schools in India and England before moving to Britain with his family in 1967. He became an advertising copywriter in London with Collett Dickenson Pearse after he failed to persuade the BBC to allow him to make documentaries. During his days as an advertising copywriter Sinha translated into English Vatsyanaya’s Kama Sutra in 1980, the first ever English translation in the West since Sir Richard Burton’s edition published in 1883. This was followed by a monograph on
‘tantrism’, *Tantra: The Search for Ecstasy* (1993). In 1995 Indra Sinha left advertising to pursue his career as a full time writer and began with a non-fictional memoir of the pre-internet generation, *The Cybergypsies* (1999). Sinha published his first novel *The Death of Mr. Love* in 2002 which centres on the notorious Nanavati murder case in Bombay and which led to the abolition of jury system in India. *Animal’s People* (2007), perhaps his best novel and the one through which he rose to fame as a writer, is set in the fictional city of Khaupur and is closely based on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy that struck India on the early morning of 3 December 1984. The novel was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2007 as well as for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award 2009. It won the 2008 Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Region, Best Book). Indra Sinha has been closely associated with the campaigning and fundraising for the poisoned victims of Bhopal since 1993. He also cofounded the Bhopal Medical Appeal which offers free medical assistance for the people affected by gas and water poisoning in Bhopal after the tragedy.

Indra Sinha comes across as a writer whose works are imbued with deep social, political and cultural overtones. His works have often been both appreciated and criticized for dealing with complex issues and bare polemics. *The Cybergypsies* (1999) is a memoir on the dangerous side effects of the internet: electronic lust, betrayal and war that never seemed so immediate and possible way back in 1984 when Sinha came to learn about the internet after giving up his job at a London advertising firm. *The Cybergypsies* describes the story of the central character Bear, an advertising copywriter living in the English countryside with his wife and children who is about to lose everything to his internet addiction. Bear becomes so obsessed with the virtual world of the internet that he is prepared to sacrifice his real worldly pleasures in order to spend time with the illusory characters of the cyber world. Bear’s real and imaginary lives fuse through a series of bizarre and hilarious adventures on the internet leading to a personal moral crisis, when finally he makes one last attempt to save his
marriage. Different from this is Sinha’s debut novel *The Death of Mr. Love* (2002) which spans a period of fifty years and two continents to narrate an epic tale which fuses both myth and murder, fact and fiction and is inspired by a real life incident where the victim becomes a villain and the murderer a hero.

Set in the fictional Indian city of Khaufpur, Indra Sinha’s novel *Animal’s People* charts out the experiences of the residents of the area after the place is devastated by a lethal gas leak from a chemical plant. The novel transcribes the oral history of Animal, a nineteen year old boy who recounts his story to an unnamed journalist (‘Jarnalis’) who comes to write an account about Khaufpur and its people for his readers (‘Eyes’). Orphaned as a result of the chemical disaster by the company which is simply referred to in the novel as the “Amrikan kampany”, the accident leaves a lasting effect on Animal’s physique as well. The fatal gas leak leaves his spine twisted like a hairpin forcing him to walk on all fours and since then he comes to be known to everyone as simply Animal, in Hindi a ‘Jaanvar, jungli Jaanvar’. (Sinha 15) He had been raised thereafter as an orphan “in a crazy franci situation” by a French nun Ma Franci.(Sinha 07) Animal gives a gripping account of the life in post-apocalyptic Khaufpur, the general apathy of the government and the indifference of the accused company and its officials towards the victims of the accident. Thus throughout the novel Animal’s narrative, someone “bent double by his own bitterness”, appear very caustic and even vitriolic. (Sinha 11)

Although the novel deals with the post-apocalyptic life of Khaufpur and its citizens, the incident of that fateful night, which is referred to in the novel as “that night”, it is indicated that the event has remained etched in Khaufpur’s public memory. The links to most of the incidents and actions that take place in Khaufpur after the factory accident in fact go back to that night when a burning fog of poison gas blazed out from the local factory and killed thousands of local inhabitants. Animal, who is well schooled in street work, lives by
his wits, spending his days “jamisponding” (a malapropism meaning spying like James Bond) on the town officials and looking after the nuns who have raised him. He falls in with a group — Somraj, Somraj’s daughter Nisha and her boyfriend Zafar who are fighting a social and legal battle against the Kampani for the redressal of the suffering locals who have been affected socially and environmentally. The American bosses of the Kampani have been summoned by the local court several times but they have ignored all judicial orders and have stayed away from the courts. Somraj, had once been a proficient singer, once hailed as the Awaz e Khaufpur, who had lost his singing breath after the incident thus annulled a promising singing career. Zafar was an excellent scholar who ignored his academic prospects to stay by the side of the poisoned victims of the disaster. The social and environmental activism led by Zafar and his comrades is the only ray of hope for the affected victims of Khaufpur in their socio-environmental and medico-legal battle against the mighty American Kampany.

When Elli Barber, an American doctor comes to Khaufpur to open a free medical clinic for the still suffering masses of the town, she has to face more hurdles than she had anticipated. Apart from the initial non-cooperation by the state authorities, she receives a mixed response from the people of the Khaufpur. While some are of the opinion that such an initiative is noble since it would help them cure of the diseases they have been suffering from as a result of the inhumane attitude of both the Kampany and the local government, there are also others who are suspicious about the whole development and they vehemently resist Elli’s initiative and even urge the locals to boycott the free clinic. Zafar and his comrades believe that Elli may have some vested interest behind her humanitarian cause in Khaufpur; that she might even have been planted by the Kampany in their effort to collect medical data which the Kampany might use in their own favour to absolve themselves of any charges pending in the Indian courts. Zafar plants Animal as a spy to keep a watch on Elli and her activities. Elli has to take much pain to instil confidence among the locals, to make them believe that she is
there solely for a humanitarian cause, and that despite being an American, she herself hates
the dirty act committed by the American Kampani.

The Kampani bosses arrive in Khaufpur for the hearing of the case against them in the
local court amidst speculations that a deal has been struck for an out of court settlement
between the Kampani and the government without taking into consideration the opinion of
the local residents or the accident victims. Zafar and his associates decide to go on a fast unto
death unless the deal is stopped. After Zafar and his associates fast for three days, their health
deteriorates and seeing the possibility of a riot breaking out, the Chief Minister summons
Zafar and his associates. The Chief Minister tries to convince them that no deal would be
signed with the Kampani officials while keeping the locals in the dark. Despite such
assurances however, the government and the Kampani go on with their out of court
settlement initiatives. When the meeting for the out of court settlement was going on in full
secrecy, a stink bomb planted by someone in disguise within the air conditioner goes off and
everyone including the lawyers, politicians and the Kampani bosses comes out of the room
suffocating. They tell the media waiting outside that they were victims of an act of terrorism,
and that the culprit should be prosecuted and locked up for years for such a heinous act. But,
the media was not at all impressed by their reaction since they understood that a single stink
bomb, however disgusting, could never be compared to the terror that the Kampani had
unleashed on the people of Khaufpur for years. Moreover, the company bosses did not have
the moral right to demand the prosecution of the persons involved when they themselves had
refused to face trial before the Khaufpur court.

The novel ends without any resolution. It concludes with the date of the hearing for
the case against the Kampani being again postponed, a new judge appointed and the Kampani
sticking to staying away from the court. For the person affected there is no justice, for justice
is continuously delayed and denied. The novel finally comes to a close with a gloomy
prophecy by Animal that there might be more such disasters in future with more people dying, and with only the poor left to die without any justice.

Despite the fact that Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* has been released comparatively recently, the novel has attracted critical reception from diverse fields — right from postcolonial studies, subaltern studies and sociology to comparatively recent fields of enquiry such as disability studies and studies in criminology. Roman Bartosch’s paper “The Postcolonial Picaro in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* — Becoming Posthuman through Animal’s Eyes” tries out ways to destabilise the rhetorical power of the apocalyptic trope, and attempts thereby to discover how the meaning of discourses of catastrophe emerge as avenues of thinking about a posthumanist perspective in disaster. Following upon Neil Badmington’s idea that posthumanism marks a careful ongoing, overdue rethinking of the dominant humanist (or anthropocentric) account of who ‘we’ are as human beings, the first part of Bartosch’s paper tries to argue that the text *Animal’s People* offers a fictional means of such ways of rethinking which necessitate the unsettling of the dichotomies of ‘us’ and ‘them’, that is humans and animals. The second part of the paper focuses on the novel’s aesthetic force and explores how the text juxtaposes apocalyptic tropes and picaresque, postcolonial laughter. By focusing on the disaster in picaresque terms, the novel tries to deconstruct the very apocalyptic trope it is concerned with in three ways — by endorsing “the narrative with a sense of alterity that benefits the reading experience”, by creating “an aesthetic tension between the writing of catastrophe and the genre of the picaresque” and by deconstructing “the dichotomy underlying the tension”. (Bartosch 10) Finally, the text is shown to offer an “Animal” perspective on the narrative of the disaster in a world of multiple and heterogeneous voices, pluralistic truths and one imperative to ethical behaviour.

Andrew Mahlstedt’s paper “Animal’s Eyes: Spectacular Invisibility and the Terms of Recognition in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*” describes the process by which dominant
discourses of poverty in the global south aggravate the invisibility of the marginalised poor, blinding observers to a spectacle of abject destitution. The paper discusses how in the novel Animal and his people are remarkably invisible to those who hold the power to effect justice. Animal and his people are invisible to the government and to the American “kampani” responsible for the disaster, just as they are invisible to the foreigners and the privileged Indians. Animal and his people are marginalised in various senses: socially, economically, geographically and politically. In addition to this, the author of the paper indicates that the poor are also a spectacle to marvel at, to pity and to romanticize. The point made is that this invisibility, abjection and romanticization of the poor in the narratives of globalization are also a form of oppression as such representations aggravate invisibility and disempowerment.

Mahlstedt cites *Animal’s People* as a species of fiction representing a kind of disempowerment without disempowering by altering the terms of recognition, i.e., finding “those levels of metaphor, rhetoric, organization and public performance” in the language that asserts narrative authority over human lives. The paper also calls attention to the diverse ways through which narrative itself is often complicit in making invisibility spectacular.

In an essay titled “Power of Zero: Aggregation, Negation, and the Dimensions of Scale in Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People”, Jesse Oak Taylor tries to explore what it means to have nothing and about how having nothing may become a source of strength for the have not’s of the society — an issue at once philosophical, mathematical, and in the context of the global health, urgently practical. Taylor argues that the greatest global health care challenge the world facing today is not disease but rather inequality, and that the question of how to make something out of nothing in Indra Sinha’s novel *Animal’s People* crystallises many of the challenges faced by current efforts in global health. In trying to address such questions the novel becomes in the process, Taylor suggests, a site for thinking through works of literature. Taylor argues that the novel goes far beyond just representing problems or offering solutions
and indicates that it should rather be understood as a form of intervention in and about itself. Taylor focuses on how the novel, as a novel, participates in the process of community empowerment, both within the world the book depicts, and perhaps even more importantly, in the effort of reading it in the actual world. Thus the novel also becomes a vehicle for thinking about the relationship between literature and literary studies and the science and practice of global health.

Jina B. Kim’s paper “‘People of the Apokalis’: Spatial Disability and the Bhopal Disaster” tries to understand Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People as a productive site for mutual engagement between postcolonial studies and disability studies — two different fields which have hardly been in dialogue with each other. Kim argues that dominant models of disability do not translate to formerly colonial sites and/or sites that bear the burden of global capitalism. Kim envisions a revision of dominant models of disability that have been largely derived from US/UK contexts, since the uneven process of globalization has resulted in the production of disabling environments across the world. In the paper Kim discusses how:

Animal’s unique spatial imaginary, which wrests new meaning from the symbolic and material topography of Khaufpur, engenders a local, collective, and embodied knowledge that resists the erasure of the local and the dissolution of survival networks under the disabling forces of neoliberal globalization. By making this knowledge contingent upon disabled experience, Sinha demonstrates that the legacy of the Bhopal disaster rests upon a stratum of disabled bodies, and further, imagines the city of Khaufpur itself as both a disabling and disabled environment. Finally, through his interpretations of the symbolic and material landscape of Khaufpur, readings that emphasize the survival strategies vital to navigating abject poverty, Animal complicates the teleology of personal and/or regional rehabilitation, thereby
foregrounding the ways in which anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and disability politics converge. (Web)

In sharp deviation from these instances of earlier scholarship, this chapter will try to appreciate *Animal’s People* using some of the theories of ecocriticism as an interpretative tool. However, the present study will try to go beyond the dominant Western hegemonic ecocritical discourse which has limited itself to the “cult of wilderness” and the “gospel of eco-efficiency” that has developed almost as an offshoot of American studies and which is unselfconsciously parochial in its attempt. Instead, this chapter will attempt to focus on the ecocritical discourse of what Joan Martinez Alier and Ramachandra Guha call, the “environmentalism of the poor”.¹ Hence, this chapter will be committed to an exploration of how the often fraught relationship between pollution, environmental justice and social justice animates Sinha’s text, as does the equally fraught relationship between national and global politics and the narrative of development. Sinha realised, perhaps, that it was important to understand and protest the degradation of Khaufpur’s land, water, air and its people’s health not only from a purely nationalist frame, for the environmental degeneration of Khaufpur was the product of a joint collaboration between the State and a transnational company. Thus Sinha’s concern for the environment as displayed in *Animal’s People* is at once both local and global.

There can be no doubt that *Animal’s People*, is a fiction based on the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. Interestingly however, *Animal’s People* was not intended as a novel from the beginning. In 1996 Sinha made some notes for a screenplay titled “Green Song” which was an attempt to tell a fictionalised account not of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy but of its aftermath — the neglect, the suffering and the struggle for justice of the thousands affected in the tragedy. The idea had its inception while Sinha was working with an advertising agency for a
campaign with Amnesty International for the redressal of the Bhopal cause. As a conscientious writer Sinha was enraged by the injustice meted out to the poor people in Bhopal, injustices he wished to see redressed, injustices he felt he could expose, silences he could help dismantle through his writing as a novelist, through his imaginative and linguistic inventiveness. Significantly, Sinha in an interview with Mark Thwaite stressed that he “knew Bhopal too well. To write freely, I had to imagine another city. In this fictional place which I called Khaufpur (“Khauf” is an Urdu word that means “terror”) the characters could come to life.” It is clear from this that Sinha knew that if the novel had to have any impact it had to first work as fiction. As he pointed out in an interview to The Guardian, “[i]t has to be a work of art [...] and if it can’t succeed as that, it could have no power to change things either.

Whatever anger I feel is expressed through some of the characters, though not all of them...” (“Triumph from Disaster”. Web.) It is evident that though Sinha felt a great deal of anger about the Bhopal disaster, he realized that he had to neutralise it for the novel to work. Thus Animal’s People has given an imaginative redefinition to the issue at stake in the Bhopal disaster while enhancing the public visibility of the cause. But before entering into a critical enquiry of the text, it is important to revisit the dark contours of the Bhopal incident as this may be of help in an understanding of the key questions which the text tries to explore.

In the early hours of 3 December 1984 the world’s worst industrial disaster unfolded in the Indian city of Bhopal when a deadly cocktail of poisonous gases escaped from the pesticide plant of Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL) into the city’s atmosphere and its surrounding areas. UCIL was the Indian subsidiary of the USA based giant transnational major Union Carbide Corporation (UCC). The UCIL plant manufactured Sevin, a Union Carbide trade name for a pesticide whose active ingredient was 1-napthyl-N-methylcarbamate, the generic name of which is carbaryl. (Willey, Ronald J., Dennis C. Hendershot and Scott Berger. Web.) The gases released involved two reactants, methyl
isocyanate (MIC) and alpha naphthol. Methyl isocyanate is reactive, toxic, volatile and inflammable, and the maximum permissible exposure of MIC during an eight hour time is .02 ppm (20 parts per billion). On the early morning of 3 December 1984, UCIL released forty tons of MIC into the atmosphere of Bhopal, the capital city of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh affecting two hundred thousand people out of the nine hundred thousand people who lived there. (Morehouse, 1993; Mukherjee, 2010) Between five thousand to ten thousand people were killed immediately and another sixty thousand suffered serious injuries and another significant number succumbed in the next couple of days. (Morehouse 479; Mukherjee 136) The general experience of the people living there on that fateful night was tragic and pathetic:

At first the air smells of burnt chillies. If you do not take the hint and get away as fast as possible, soon you find yourself in a thick white mist. Your eyes, throat and lungs begin to burn and fill up with oozing fluid and melting tissues. Blinded, you gasp for breath as fluid begins filling up your lungs. Then you lose control of your nervous system, you vomit uncontrollably, cramps seize your stomach. If you are lucky you lose consciousness quickly and you die. If you are not, your death is a long drawn out, agonizing affair. If you survive, your lungs and eyes will never work properly again. Muscle pains and ulcers will prevent you from working and leading a normal life. You will give birth to unimaginably deformed or dead bodies. (qtd. in Mukherjee 135)

It is interesting to note the tonal difference in the representation of the events and facts by the Indian and the American media in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. The day immediately after the disaster most of the national dailies were struggling to grapple with the exact nature and scale of the disaster. On 4 December all the major newspapers of India such as the Hindusthan Times, The Hindu, and The Statesman were reporting stories of three
hundred and fifty to four hundred and ten deaths. Besides, there were also speculations about the responsibility for the leak. The *Hindusthan Times* in a report headed “Gas Kills Over 400 in Bhopal” quoted a factory official claiming that preventive measures had been taken and the release of the gas was stopped within minutes. (Mukherjee 136) The very next day the *Hindusthan Times* followed up with a report about the increasing number of deaths and also about the veracity of the Union Carbide management version. It stated that while cleaning the MIC tank, safety protocol was broken, that no engineers were present during the cleaning operation, and the workers working had no idea about any remedial measures if in case anything went wrong. It was also reported that the thousands of poor people who lived outside the factory were not informed about what a long siren meant, and that they in fact ran towards the factory to offer help when they saw a large plume of gas. Besides, the people were hardly aware about the precise nature of the gas, whether MIC was fatal or whether there were other poisonous gases such as phosgene or cyanide. *The Hindu* also published stories revealing the fact that MIC had a cyanide base. Quoting a factory official it pointed out that it was at least an hour and not minutes had passed before the situation was brought under control. *The Statesman* revealed that along with MIC, other poisonous gases such as phosgene were also released. (Mukherjee 135-136)

In contrast to the Indian reporting, the media in USA immediately fell in line with arguments in defence of the Union Carbide. The Union Carbide management’s argument was sharp and precise: firstly, the disaster had nothing to do with any kind of negligence or structural flaw on the part of the American owners, secondly, the responsibility of the disaster had everything to do with the errors at the local Indian level, that is the failure was that of the local factory management and the product of human error, and finally that the accident was the result of an act of sabotage done by a disgruntled local worker. Warren Anderson, the then chairman of United Carbide Corporation claimed: “Our safety standards in the U.S. are
identical to those in India... same equipment, same design, same everything” and “You can’t run a $9 or & 10 billion corporation all out of Danbury... Lines of communication were broken at the Bhopal plant. Compliance with these procedures is the responsibility of the plant operators” (Larry Everest’s *Behind the Poison Cloud: Union Carbide’s Bhopal Massacre*, qtd. in Mukherjee 137) The Wall Street Journal as well as the New York Times severely criticized the inability of the Indians in living up to expectations while dealing with advanced technology. They also criticized the Indian government for not allowing the appropriate level of American control of the plant stating that “when control over an affiliate is diluted... fewer resources are typically committed by the parent” (Larry Everest’s *Behind the Poison Cloud: Union Carbide’s Bhopal Massacre*, qtd. in Mukherjee 120)

The utter falsity of the arguments of the UCC became clear with successive researches into the incidents of the night by Indian and international researchers. Although doctors and researchers close to the UCC claimed that MIC is “non-poisonous” and “only an irritant” (*EPW* 22.40, 1987), it has been proved beyond doubt that MIC is highly toxic and reactive. UCC’s own submission to the US Department of Labour and other researches prove the toxic nature of MIC. UCC knew very well that overexposure to MIC, “[m]ay cause skin and eye burns on contact. Vapours are extremely irritating and cause chest pain, coughing, and choking. May cause fatal pulmonary edema. Repeated exposure may cause asthma [...] Methyl isocyanate appears to be the most toxic member of the isocyanate family.” (Results of 1963 research by UC Mellon Institute, qtd. in *EPW* 22.40, 1987) Although UCC blamed the local subsidiary for the disaster, it was subsequently demonstrated that managerial control of UCIL was exercised by UCC through a centralised structure from its Eastern Division Headquarters at Hong Kong, and that even minor production and maintenance decisions were made in Hong Kong. (Morehouse 477; Pearce and Tombs 121) Contrary to American arguments, UCC had 50.9% share in the Indian subsidiary. (Morehouse 477; Pearce and
Tombs 121) For the UCC, economics was given priority over safety standards on a regular basis. Thus as Morehouse claims: “Bhopal was not an accident. It was a disaster waiting to happen.” (479)

The legal battle that followed failed to do any good to the victims of the disaster since the UCC resorted to legal chicanery. When sued by Indian government in an American court, UCC argued that it was impossible for American courts and juries to try them since they were not aware of the socio-political and environmental realities of India and urged that they should be tried in Indian courts. When summoned by Indian courts, they pointed out that since the UCC was an American major, the Indian courts and its law had no jurisdiction over them. Ever since then, the UCC’s strategy in the legal battle has been a ploy of endless deferral, denial and delay. In 1986, UCC argued for a $500 million out of court settlement with the Indian government in lieu of dropping of all the charges against the company and its officials, but popular outrage prevented the deal. Finally, in 1989 Union Carbide’s offer of $470 million was accepted by the Indian government as a full and final settlement. In 1994 UCC sold off the Indian subsidiary UCIL to Dow Chemicals, divesting itself of all the responsibilities it was charged with. Praful Bidwai, the Indian journalist and activist has stated about this resolution that by it “[t]he Bhopal victims have become a mere footnote to a sordid story of transfer of money from one group of vested interests — Carbide or the Government — to another.” (Chouhan et al. Bhopal: The Inside Story, qtd. in Mukherjee 143)

In reading Animal’s People as, among other things, an example of the postcolonial reality of India’s environment, any regarding of Sinha’s attempt to recast Bhopal as Khaufpur cannot be restricted solely to spatial terms. Rather, Khaufpur has to be understood both as a specific and non specific, a stand-in for Bhopal as well as a synecdoche for all those poisoned
communities across the world both in the global South as well as in other parts of the
colonised/neocolonised ecospace. Sinha himself once proclaimed: “I wish people would not
automatically assume that Khauppur is literally Bhopal in every little detail. Khauppur is a
city of the imagination and at one point I had thought of calling it Receio and setting the city
in Brazil. It could just as easily have been set in West Africa or Indonesia, because the story
is really about how powerless, disenfranchised people deal with the monstrous injustices that
are heaped upon them.”(Sandhya. Web.) Sinha makes this point clear through Zafar, one of
the central characters of the novel whom Jesse Oak Taylor otherwise calls “a kind of atheist-
Muslim Gandhi”: “Is Khauppur the only poisoned city? It is not. There are others and each
one of has its own Zafar. There’ll be a Zafar in Mexico City and others in Hanoi and Manila
and Halabja and there are the Zafars of Minamata and Sevaso, of Sao Paolo and Toulouse...”
(296). Set in contemporary Khauppur, Animal’s People transcribes the oral history of Animal,
a nineteen year old youth who is forced to walk on all fours when an “American Kampani”
spread out lethal poison over the city. Animal’s “people” refers to all those slum dwellers
who reside in the vicinity of the “American Kampani”, and who were directly affected in the
toxic disaster on that fateful night and whose lives continue to suffer as a result of the
“Kampani” having failed to redress the situation arising out of the disaster in the factory and
its adjoining slums. Although written almost twenty years after the disaster, Animal’s People
vividly dramatises the violence of the singular event of “that night” mainly through the point
of view of Animal:

My story has to start with that night. I don’t remember anything about it, though I was
there, nevertheless it’s where my story has to start. When something big like that
happens, time divides into before and after, the before time breaks into dreams, the
dreams dissolve into darkness. (Sinha 14)
As its real-world equivalent Bhopal, Khaufpur, a city which boasted of its long cultural history came to be recognised since the tragedy of that night as almost as a metonymy for disaster, of toxic bodies. The incidents of that night were of such catastrophic consequence that for most of the inhabitants of Khaufpur it erased their past of a peaceful existence and have threw them into a life of endless suffering:

Khaufpur once had a high cultural life, and a remarkable history, famous it was for poets, politically progressive, a haven for refugees including a large community of Afghans. I think her friend must have meant Farouq’s lot, the Yar-yilaqis, who are really Uzbegs. He complained how all these things are forgotten because nowadays when the world hears the name of Khaufpur it thinks only of poison. I curse the day the Kampani came here because its disaster erased our past. (Sinha 152)

Animal describes the fateful night as “ous raat, cette nuit, that night, always that fucking night,” (05); “that night, which no one in Khaufpur wants to remember, but nobody can forget.” (01); “That night they say was a night of great cold. Zafar used to say that as people were breathing clouds of mist out of their mouths that night, they little knew what kind of mist they’d soon be breathing in” (Sinha 13); “On that night all sorts of people lost all kinds of things, lives for sure, families, friends, health, jobs, in some cases their wits. “(Sinha 37)

Animal in the novel narrates the story of only one of the families, the story of which “contains the tale of thousands.” (Sinha 83):

Pyare Bai was married to Aftaab, he worked in the Kampani’s factory, and he told her how dangerous were the chemicals in there. If by chance you got any on your hand, Aftab said, the skin would blister. On that night he was at home off duty, when the stinging in the eyes began, the burning chillies, unlike most people he knew what to do. He covered the faces of Pyare and their two young daughters with wet cloths then led them, walking not running, out of the wind. In this way they escaped when most
of their neighbours perished. All were nevertheless damaged by the poisons. Aftaab the worst, because he’d taken less care over himself, he was coughing foam tinged with blood, his eyes were nearly shut. When they returned home all objects of metal, like cooking pots, had a green crust. Aftaab would not allow Pyare and the children into the house. He cleaned everything, washed every corner before he let them in.

At first Aftaab seemed to recover, but his old job was gone, he was too breathless to be able to do physical work. His conditions grew worse. His eyes suffered, he got rashes all over, plus fevers and pains in his joints. Pyare bought medicines. Aftaab told her not to waste money on him, for he would die. (Sinha 83-84)

What Sinha seems to imply is that violence, especially environmental violence has to be considered not only as a contest over space and natural resources but also over time — a phenomenon which Rob Nixon calls “slow violence”. The idea of slow violence in matters of environmental toxicity is crucial in the sense that such violence is not only slow paced and delayed in its effect, but rather it often multiplies the threat on a long term basis through biological magnification and toxic drift, engendering effects in such ways that sustaining life becomes slowly but increasingly difficult. It may be said that Sinha’s success in Animal’s People lies in his ability to “turn the long emergencies of slow violence into [a] stor[y] dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment” (Nixon, Slow Violence... 03). Sinha specifically focuses on the slow violence which the Kampani and its officials unfolded over successive years. Ironically, it is most often people lacking in resources, those marginalised and those who have been made almost socially and politically invisible as a consequence of their poverty, who are the principal casualties of slow violence. In fact, Animal’s condition stands as a metonymy for all those people who have been suffering the consequences of that night, as he stands as a singular representative of the poisoned communities of Khaufpur. As
Animal points out at the very introductory lines of the novel: “I used to be human once. So I’m told. I don’t remember it myself, but people who know me when I was small say I walked on two feet like a human being.” (01) That it was six years after Animal was exposed to the poison gas leaked from the factory his spine started to twist forcing him to walk on all fours illustrate the delayed effect of slow violence. Thus in many ways Animal represents literally the body politic of the poisoned communities of Khaupur since his physical body represents a “loci of accretion, sites where chemicals interact and build over time, producing new forms and unknown reactions.” (Taylor 187) Even after almost two decades of the disaster, the factory and its adjoining areas had not been cleaned of the toxic chemicals left behind by the Kampani. Successive monsoons have weathered, rusted and rotted the death factory. The rains have washed the poisons on the ground deep into the soil. They then have entered the groundwater and have seeped into wells and bore pipes. They gushed from taps and entered into people’s bodies through drinking water. There they burned stomachs, corroded skin, damaged organs. Animal goes on to describe the long term effects of this violence in people’s bodies of Khaupur:

I was there when an old man came and told Zafar, ‘An old ulcer weeps, it makes the skin all around putrid and this goes on day and night the pain it’s unceasing, with such pain you can’t think, you can’t read your prayers or work or sleep, nothing can you do but just endure it, at the end of each day you can say nothing except I’ve survived, and after many days and nights blur into a dream, you say, well I am still here, but so is the pain, in truth it makes you mad,’ (Sinha 148)

Such toxic biomagnifications have worked not only with the life of the living but also with those who were unborn or waiting to be born. Sinha gives a very realistic yet pathetic description of how such “slow violence” works across time and space through Animal’s imaginary meeting of the unborn foetus in the jar kept in the laboratory:
'Evening, evening,' they chorus, in little voices that sound like bells.

‘Animal, meet the other directors of the board.’

‘Board of what?’ The children in the flasks all have terrible injuries. One has a single huge staring eye in the middle of the forehead, another has three arms, a third lacks nose and mouth.

‘The Kampani of course,’ says my friend, as if I’m a fool to ask.

Well this is shocking news. ‘So you are the evil-minded, greedy — ‘

‘No, you idiot,’ cries my two-headed mate. ‘Everyone on this earth has in their body a share of the Kampani’s poisons. But of all the Kampani’s victims, we are the youngest. We unborn paid the highest price. Never mind dying, we never even got a fucking shot at life. This is why, Animal miyan, we are the Board of Directors of the poisonwallah shares.’ (Sinha 236-37)

If babies make it to the world alive, the poisons are waiting in their mother’s milk. Thus when Elli, the American doctor visits the affected slums she comes across a woman who refuses to feed her wailing baby her breast milk: “‘I won’t feed my kid poison.’ She’s leant forward to cast the last dribbles of her milk onto the ground,’[...] ‘We have loked upon the milke and it semeth to muche thinne and watry. Plus it enclyneth to reddenesse, which is un naturall and euill. Likewyse, it tasteth bitter, ye may well perceyue it is un wholesome.’...” (107 sic) This is not only a graphic image of innocence perverted but an instance of how pollution interferes even with the most basic form of human interaction and life on a day to day basis. The environmental toxicity specific to Khaufpur becomes evident in the young woman’s toxic litany: “‘Our wells are full of poison. It’s in the soil, water, blood, it’s in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here long enough, you will be too.’”(Sinha 107-08)
It is against such consequences of corporate eco-crime and the emergence of “slow violence” that Zafar whom Jesse Oak Taylor calls “a kind of atheist-Muslim Gandhi” reacts: “‘Is poison presumed harmless until it kills?’ he retorts. ‘Isn’t this the lesson of Khaufpur, that you don’t wait to be harmed before you take action to protect?’” (126) Zafar and his associates have been fighting against the injustices of the Kampani both in and out of the court. However, such unfolding of “slow violence” has been managed by the company bosses through the process of distantiation — both spatial and temporal. For more than twenty years the people of Khaufpur has been trying to bring the accused company bosses to Khaufpur to face trial before the law for the crime they had committed. Thirteen judges had come and gone amidst numerous trials in those years, but the company bosses sitting in America resorted to legal procrastination through dirty deals and backdoor negotiations with Khaufpur’s Minister of Poison Relief and other functionaries. For the people of Khaufpur justice proved to be a will-o-the wisp, as justice has been both delayed and denied. As Zafar puts it:

The case against the Kampani had been dragging on endless years. It stood accused of causing the deaths of thousands on that night, plus it ran away from Khaufpur without cleaning its factory, over the years the poisons it left behind have found their way into the wells, everyone you meet seems to be sick. The Khaufpuris were demanding that the Kampani must pay proper compensation to those whose loved ones it killed, whose health it ruined, plus it should clean the factory and compensate the people who had been drinking its poisons. Trouble with the Kampani bosses were far away in Amrika, they refused to come to the Khaufpuri court and no one could make them. (Sinha 33)

This indicates that in Khaufpur or Bhopal in the real world, the idea of environmental justice is intertwined with the idea of social and political justice. Sinha seems to argue that
for the people of Khaufpur there can be no environmental justice without social justice. This idea is forwarded by Sinha in his novel through a conversation between Zafar and the crow whom he meets in a hallucinatory dream. When the crow asks Zafar to express three wishes he wants to get fulfilled, Zafar responds:

Quick as a flash Zafar pours out his heart’s deepest desires. ‘The Kampani must return to Khaufpur, remove the poisons from its factory plus clean the soil and the water it has contaminated, it must pay for good medical treatment for the thousands of people whose health it has ruined, it must give better than one-cup-chai-per-day compensation, plus the Kampani bosses must come to Khaufpur and face the charges from which they have been running for so long and the court case against them should conclude.’

[...] ‘All these proceed from one wish, which is that simple natural justice should prevail.’ (Sinha 227)

Sinha raises here an important question about the politics of corporate policy and environmental toxicity — questions about who decides to build what, where, and with what environmental effect. And since the Kampani was owned by an American multinational, he also raises key questions about the presence/absence of an universal code of environmental and civic ethics, law, justice and rights. For the disenfranchised, media-marginalised poisoned victims of Khaufpur who share the transnational toxic burden of an absentee corporate colonialism, there seems to be no way to access rights and justice. As Animal points out:

I said, many books have been written about this place, not one has changed anything for the better, how will yours be different? You will bleat like all the rest. You’ll talk of rights, law, justice. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they
don’t mean the same. Zafar says such words are like shadows the moon makes in the Kampani’s factory, always changing shape. (Sinha 03)

Sinha’s arguments about the absence of an universal order of law, rights and justice is in line with Hannah Arendt who argues that human rights are “a kind of additional law, a right of exception necessary for those who had nothing better to fall back upon” (The Origins of Totalitarianism 293 as qtd. in Mahlstedt 70-71). As Animal points out, for the outsiders, for those who because of their better social and politically privileged position are screened off from such environmental hazards and thereby are immune to such environmental risks, “we are not really people. We don’t have names. We flit in crowds at the corner of his eyes. Extras we’re, in his movie.” (Sinha 09)

A corollary to Animal’s argument about selective environmental immunity is the notion of environmental racism, which has been defined by the American environmental philosopher Deane Curtin as “the connection, in theory and practice, of race and the environment so that the oppression of one is connected to, and supported by, the oppression of the other” (Environmental Ethics for a Postcolonial World 145, as qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 04). Environmental racism tries to study “the experience of communities that struggle daily with environmental degradation and with their disenfranchisement from the institutions and structures that control their living environment,” besides “cast[ing] a critical eye on the political economy of environmental degradation, including the structure of environmental decision making in disaffected communities.” (Cole & Foster 10) Reflecting on how “the colour of disaster” (term used by Michael Eric Dyson in Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Colour of Disaster, 23:2006, qtd. in Nixon, Slow Violence... 58) has shaped the environmental priorities and policy making both within and across countries especially in America, Nixon shows how compared to Bhopal, Chernobyl attracted much more environmental attention from the West, despite the fact that both the incidents were
equally grave and environmentally destructive. Chernobyl being close to Western Europe, its threat was perceived by the West to be much more imminent than that of Bhopal, which being situated in a Third World country and far away from the West, was deliberately presumed to be less of a threat, or one limited to its national border. In the case of Khaufpur or its real life counterpart in Bhopal, the collusion of interest between the neo-colonial State and Union Carbide served to aggravate the problem. The Indian State in its desperate attempt to attract investments allowed the chemical plant to be set up in an area which was densely populated by people mainly from the socially marginalised sections, without paying any attention to any backup disaster management plan in case of any environmental crisis. While the existence of somewhat safer plants and production processes of the Kampani/Union Carbide in the West (there are other plants of UCC at Beziers, France and at Institute, USA) can be understood in terms of environmental racism, the discrimination of the Indian ruling elite also becomes evident in the fact that despite numerous complaints from the workers and a section of the media, the government did not take note of the rapidly deteriorating situation at the plant site in Bhopal. Over two years before the Bhopal disaster, Raj Keswani, a journalist from Bhopal wrote a prophetic story, the first of a series of articles for the Jansatta daily on September 1982 entitled “Wake up People of Bhopal, You Are on the Edge of a Volcano”, predicting that Bhopal was about to be annihilated. Keswani repeatedly urged the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh to take action before Bhopal “turns into Hitler’s gas chamber”. His final article “We Are All About To Be Annihilated” appeared just before the gas disaster. (Sinha 2009) Thus, the State not only ignored all prior warnings but also deliberately tried to underplay the disaster to minimise the political fallout. The accident was depicted almost as the price to be paid for “progress” and “development”. Animal’s question: “Do you suppose anyone can explain why the Kampani chose this city to make its factory?
Why this land?” (Sinha 32) is redolent of the discriminatory environmental policies both by the Government and the Kampani.

It is evident that one of the central aims of Sinha in Animal’s People is to critique and contest the Western notion of development. Sinha’s argument in this regard is in line with other radical Third World theorists who see development as nothing more than a form of neocolonialism introduced to serve the political and economic interests of the West. This myth of development, taking false support from the ideas linked to the Enlightenment ideology of progress and the Darwinian theory of the survival of the fittest enjoins the less advanced countries to close the gap, thereby forcing the less wealthy nations to subscribe to a model of capitalist growth with disastrous environmental consequences (Huggan and Tiffin 27). Animal’s People which fictionalises the Bhopal saga is an attempt to put into words and therefore to bring before public visibility the chilling truth about how transnational companies under the vantage of the current wave of development and progress operate with dangerous technology within developing Third World countries, and how this mantra of development and progress indiscreetly transforms the social and environmental conditions of the people’s existence in the region. In the novel, Animal serves very much as the anti-voice of development and globalization. The ‘Kampani’ referred to in the novel is one of those several chemical plants established in India during the nineteen sixties for the production of pesticides and fertilizers under the mission of what is famously called the Green Revolution. Green Revolution is the name given to the science based transformation of Third World agriculture in which high-input agriculture replaces traditional methods of farming. Union Carbide arrived in Bhopal in 1969 to set up a plant to manufacture the pesticide Sevin with the encouragement and support of the Indian government. It came to India with an aura of First World technological and economic efficiency, with a mission to take part in India’s campaign of Green Revolution which promised to increase the country’s agricultural output
manifold. Although the disastrous social and environmental consequences of such
technological choice are well documented, what Sinha points out is that the Bhopal Gas
Tragedy has its roots in the same narrative. Though the Green Revolution was promoted by
the West as a great humanitarian endeavour designed to bring out India of its postcolonial
dependency by making it self sufficient in food production, the real intention of the
transnational Kampani/Union Carbide was “to find clients and not to help countries to
develop” (De Rivero 32). The tragic desire of the Kampani/Union Carbide to play god with
the environment of a country which they did not understand is emblematic of the reckless
ways in which transnational corporations and a surrogate government tried to internalise
profits and externalise risks. An important point that is made in the novel is that although the
factory in Khaufpur has long been shut down, the chemicals produced there are ever present,
silently continuing to pollute the environment. As Animal notes: “Wonderful poison the
Kampani made, so good it’s impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they’re still
doing their work”. (Sinha 29) Sinha depicts the disastrous effects of the chemicals produced
by the factory by representing the absence of any kind of life forms in the factory: “Listen,
how quiet it’s. No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can’t survive
here.” (Sinha 29) This environmental devastation represented by Sinha through negative
presence remind one of Rachel Carson’s use of lines from Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans
Merci” as an epigraph to Silent Spring: “The sedge is wither’d from the lake,/ And no bird
sings.” (qtd. in Garrard 02) Sinha’s approach calls to mind Carson’s “Fable for Tomorrow”
that introduces Silent Spring, which depicts a once harmonious American landscape,
suddenly blighted by some mysterious malady that has brought devastation to an entire
community. “Fable for Tomorrow” concludes with the grim assertion that: “No witchcraft, no
enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done
it themselves.” (qtd. in Garrard 02) Just as Carson in Silent Spring points out that the victims
of pesticides and herbicides should be regarded as victims of biocides, it is this same notion of biocidal victimization that is put forward through Sinha’s narrative, when an old woman, herself a victim of the Kampani poisoning, puts forward an apparently naive, but otherwise poignant question to the American lawyer: “Mr Lawyer, we lived in the shadow of your factory, you told us you were making medicine for the fields. You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead. I would like to ask, was there ever much difference, to you?” (Sinha 306)

Sinha also brings into dialogue the ideas of environmentalism and terrorism, a field of theoretical enquiry that has gained popularity in the West, especially in USA, under the name of environmental/ecological terrorism or ecoterrorism. The American agency Federal Bureau of Investigation defines ecoterrorism as “the use or threatened use of violence of a criminal nature against innocent victims or property by an environmently oriented, subnational group for environmental — political reasons, or aimed at an audience beyond the target, often of a symbolic nature.” (qtd. in Douglas Long 03) Ecoterrorism had its beginnings in the USA in the 1970’s through acts of sabotage executed by environmentally minded groups, as a violent reaction against the polluting corporations. However, Sinha broadens this field of reference by introducing more ethical and theoretical questions about environmental terrorism. Zafar in the novel sits on a fast unto death unless the backdoor negotiations between the government and the Kampany are stopped. He insists that the people’s protests against the Kampani should be non violent since it is they “who have suffered injustice, and the Kampani which has committed it” (Sinha 282). His argument is that as they themselves are asking for justice, they should not break the law. Zafar points out how the Kampany has carried out mock drills in one of its factories in the USA involving the Police and the FBI to deal with any kind of protest by tagging the protesters as terrorists: “it was a drill. Police, FBI, fire service, all were involved. The Kampany invited the newspapers to watch and said,
look, this is how we’ll deal with terrorists. Can you guess who these “terrorists” were? In the story given out by the Kampany they were Khaufpuri protesters...” (Sinha 282-283). Zafar goes on to define the exact nature of the terrorism that is at work in Khaufpur, a form of terrorism unleashed by the Kampani on the people of Khaufpur and its environment:

Friends for a moment think what’s really going on here. What is terror? The dictionary says it’s extreme fear, violent dread, plus what causes it. On that night our people knew terror beyond what a dictionary can define. Who caused it? Our people continue to feel extreme fear, violent dread, because they don’t know what horrors might yet emerge in their bodies. Who refuses to share medical information? Our people want justice in a court of law. Who sneers at justice by refusing to appear in court? Terrorists are those who cause terror, who endanger innocent lives, who don’t respect law. The only terrorists in this case are those who run the Kampani. (Sinha 283)

Zafar speaks about how the Kampany has terrorised not only the environment of Khaufpur but also its people, about what means were available to those affected by such environmental re-landscaping by the Kampany, those whose fundamental conditions of material existence has been altered as a result of the disaster on “that night”.

Sinha’s *Animal’s People* is fiction, but it does give an imaginative redefinition of the various environmental issues inhabiting a postcolonial landscape suffering the consequences of outsourced toxicity. The ravaged grounds of Khaufpur/Bhopal provided him with the ideal base for the writing of such a story. Sinha’s text is an ecologically involved one and it illustrates not only the environmental damage that corporate greed can inflict on the poor and the powerless, but it also shows that the disenfranchised of the global South do indeed have a concern for their environment which is much more genuine and honest as compared to the egalitarian environmental concerns of the rich North. *Animal’s People* is a compelling text
which subverts the traditional perception that environmentalism is the prerogative of the rich nations of the North.

Notes

1. “Environmentalism of the poor” is a term used by Joan Martinez-Alier and Ramachandra Guha that contest the unequal distribution of natural resources and the environmental fallout of the economic growth. The term is often used to understand the environmental realities of the global South. For details, see, Environmentalism: A Global History. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000 and Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998


3. Terms like ‘biological magnification’ and ‘toxic drift’ are used to refer to the spreading of toxic pollutants and heavy metals from the place of origin to other places through various means such as water, wind and other natural agents and which finally enters into the food chain of the living organisms.

4. Richard T. De George explains that “International business ethics might refer simply to the comparison of business practices and their ethical evaluation in different countries; it might investigate whether there are in fact ethical norms commonly recognised in all countries that should govern international business and economic transactions, and if there are variations in ethical norms whether multinational firms are bound by the ethical
normal of their mother country, by the ethical norms of their host countries, by either, by both, or by neither [...] there has been much less written about corporate and managerial ethics on the international level than on the national level.” For details, see De George, Richard T. “International Business Ethics.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 4.1 (January 1994).

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CHAPTER III


In August 2015 the world mourned the 70th anniversary of the atomic bombing on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki of Japan by the USA. Standing at the Hiroshima memorial Park, the Prime Minister of Japan Shinzo Abe declared: “Seventy years on I want to reemphasise the necessity of world peace. [...] To coexist we must abolish the...ultimate inhumanity that is nuclear weapons. Now is the time to start taking action.” (BBC) While the history of the atomic bombing on Japan by USA is fairly well known to the whole world, the larger part of the world seems to be unaware of a much longer and brutal history of nuclear testing by the USA in the Pacific nation of the Marshall Islands — nuclear tests that had disastrous social and environmental consequences in the region. While the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s message of peace has often been criticized even within his own country as “Abe’s peace is a phony peace” (Soble. Web.), it is interesting to note how the experience of one single little country like the Marshall Islands, barely visible on the global map, has been successful in moving global policies on such existential issues as that of nuclear disarmament and climate change.¹ At the United Nations Conference on Climate Change held in Paris between 30th November 2015 to 12th December 2015, Tony de Brum, the Marshallese politician and minister was successful in bringing most of the representatives from 195 countries of the world into a consensus on nuclear disarmament and to cut back on carbon emissions so as not to allow the mean temperature of the Earth to rise by no more than 1.5 degree centigrade. At the same time it is true that despite Tony de Brum’s repeated attempts at bringing into visibility the spectacular historical violence perpetrated by USA on the Marshall Islands, most of the powerful countries of the world seems to be apathetic and
amnesiac to the legacies of nuclear radiation with which the people of the Marshall Islands have had to live with. Elizabeth DeLoughrey points out that the “hundreds of nuclear tests conducted in the Pacific Islands...have been largely erased from global memory” (“Radiation” 474, qtd. in Carrigan 256). This general amnesia coupled with the geographical invisibility of the Marshall Islands on the world map accounts for why — a field preoccupied with marginality — the region has remained at the periphery of the mainstream postcolonial ecocritical thought. Robert Barclay’s *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific* is an attempt to give an imaginative redefinition to the historical, social and political issues of the environment of the Marshall Islands and to bring to public visibility the chilling truth of nuclear colonialism by the USA on the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands of the Pacific.

Robert Barclay is a Hawaii based Pacific Island novelist. Though he is not a Marshallese by birth, Barclay was raised on the Kwajalein Island in the Marshall Islands. He came to the island as a nine year old boy when his father took a job as an engineer at the US missile range facility on the “Star Wars” project on the Kwajalein Atoll in the early 1970’s. Currently Barclay teaches at the Windward Community College, Hawai’i and lives in Kane’ohe with his wife and two children. *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific* (2002) which was Barclay’s debut novel, grew out of his thesis for his MA degree in a creative writing programme at the University of Hawai’i. Barclay’s novel won him the Harriet Goldsberry Award in Hawai’i, and he was nominated as a finalist for the prestigious Kiriyama Prize for fiction in 2002. Barnes and Nobel selected *Melal* for its Discover Great New Writers programme, and the novel also received critical acclaim in Honolulu’s leading daily and weekly newspapers. The novel is currently being adapted into a film by Producer and Director Vilsoni Hereniko. Apart from *Melal*, Barclay has also written works such as *Hawaii Smiles* (2009), *If Wishes Were Horses* (2011), *Triple Take* (2011), *More Than Words Can Say*

*Hawaii Smiles* (2009) is a collection of eight light hearted short stories about life in Hawaii. Published in 2011, *If Wishes Were Horses* is a novel which centres on the story of how two damaged souls affected by a common tragedy finally finds a way to healing. *Triple Take*, which was published in 2011, is a mystery or suspense story dealing with deception, substitution, trickery and vengeance. A fine blend of slapstick comedy and scintillating insights into heritage bureaucracy, it is a reflection on what really goes on behind the closed doors of ‘staff only’ sections in museums. Barclay’s 2011 novel *More Than Words Can Say* narrates the story of Chelsea Enright, an art teacher from a well off family who after the passing away of her grandmother, inherits her Adirondack cottage along with a box full of her grandmother’s World War II-era secrets. As she goes through her grandmother’s diary she comes to learn about her grandmother’s life, and this knowledge has such an impact on her that it almost turns her life upside down. Barclay’s next work of fiction, *Death at the Podium* (2012) describes how orchestra conductors die mysteriously all around the world and how Jonathan the oboe player, Kate his violinist and university researcher piece together incidents to unravel the mystery. Subsequently, in 2014 Barclay published his novel *Ask Me About My Bombshells* in which he blends the basics of firework shows, police investigations, protesting for money and opposites attracting romance. Barclay’s novel *Widow’s Walk* published in 2014, records a story of haunting romantic passions, destiny, loss and an eternal love that finally brings two people together.

Barclay’s *Melal*, the novel through which he came into being as a fiction writer, is about three generations of Marshall Islands family, their spirit cosmology and about how they cope with the American occupation of their islands and the subsequent erosion of their tradition and culture. The story line in *Melal* is focused on the interactions of three sets of
characters: the Americans on Kwajalein, the Keju family and other Marshallese, and the various demons, spirits and other beings that constitute the Marshallese culture. *Melal* covers the action on a single day, Good Friday of 1981. The main Marshallese characters are the widower Rujen Keju and his two sons — the teenage Jebro and the twelve year old Nuke. A victim of the radiological fallout because of the nuclear tests carried out by USA in the Bikini Atoll of the Marshall Islands in 1954, Rujen’s wife Iia has died out of cancer and is buried near the family house in Ebeye Island in Kwajalein atoll of the Marshall Islands.

Rujen is the highest ranking Marshallese employee living on the Ebeye Island and works at the sewage treatment plant at the USA military base in Kwajalein Island. Rujen represents himself as a Marshallese native who has coped with changes by adopting the culture of the oppressor. He is a practicing Christian and his faith in the Americans is not diminished by the propaganda that the nuclear tests had been carried out deliberately by the Americans in order to study its effects on humans. Although earlier promises made by the Americans about the construction of basic facilities such as proper sewage treatment and a hospital on the Ebeye Island have never been kept, Rujen has the firm faith that the Americans will eventually offer the islanders a better way of life. Rujen’s relationship with his elder son Jebro is uneasy. Jebro finds refuge and value in Marshallese culture and is inspired by the memoirs of his paternal grandfather who had been a traditionalist and had often rebelled against forceful occupation of their ancestral land by the Japanese and the Americans. Jebro had spent a couple of years in the nearby island of Tar-Woj, an island where he had been born and where he has land rights according to the Marshallese culture. But Tar-Woj had now been notified as out of bound by the US military authorities as being endangered by debris left behind from exploding American missiles that had been tested there. American Army helicopters are described in the novel as continuously monitoring the area to prevent any trespassing in this now off limit area. Unlike Jebro, his younger brother
Nuke is only attracted to things American, even as Jebro encourages him to explore his native Marshallese culture and heritage. On the day of the action in the novel, Jebro and Nuke borrow their father’s boat, and against all American regulations, venture on a fishing expedition to the Tar-Woj Island where their grandfather had ancestral land and was buried. On their return to Ebeye, Jebro and Nuke are nearly lost at sea as their boat is sunk by some careless drunken young American boys. However, they end up besting the Americans who caused the trouble. In a different location, their father Rujen while on work in Kwajalein Island, suffers a series of humiliating incidents and has an epiphany that leads him to reconsider his earlier assessment about the American presence on the islands. This provides him with a renewed appreciation of his inherited tradition and culture.

Present on the Tar-Woj island along with Jebro and Nuke are two characters drawn from Marshallese mythology, Noniep, an ancient dwarf who is the last keeper of Marshallese culture, and the immortal Etao, the trickster who uses his magical gift to play practical jokes and is the source of pleasures, dreams and hope in human existence. Barclay, through his description of the human and the mythological figures brings to the fore the unique social, political, cultural and environmental realities of the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands of the Pacific.

Melal has been widely acclaimed for its unflinching depiction of the legacy of nuclear radiation and its social, political and environmental fallout not just in the Marshall Islands but in the entire Pacific region. Focussing as it does on the damage done to a pristine environment and its idyllic culture, Melal brings to the fore an issue which has rarely been referred to in literature. However, the novel has not received much of critical commentary apart from some sporadic references in some texts of literary criticism. Part of the problem is due to the fact that the major body of literary criticism in the world today is still focused on canonical texts mainly from North America, Western Europe and the literatures from a
handful of postcolonial nations. Hence the literature emanating from such countries as the Marshall Islands, or more generally speaking the Pacific Islands, which have a decentred rhizomatic geography and whose visibility on the global map is almost nil as compared to the presence of the bigger nations, often draw lesser attention than the literatures written on the major countries.

Byron Bender, a University of Hawaii linguist and scholar of Marshallese culture and language has described *Melal* as “an extraordinary work that defies categorization...a political and social treatise disguised as a novel.” (as qtd. in Robert C. Kiste 208) In her review of the manuscript of the novel, Teresia Teaiwa of the Pacific Islands Studies department of Victoria University at Wellington, wrote that *Melal* is a “rare and precious gift to all humanity.” (as qtd. in Robert C. Kiste 208) Author Patricia Grace’s enthusiastic endorsement on the back cover of the novel describes it as “a wrenching story of people — voiceless, powerless — as they attempt to survive the horrors of nuclear testing, relocation, Western arrogance and domination.”

Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s essay “Heliotropes: Solar Ecologies and Pacific Radiations” speaks about how the field of ecology was constituted by the Atomic Energy Commission in its study of the radiation effects on the Pacific Islands. DeLoughrey points out that the concepts of global ecology are derivatives of the literal fallout from the Cold War and that solar and military form of radiation are the key indicators of globalization. Explaining how the atomic discourse has been naturalised in western literatures by likening nuclear weapons to the sun, she describes how natural figures of solar radiation have been used in Pacific Literature to articulate a heliocentric global modernity. By connecting radiation with ecological thought, her writing explores the close connection between militarism and ecological violence and their representation in indigenous writings of the Pacific.
In a paper entitled “Sea of secrets: Imagining illicit fishing in Robert Barclay’s *Melal* and Rob Stewart’s *Sharkwater*”, Teresa Shewry tries to examine how contemporary literature and film responded to the criminalised fishing practices in the Pacific in an age of severe environmental degradation. She points out how Rob Stewart’s documentary film *Sharkwater* describes the shark fin industry as illicit thereby placing shark fishers at the margins of ethical and social life. She indicates that Stewart’s understanding of the shark fin industry is complicated keeping in mind the complex network of state, economy, environment and culture within which the illegal practices of the shark fin industry take place. Shewry also examines Barclay’s *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific* as being also concerned with environmental degradation and criminalized fishing. Shewry notes that while like Stewart, Barclay also places illicit fishing within the context of a capitalist economy, he also stresses how illicit fishing in the Pacific Islands is connected to multiple colonialisms and military occupations.

Another important paper by Anthony Carrigan on “Postcolonial Disaster, Pacific Nuclearization, and Disabling Environments”, examines the intersection between Postcolonial Studies and Disability Studies in the context of Pacific nuclearization. The paper explores how two texts Robert Barclay’s *Melal* and James George’s novel *Ocean Roads* describe the nuclear Pacific as a disabling environment conditioned by imperialist military interventions. Taking his cue from the sociological research on disaster and disability studies conducted by Mark Priestley and Laura Hemingway and from the postcolonial theory of necropolitics, Carrigan shows how both novels foreground deep entanglements between nuclearization and disability in the region of the Pacific.

Keeping in mind these perspectives, this chapter will try to argue that through *Melal*, Robert Barclay attempted to realize the social and political issues of environmentalism through a fictional representation of an actual nuclear holocaust which had incinerated the
region around the Marshall Islands in the 1950’s. It will be the argument of this chapter that by doing so, Barclay in his novel tried to expose the direct linkages between colonialism, US militarism and the fact of environmental destruction in the Marshall Islands. Barclay’s portrayal of the nuclear radiated environment of the Pacific further brings into question the planetary notion of American environmentalism by exposing the hypocrisy and parochialism inherent within it. However, it needs to be realized first that any proper understanding of the environmental destruction of the Marshall Islands necessitates an understanding of the history of the region.  

The Marshall Islands, made up of two chains of twenty nine coral atolls and five individual islands and spread over around two million square kilometres, are situated just north of the Equator between Hawaii and Australia in the Pacific Ocean. The total land area of the Marshall Islands is around one hundred and eighty one square kilometres. Presently the islands are inhabited by more than sixty thousand people who live mainly on Majuro Atoll, which serves as the capital of the Marshall Islands, and Ebeye, an island of the massive Kwajalein Atoll (Royle 211). The human habitation on these Islands may be traced back to as long as four thousand years ago. But, the Islands have also been subjected to multiple colonialisms mainly from the Western countries almost since the fifteenth century. There had been a Spanish invasion on these islands as early as in 1494, which was followed by British visits (Brown 40; Royle 211) The islands got its name after the British captain, John Marshall, who surveyed the islands from 1788 (Royle). However, it was the Germans who were the first important colonial actors on the islands, for it is they who occupied the island as a coaling station in 1878. Subsequently in 1885 the islands became part of a formal German protectorate (Royle 211). During the First World War, the Germans lost control of the islands to the Japanese who took formal administrative control of the islands under the League of Nations charter in 1920. (Royle 211; Brown 40) Japan, however started treating
the islands as part of their home country and they transported so many Japanese there that the Marshallese became a minority on the islands. During World War II the Americans ousted the Japanese from the Marshall Islands and the other islands of Micronesia and established military bases at Kwajalein and Enewetak atolls, the former being the US force’s largest air base in Micronesia. In 1947 the United Nations incorporated the Marshall Islands into the Trust Territory of the Pacific to be administered by the United States, and the Japanese settlers on the Marshall Islands were repatriated. However, the US abused this treaty. In their race against the Soviet Union for nuclear supremacy during the Cold War era, the USA prioritised their national security against the interest of the Marshallese as they used the Marshall Islands as “empty” spaces to conduct nuclear tests. Between 1940 to 1950 USA carried out sixty six nuclear tests mainly on the Bikini and Enewetak Atolls of the Marshall Islands (Royle 211; Kiste 209). The most infamous of these thermonuclear tests was the Bravo blast at Bikini Atoll on March 1, 1954 which was almost a thousand times more powerful than the bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki (McArthur 264). The violent blasts carried out by the USA subsequently after the Bravo test not only severely contaminated the northern atolls of the Marshall Islands but often incinerated entire islets. The islanders of the atolls were not only forced to relocate leaving behind their homelands, but they were also abandoned on uninhabited islands where they faced starvation due to limited subsistence resources or allowed to die due to radiation effects. Despite the conclusion of the nuclear testing in the 1950’s, and despite the Marshall Islands gaining independence in 1991, the United States Army continues to occupy Kwajalein Atoll as a key strategic location for military purposes. Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles with inactive warheads shot from Air Force Base in California use the lagoon at Kwajalein as test site for target practice. The Kwajalein Missile Range assumed even greater significance during the 1980’s with Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” agenda. Thus for centuries the local inhabitants of
the Marshall Islands have been subjected to multiple colonialisms, military exploitation and environmental degradation.

Against this historical background Barclay in his novel *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific* reveals the different ways in which the Marshall Islanders have been confronting the devastating repercussions of the nuclear colonialism by the USA as late as in 1981. It should be noted at this point that ‘Melal’ is an archaic Marshallese word meaning playground of demons, a place not habitable by people. Although the novel is written in the background of the Bravo blast of 1954 at Bikini Atoll, the blast or the incidents leading to the blast does not feature in the novel directly. Instead, the nuclear holocaust is referred to in the novel indirectly as a nightmarish incident through the narratives of the characters as a nightmarish incident. Jebro for example remembers how his mother Iia, who had been a witness and a victim of the nuclear explosion, had once described the blast to him:

Jebro’s mother had also told him a story of the bomb, which was also the story of how she came to Kwajalein atoll. She said that as a little girl on Rongelp, one morning just before dawn, she saw from a window what she thought was a moon rising in the west. It was so bright that trees, the ground, the lagoon, everything became awash in its reddish glow. Not long after that a tremendous wind blasted in, so strong that some homes were badly damaged and even some of the trees were blown half out of the ground. That seemed to be the end of it, and everybody knew it was from an American bomb, but they were safe from this one, they knew, because they have been evacuated before some of the bombs and this time they were not [...] a few hours later she watched a strange, dark cloud, blow over the atoll. An ashy powder began to fall. No one knew what that was, and the other children played in it while it formed a two-inch layer on the ground [...] Later it rained, the powder coming down from the sky in the rain and washing into the cistern. The drinking water turned
yellow. It tasted bitter. So did the fish caught that day, having been powdered while in water at the bottom of canoes. (Barclay 60-61)

It is a fact that the violent blasts severely contaminated the island regions and incinerated entire islets. But yet another fact is that the measures taken by USA to exploit the Marshall Islanders amount up to be a story of deception, lies and abuse. In fact, the meticulously planned nuclear testing may be understood as a form of environmental racism indulged in by the US authorities and directed towards the indigenous inhabitants of the region. This implicit racist attitude of the USA becomes quite evident when one notes that in 1953 the US Atomic Energy Commission communicated to the American Congress that “tests should be held overseas until it could be established more definitely that continental detonations would not endanger the public health and safety.” (qtd. in Smith-Norris 06) Seeking “empty” test spaces, the USA decided to carry on with their Cold War programme of nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands. But the island region was not terra nullis but inhabited by indigenous peoples since thousands of years. The people living on these islands for hundreds of years were forcefully relocated to other islands, and were told by the US administrative authorities that this would be “for the good of mankind and to end all world wars” (qtd. in McArthur 264; Brown 40). Thus, the USA which is otherwise accepted as a vanguard in modern environmental activism appears to be hypocritical when it comes to the matter of planetary environmental consciousness, the USA clearly having two different environmental safety parameters, one for the citizens of their own country, and another for the citizens of other countries, mainly the less fortunate postcolonial countries located in the global South.

Barclay in his novel depicts Ebeye Island as one of the most densely populated islands in the world. Thousands of Marshallese live on seventy-some acres of land, most of who have come to the island upon being relocated from other islands. Rujen Keju for instance came to the Island when he and his family had to leave their homeland at Tar-Woj. As Barclay puts it,
they were “removed from the island in 1965, when the Americans took most of the lagoon and several of the surrounding islands to be used as a bull’s-eye for ballistic missile testing.” (Barclay 23). Rujen’s wife Iia had had to leave her native land Rongelap on the island of Malu even earlier when “Malu was poisoned by radioactive fallout from the sixty-six atomic and hydrogen thermonuclear bombs detonated nearby at Bikini and Enewetak.” (Barclay 80)

The story of the forced relocation of Rujen Keju and his family is symptomatic of the larger history of displacement and migration of the Marshallese peoples in the region. Such forceful relocations of the subaltern indigenous inhabitants of a region in the name of global peace and the welfare of mankind is nothing less than an indefensible abuse and total disregard of the land ethic and the collective environmental imagination of the people in the region. The idea of bringing world peace and security through violence and use of weapons of mass destruction is unambiguously critiqued by Barclay as he begins the novel with a few lines from a petition signed in 1968 against the Americans by the displaced islanders of Kwajalein Atoll: “We believe in peace and love, not in the display of power to destroy mankind. If maintaining peace means killing and destruction of the fruits of man’s efforts to build himself a better world, we desire no part of it.” (Barclay ix, emphasis in original) Barclay evokes the natural beauty of Rujen’s ancestral homeland Tar-Woj with its lush green vegetation to stand in sharp contrast to the polluted horrors on Ebeye Island and the materialistic vulgarities of Kwajalein Island where the American missile testing facility is stationed. Moreover, the depiction in the novel of the adventures at sea carried out by the teenage American boys gives Barclay an opportunity to describe not only the complexity of life in the Pacific Ocean but also to express a philosophy of life:

"Death ruled the ocean. The ocean itself was not a dead thing, having never been alive, but the life in it existed only as a byproduct of death. Every living thing in the ocean was fleeing from something trying to kill it and eat it, and every living thing was out
to suck the life from something else. You could cut open a living shark and it would eat its own guts. The same thing was true of life on land, even with people — if one thing wanted to live then it had to take the life of another, to kill, swallow, and then crap out as much life as it needed to stay alive. Life was a shark eating its own guts, an eel chomping on its own tail, a twisted game where the goal was not to win, because nothing ever did, but to put off losing for as long as possible and to have a good time doing it. (Barclay 214)

This philosophy is embraced by the teenage American boy Travis Kotrady, who is out on the ocean for adventure and is responsible for sinking Jebro’s boat. However, Barclay makes it clear that such a philosophy stands at odds to the Marshallese culture which believes in symbiotic relationships, in the mutual sharing with others of whatever little one has.

The anthropologist Roger Keesing once argued that Pacific interest in land rights was a postcolonial invention, part of the broader creation of “myths of ancestral ways of life that serve as powerful political symbols [...] Land and spiritual connection to it, could not have, other than in a context of invasion and displacement and alienation, the ideological significance that it acquires in such a context” (“Creating the Past: Custom and identity in the contemporary Pacific”, qtd. in Kirsch 175). Keesing has however been rightly criticized for ignoring the importance that the value of the land had to the people in the region in the past. Barclay depicts both the environmental imagination and the sense of belonging of the Marshallese to their own land by referring at the beginning of the second part of the novel to the petition sent to the United Nations by the Marshallese leaders: “Land means a great deal to the Marshallese. It means more than just a place where you can plant your food crops and build your houses, or a place where you can bury your dead. It is the very life of the people. Take away their land and their spirits go away.” (Barclay 273, emphasis in original) This same sense of belongingness of the Marshallese to the land and their larger environment was
uttered by Tony de Brum, the Marshallese minister at the Seventh Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference at the United Nations on May 11, 2005: “for the indigenous people it is not that simple. Our land and waters are sacred to us. Our land and waters embody our culture, our traditions, our kinship ties, our social structures and our ability to take care of ourselves. Our lands are irreplaceable.” (Web.) These words of Tony de Brum indicate that for the Marshallese, displacements of their population and the destruction of their own cultural language and tradition amount nothing less than “genocide”. And it is precisely this genocidal victimization of the Marshallese by the USA through the forceful occupation of their land and waters that is indicated by Barclay through the words of Jebro in the novel:

We’ve lost too much knowledge of how to be Marshallese, our land too and all those that used to keep us busy, like fishing, building canoes, teaching the ways of navigation — all our old magic. I think now we try to cope the Americans, but we can never have the life Americans have. Marshallese boys are in a hole between two worlds, and maybe the rope is a way for many of them to get out. (130)

For the people of the Pacific Islands in general and the Marshall Islands in particular, “land anchors people in place...and gives them identity” (Carucci, Laurence Marshall, as qtd. in Kirsch 175). To them, both “identity and ...land exist beyond the economic, beyond the surface layer, beyond the map that we see [...] It is a spiritual tie to land and it is a tie to land that can never be broken...” (Pollock, Nancy J., as qtd. in Kirsch 175). For the Marshallese, relations to the land is a very important continuing factor, for as Carucci points out, “the tie continues to persists over time and space, no matter where you are.” (qtd. in Kirsch 175) It is this spiritual connection with the land that forces Jebro to go to Tar-Woj, an island that has been placed off limits by the USA military authorities. Rujen chides Jebro for his decision to camp at Tar-Woj saying that it is against the American law. Jebro argues back that “Nuke has never seen his home island,” [...] “Maybe that’s more of a crime than a law.” [...] “It is your
boat,” [...] “So I’ll just leave it here, find some other way to the island of my birth, where coconuts, pandanus, and breadfruits fall to the ground and rot because that is the Americans’ law.” (Barclay 10) Jebro’s sense of belongingness to his native land is indicated in *Mela*:

Jebro was proud of belonging to his clan, and he was proud of the bond he had with the land at Malu. As the eldest son of his mother, an eldest daughter, he could even be an *alap* someday, but he would never live there. Malu was poisoned by radioactive fallout from the sixty-six atomic and hydrogen thermonuclear bombs detonated nearby at Bikini and Enewetak. Jebro might live and die without even setting foot on his rightful land at Malu, but knowing that it was there, that he belonged to it to him, gave his life profound meaning and position.

Jebro also felt a bond with Tar-Woj, his *lamoran*, patrilineal homeland, and as he sat on the beach with his brother, in violation of a foreigner’s law, he felt not only the power that having a right to be there gave him, but also a responsibility to the land, to be a part of the life it sustained. (Barclay 80)

Barclay in his novel also describes the experience of a man in his boyhood, who, when he came to learn that as a result of the nuclear blast “his rightful land, his inheritance, had become nothing more than part of a gaping crater in the reef, almost two hundred feet deep and one mile around, he knew right then that the bomb had destroyed part of his soul.” (Barclay 80)

The Keju family and the rest of the Marshallese were not only forced to leave their homelands where myths, history, genealogy, and identity were inscribed into the landscape, but they were also shifted to and abandoned into uninhabited islands where they had to face near starvation. The Ebeye Island to which the Keju family and most of the Marshallese were relocated was, one of the worst slums and shantytowns in the Pacific, exemplifying almost an American version of apartheid in the Pacific. As Barclay describes it, “On Ebeye, the land did
not support very much life, boasted no crops, no ground water, no jungle, no grass, no stands of fruit-bearing trees. The people's lives were sustained not by the land but by money flowing in and then out like the tide...” (79). Even more heinous was the “human experiment” that the Marshall Islanders experienced after the Bravo blast. As Barclay writes, within hours of the blast, “[a]n ashy powder began to fall” downward from Bikini Atoll (Barclay 81). Children started playing in it, while some people who thought it to be rare, collected it in wash tubs without realising that it was highly radioactive. Despite political and environmental protests from other countries, the American government tried to downplay the impact of the test by describing it as “a negligible hazard” (Smith-Norris 11). Nevertheless, as Barclay indicates in his novel, the results of radioactive radiations started to become apparent from that very day itself:

By that night people began to vomit. Their skin and their eyes and their mouths became inflamed, burning hot [...] Iia said she watched the faces of her friends and relatives become red with pain, and after about ten days the hair on their heads and their body hair was falling away, their burned skin was peeling off in patches, their fingernails were becoming discoloured and falling off, their fingers bleeding. (Barclay 81)

None of the islanders had been pre-warned, and nor were there any instructions for evacuation or relocation. More severe were the long-term effects of the blast. The sufferers of such slow violence were the islanders, essentially marginalized people who had come to be treated as dispensable by their wealthier brethren, people whom Arundhuti Roy has described as “nothing but refugees in an unacknowledged war.” (Roy 65) The slow radiological violence that the Pacific islanders had been subjected to was “driven inward, somatised into cellular dramas of mutation that — particularly in the bodies of the poor — remain
unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated.” (Nixon 06) Barclay in *Melal* graphically describes the long term effects of such “slow violence” in Keju’s family:

Iia had been evacuated to Kwajalein atoll from Rongelap when she was nine, after her island accidentally received too much fallout from one of the atomic bomb tests at Bikini---the Bravo test. She was burned, and had some other trouble, but not nearly as bad as most because she had been sick that day and had remained inside her house [...]. Jebro was Rujen and Iia’s first born and they had wanted more, a girl, but she had miscarried once before giving birth to Jebro, three times before Nuke, and then the one after. (Barclay 20)

Despite being “burned” and experiencing what Rujen calls “other troubles”, Iia still considers herself to be a lucky:

She was one of the lucky ones, she said, never suffering from the thyroid cancers that eventually grew in most of the other children exposed that day, but then she always had that trouble having babies, and sometimes, Jebro knew from hearing what he was not supposed to hear, she had jellyfish babies, what some Marshallese women called monster babies because they looked inside-out, and finally it killed her. (Barclay 82)

Iia’s reproductive disability and her giving birth to “jellyfish babies” is portrayed by Barclay as one of the long term effects of nuclear radiation on humans in the Islands. Rujen recalls how even after “the doctors said [Iia] had recovered” (20), they used to come and took her to their ship “to examine her and take her blood, and once they took a little piece of bone from her chest” though “[t]he doctors never said [...] that Iia better not try having any babies”. (21)

Rujen, at least initially, had been an ardent admirer of the American way of life, but the death of his wife, made him realize the truth behind the motivations of the Americans, even though he was more than willing to turn a blind eye to it:
He knew, but who was he going to confront and accuse, the U.S. Army, the Navy, the entire American country? He had heard the rumours that they did it on purpose, because they wanted to know what things their bombs could do, but Rujen never believed that and neither did Iia. How could he believe that? For the President and the Army and the Navy and all the leaders of America to think together to do something so awful on purpose to peaceful Christian people, while at the same time they fought the evil powers and gave the Marshallese so much and strived to fill the world with peace and good and freedom—all of them, thousands of them together, would have to be completely wudeakeak, insane. It made no sense. (Barclay 21-22)

It is also indicated in the novel that even after the conclusion of nuclear testing in the 1950’s, the US Army continues to occupy the Marshall Islands as an impact area for their missile tests. (Barclay 144) The environmental racist attitude of the US government is evident even in Henry Kissinger’s purported statement when he was Secretary of State: “When there are only 90,000 people out there, who gives a damn?” (Dowell 1988: 26, qtd. in McArthur 03). Barclay’s Melal makes obvious such broad interconnections between environmental racism, colonialism and nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands.

Barclay in his novel also counterposes the environmental apathy of the Americans towards the Marshallese environment with that of the U.S led conservational attitude towards non-humans, pointing out the fact that American environmentalism while posing as planetary, was at root profoundly parochial. 8 Barclay posits at least two different versions of environmental advocacy here. The Americans are bent on saving the dolphins which have become a signature species for the global conservation movement. The Marshallese on the other hand have their own indigenous version of environmental realism, one that is elemental in scope and conforming to their local realizations of natural/environmental cycles. Thus when Crawford Pelto, the lab guy at the Kwajalein sewage treatment plant tells Rujen that it
is illegal to catch or kill dolphins, that one “can’t kill dolphins — it’s like whales” (Barclay 97), Rujen asserts his own indigenous vision of the environmental reality: “I don’t think that’s the law,” [...] “I never heard anybody say not to catch dolphins, not to catch anything except...you know, Marshallese used to say don’t catch some things because it was poison, or some things if it was breeding season, but —” (Barclay 97). Midway through the novel this conflict between the environmental worldviews of the Americans and the Marshallese assumes a crisis proportion. Hurt by what Rujen sees as disrespect towards Marshallese traditions and custom, Rujen refuses to lend support to the American-led campaign of saving the dolphins. When Foster Rick, a civilian employee of the American Army at Kwajalein base criticizes Rujen for his taking of dolphin’s meat and tells him that he has been given the responsibility to enter into a negotiation with the people accused of catching the dolphins which swim into the lagoon, Rujen expresses his displeasure:

Rick, I tell you, no bullshit — Marshallese don’t go looking for dolphins, chasing them in the ocean, but it’s a Marshallese custom that when you see a dolphin come inside the lagoon, that’s a gift. If you refuse to take it then you get bad luck — that’s the custom. No negotiations can change this. Just let those guys have these dolphins and I think soon everybody here will forget about it — they will have other things to worry about. (Barclay 120)

In a further illustrative sequence of events, Nuke takes pity on the turtle that he has caught at sea and allows it to go away. Nuke compares the situation of the captured turtle to that of the lives of the Marshallese boys who “are in a hole between two worlds”, caught between their indigenous values and the American life-style (Barclay 130). Nuke comprehends this dilemma through a analogy: “I think it’s strange how turtles live in the water but have to breathe air [...] It’s like they can never decide which world they want to live in, so they try and live in both. I think it would be very hard to live as a turtle.” (Barclay 129)
Melal is an important ecologically inspired text that brings to public visibility the reality of the environmental damage done to the Marshall Islands, a postcolonial country in the global South. It is a revelatory piece of writing that explores the fact that some of the most cataclysmic environmental hazards in modern history have been ignored by and in mainstream environmental debates. It also brings to light the chilling truth, that those very countries in which the contents of the modern environmental imagination have been born, are in fact responsible for the environmental destruction of the Marshall Islands. Barclay’s novel also gives legitimacy to the assertion made by the Indian environmental thinker Ramachandra Guha, that mainstream American ecocriticism is theoretically inadequate since it fails to deal with environmental issues arising out of military intervention by the US as well as the rest of the West. Thus Barclay’s novel may be understood as a vocabulary of protest not only against American environmentalism but also against the hegemony of American ecocriticism.

Notes


3. For a detailed sociological study on the Pacific Islands, see Dirk H. R.. Spennemann, “Japanese Poaching and the Enforcement of German Colonial Sovereignty in

4. For details on the nuclear policy of the USA during the Cold War, see Martha Smith-Norris. “‘Only a Dust in the Face of the Wind’: An Analysis of the BRAVO Nuclear Incident in the Pacific, 1954.” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 6.1 (Spring 1997): 01-34.

5. The “Star Wars” or its formal name Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) was a proposed missile defence system initiated during the tenure of the American President Ronald Regan in 1983 to protect USA from ballistic strategic nuclear weapons. SDI was nicknamed largely in the mainstream media as “Star Wars” after the popular 1977 film by George Lucas.

6. This is how more often than not, it is the people from the margins who are made to face the consequences of the so called ‘development’ projects necessary for the betterment of the humanity, initiated by their ‘developed’ brethren. In an entirely different context, mention may be made of the nationalist and developmental slogan of the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru addressing to the villagers who were to be displaced for the construction of the Hirakud Dam in 1648: “If you are to suffer, you should suffer in the interest of the country...” (Cited in “The Greater Common Good” by Arundhuti Roy)

7. For details, see Alex Pashley. “Climate change migration is ‘genocide’ says Marshall Islands minister.” *Climate Home*, October 5, 2015.
http://www.climatechangenews.com/2015/10/05/climate-change-migration-is-genocide-says-marshall-islands-minister/


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CHAPTER IV

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*: Humans, Nonhumans and the Realities of the Environment.

Ever since the success of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980) opened up the international Anglophone market to the new writings emerging from the Indian subcontinent, Amitav Ghosh has come along as one of the key writers writing in English today. An anthropologist by training and a writer by profession, his interest range from history to politics, from folk myths to current affairs, all of which he reinterprets and binds into a seamless whole. Ghosh’s writings manage to focus on issues from a global perspective while not being insensitive and intolerant to local and highly individual, often contested and marginalized histories. As a result he has developed a substantial volume of work that resonates with some of the key issues in today’s time, which are often politically contentious and therefore theoretically important. Ghosh’s writings are thoughtful and provocative. He draws portraits of people, places and events, and is a writer whose contributions to global conversations on historical as well as contemporary social, political and cultural issues are well recognised. Indeed, a critical examination of Ghosh’s work may open up an opportunity for the reader not only to experience his fictional writings for pure aesthetic pleasure but also to decipher their multilayered structures, thereby decoding the various social, political and cultural issues inherent in his discourse. In the novel *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh’s preoccupation with the issue of the environment on the one hand vis-à-vis his engagement with the marginalized and silenced subaltern voices and their dilemmas on the other, has led critics to label him as a novelist with a postcolonial agenda equally as an environmental activist, labels which he has resisted time and again (see Wroe, 2015).
Amitav Ghosh has till now published seven novels namely *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and *River of Smoke* (2011). His major non-fictional works include *In an Antique Land* (1992), *Dancing in Cambodia and at Large in Burma* (1998), *Countdown* (1999) and *The Imam and the Indian* (2002). In all his major works Ghosh meditates upon a core set of issues, issues which are both global and local at the same time, issues which are fundamental to human experiences; but each time he does so from a new perspective. As can be inferred from the title itself, reason as conceived by Western modernity is the central theme of his debut novel *The Circle of Reason*. “The novel published in 1986, dramatizes the encounter of colonial, pre-colonial and ‘para-colonial’ knowledges within a colonial and post-colonial milieu, demonstrating how the formation of colonial power/knowledge complexes is both reproduced and ironically subverted by its reception in colonized societies; how the ‘subaltern’ peoples, in the form of illegal immigrants in a fictionalized Gulf emirate, both elude and fall victim to the ‘logic’ of the modern state; how diasporic connections increasingly traverse and transgress the boundaries imposed by such raison d’etat; and eventually how ‘Reason’ is thwarted by its necessary imbrications with the emotional ties of custom, tradition, and human sympathy.”

(Mondal 08) Set in 1960’s Calcutta and published in 1988, Ghosh’s next novel *The Shadow Lines* deals with the trials and vicissitudes experienced by a Bengali family in the wake of Partition of India in 1947 and again during the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In this novel Ghosh delves into the meaning of ideas such as freedom, nationalism and national identity in a modern world. He tries to interrogate the “shadow lines”, those invisible borders, both subjective and objective, that exist between people, which mark the transition from youth to maturity, between past and present, and between one community and the other. *The Calcutta Chromosome* published in 1996 may be understood as a kind of medical thriller or science
fiction. Though loosely based on the journals of Sir Ronald Ross, the British scientist who discovered the pathogen for malaria in the Anopheles mosquito, the novel subverts the traditional science fiction alignment by introducing postcolonial perspectives. In this novel Ghosh deals with issues “that engages seriously with the intervention of scientific knowledge — this time in the form of colonial medicine — in a colonial society and its reception by the colonized.” (Mondal 13) The novel tries to explore the Eurocentric self-representation of Reason, Progress and modernity enforced by colonialism. Published in 2000 The Glass Palace explores the ties between families and friendship across four countries and four generations. Concerned mostly with the fortunes of three families, the novel focuses on the changing economic situations of both Burma and India while probing complex questions about nation and how these notions change as a country is swept away by modernity. The novel is a poignant evocation of what Chitra Sankaran calls “the moral conundrums and dilemmas that the colonial power imposed on the colonized in the guise of undertaking a ‘civilizing mission’ […] It explores the existential and moral dilemmas that the middle-class Asians — soldiers under the raj fighting for the empire; Asians who were ideologically torn between two sides of a question, such as members of the INA — were forced to grapple with on a daily basis in their lives.” (xviii) In 2008 Ghosh published The Sea of Poppies, an epic saga, the first of a series of three novels of what he calls the Ibis trilogy. The novel deals with a host of themes right from subaltern destinies, the origin and development of the Indian diaspora as indentured labours to the British plantations, to the human devastation caused by colonialism and colonial injustices. Published in 2011 Amitav Ghosh’s The River of Smoke gives voice to the dilemmas of the subalterns and the marginalized through his fictional narrative. It probes the human frailty and fortitude of individuals caught up in the opium war in China.
The action of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the novel selected for discussion in this thesis, takes place in the Indian part of the Sundarbans, an immense archipelago of islands on the easternmost coast of India, interposed between the sea and the plains of Bengal. Life in the islands is dependent on the ebb and flow of tides, on the vagaries of nature. For centuries the islands have had been the shelter for the hopeless and the homeless of society, a habitation for people who have braved the inhospitable condition of the region to eke out a precarious and perilous existence on the alluvial tracts amidst the crocodiles and the man eating Royal Bengal Tigers in the forest. Over the course of time, the islanders have evolved their own and unique ways of existence in consonance with the rhythms of the fragile ecosystem of the region. While the islanders depend on the forest for their subsistence, they believe that anyone venturing into the forest of the watery labyrinth with an impure heart will never return.

Into such a setting comes Piyali Roy, one of the central characters of the novel, an American cetologist of Indian origin. Cetology involves the study of marine mammals, and Piyali has come all the way from Seattle, U.S.A, her hometown, to the Sundarbans to study the freshwater dolphins found in the Asian waters — the Indus, the Mekong, the Irrawaddy and of course the Ganges. On her way from Calcutta to the Sundarbans she meets Kanai, another principal character of the novel, an urbane, self styled cosmopolitan who is also a translator by profession in Delhi, India. However, Kanai has come to the island to visit his aunt Nilima and to receive a newly recovered notebook written by his deceased uncle Nirmal, who had been a poet and scholar and whose ideas of a socialist revolution though initially dashed, were later revived through his experiences with the people in the Morichjhapi Island of the Sundarbans. Nirmal’s wife Nilima, who is also adored as ‘Mashima’ by the islanders, had greatly contributed toward the social development of the people of the islands. Through her own efforts she has successfully established a non-government developmental agency
called the Badabon Trust which provides basic infrastructural facilities like a school and a hospital for the people of the region.

In the Sundarbans, Piyali or Piya meets Fokir, an illiterate but proud local fisherman in the Sundarbans. Fokir is the son of Kusum, a woman who though an early inhabitant of the Islands was forced to settle in the Marchjhapi Island and was later killed in the violence that ensued between the locals and the government of West Bengal. Piya engages Fokir as a helper and a guide in her research in the waters of the Sundarbans not only because Fokir has earlier saved her life but also because of the mutual similarity in their uncanny interest with the ways of the seas and rivers. Moreover Piya is fascinated with Fokir’s local knowledge and with the ways he identifies himself with the local environment. Piya feels that Fokir’s presence in her fieldwork might be of enormous help to her in her research work. But, since both Piya and Fokir do not share a common language of communication, Kanai is entrusted with the task of translation between the two.

Kanai goes through Nirmal’s notebook which he has received from Nilima. The notebook recounts Nirmal’s experiences in the islands during the Marichjhapi massacre in 1979 in which thousands of people including Fokir’s mother Kusum had been killed. Nirmal’s notebook recounts that in or around 1970, during Bangladesh’s war of independence, a group of people who were displaced from the Bangladesh side of the Sundarbans had tried to sneak in through the porous border to the Indian part of the tide country. But the government of Indian state of West Bengal sent these refugee settlers to the refugee camps situated in central India. With the change in the ruling government in West Bengal, the refugees rehabilitated in the camps of central India started to migrate and settle in and around the island of Marichjhapi, which by the time had already been declared as a wildlife conservation area by the Indian government. To clear the island from encroachment, the government used force, leading to the death of hundreds of refugees.
Piya’s notion of Fokir being a person who selflessly identifies himself with the ecology of the region receives a blow when Fokir along with other people of the islands participates in the act of killing a tiger which has entered human habitation and has caused damage to the livestock. In course of their survey on the river, both Piya and Fokir get trapped in a violent storm. Piya somehow survives the storm; however, Fokir while trying to save Piya loses his life. Fokir’s death causes a sense of realisation to dawn upon Piya, and she returns to the U.S.A. However, she again comes back to the islands to resume her research on the marine mammals of the region, but under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust.

Most critical commentaries on Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* have been made from an anthropocentric perspective. But there have also been a couple of studies that try to underscore the issue of how animals are represented in the text and the relevance of this to the social milieu which the text portrays. Before exploring this critical territory, it may be important to refer to a few works on the Sundarbans. Annu Jalais’s *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics & Environment in the Sunderbans* is a study of cultural anthropology which examines the myths and beliefs of the people of the Sundarbans, as they have evolved over time through their negotiations with a hostile environment. Recognized worldwide for its unique ecosystem, the Sundarbans serve as the backdrop of the book. Jalais points out that while the Sundarbans have been projected as an ecological paradise, the muted voices of the marginalised humans living on those islands have never been heard. The book also tries to appreciate what the tigers signify to the people of the Sundarbans. Jalais argues that for the people of Sundarbans, tigers serve as a definite social marker; far more than the categories of caste, tribe or religion, the people of Sundarbans articulate their social location and interaction with reference to the non human world, chiefly the tigers. The book is further an exploration of the history of the encounter of Islam and Hinduism as expressed through the tiger-charming practices and the worship of various forest deities such as Bonbibi and
Dokkhin Rai. Jalais also focuses on the history of Morichjhapi massacre and its uneasy nexus with politics and globalisation.

Jonathan Steinwand in his paper “What the Whales Would Tell Us: Cetacean Communication in Novels by Witi Ihimaera, Linda Hogan, Zakes Mda, and Amitav Ghosh” included in the volume *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, explores the emergence in postcolonial texts of an urgency to trace the relationship between humans and charismatic megafauna like whales and dolphins in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, Zakes Mda, Linda Hogan and Witi Ihimera. Steinwand argues that the large volume of texts produced by postcolonial writers relating to the sea or the land-sea relationship suggest that the general understanding of the environmental ethics which chiefly relies on the idea of land ethics has broadened enough to include maritime spaces. Besides, the cetacean turn in postcolonial literature draws one’s attention not only to the whales and dolphins but also to those marginalised people who inhabit those ecosystems and whose livelihoods are equally at stake. The cetacean turn in the recent postcolonial writings is said to be a further indicator that each society or ecosystem faces localized environmental challenges, and that such writing is a corrective to the sentimentalizing tendencies of environmentalism.

In his paper “The Postcolonial Uncanny: The Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*” Promod K. Nayar uses Sigmund Freud’s theory of the ‘uncanny’ to understand the islanders’ sense of space in the Sundarbans as reflected in Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*. Nayar uses Freud’s theory of ‘uncanny’ to understand a sense of space in which one finds oneself simultaneously at home and not at home, a sense of space which is both familiar and strange, safe and threatening at the same time. Nayar points out that the postcolonial state of India in its craze for development has created a large number of displaced and dispossessed people who find themselves out of place in an alien world and thereby seek a home. For Nayar, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* offers a humanistic
critique of this policy of dispossession of the marginalized by the state. In Ghosh’s novel the issue of refugees of Morichjhapi is emblematic of the failure of the postcolonial state to provide a home to the dispossessed. For the refugees in Ghosh’s novel the place is unhomely not only because the dispossessed are out of place, without a place in land or history, but also because the land they possess is in itself uncanny in the sense of it being inhospitable. Nayar points out that Ghosh’s ‘uncanny’ works at multiple levels right from ecology to land reclamation, from homelands to local knowledge, and that his text proposes what Nayar calls “a more emancipatory and inclusive postcoloniality.” (90)

Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in the section, titled “Zoocriticism and Postcolonial” in the book Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment, try to bridge the gap between Zoocriticism and Postcolonialism. Huggan and Tiffin point out that in Western intellectual history, human civilization has always been constructed against the animal and the animalistic. In the chapter “Agency, sex and emotion”, Huggan and Tiffin make a passing reference to Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide as a novel dealing with competing man-animal priorities. They point out that in the novel “the tiger is not sacrificed to anthropocentric narrative expectation but rather to its pre-designated ideological positioning between the rights of the local peoples and western conservationist objectives — the subject of an increasingly important postcolonial debate” (185).

It may be said that most of these scholarly criticisms of Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide suffer from a sense of intellectual rigidity for they are divided between a radically polarised anthropocentric and a biocentric approach. While Jalais’s Forest of Tigers is an anthropological study on the life of Sundarbans, Nayar focuses on the plight of the displaced refugees of the Sundarbans. Similarly, Steinwand and Huggan and Tiffin argue for an interpretation of the text from a posthuman perspective, calling for a re-interpretation of the place of animals in human society. It is noticeable that only Huggan and Tiffin try to a
certain extent to bring into dialogue the issues of the human and the non-human as revealed in the text. However, their analysis focuses on the single issue of the man-animal conflict in the text and it evades other imminent social and political realities of the environment of the Sundarbans.

In contrast to these criticisms, this chapter will make an attempt towards a nuanced historical understanding of the social and political realities of the environment of the Sundarbans. Such an interpretation is also a break from the apolitical tendencies of the earlier forms of ecocriticism which tended either toward a pastoral impulse or an aesthetic appreciation of nature. This chapter will instead try to argue that through his novel Ghosh attempts a critique of the American brand of mainstream environmental ethics which relies heavily on the idea of wilderness conservation and deep ecology. While Ghosh appears to be not entirely averse to the philosophy of conservation, it seems that what he disapproves of is the assumption of its being universal and its application on a planetary scale, especially in the global South. Ghosh argues that while European instrumentalist attitudes and corporate exploitation of the environment continue, radical counter-moves often inspired by Western attitudinal changes have often resulted in catastrophic consequences both for the humans and the non-humans of the islands. Contrary to the Western perception that the developing countries are too poor to be environmentally conscious, Ghosh points out that the disenfranchised locals of the Sundarbans have their own environmental concerns which is often much more genuine, imminent and honest than those of the egalitarian environmental concerns of the rich North.

In Amitav Ghosh’s novels, right from *The Shadow Lines, The Glass Palace, The Hungry Tide* to the Ibis trilogy, there is probably a movement not only from land to the estuary and then to the sea, but also from a more human centred focus to an ever increasing interest in the non human, both living and non living. Thus, in *The Hungry Tide* his interest
ranges from marine mammals such as dolphins, whales and dugongs to the life in the river that meets the ocean at the Bengal delta. Similarly, in the Ibis trilogy he deals with the elemental passions of life in the sea. This in itself represents a grand journey from the land to water, a reverse as it were of the journey of life on earth. For Ghosh, an interest in the life at the edges, places where the land meets the water, places most rich and complex in life forms, thus becomes quite natural.

In *The Hungry Tide* Amitav Ghosh gives a vivid description of the non human life of the Sundarbans — both living and non living. Combining the modes of both fictional and non fictional nature writing Ghosh describes the geography, specificities as well as the ecology of the Sundarbans with an almost scientific precision:

There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and everyday thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily — some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. (Ghosh 07)

A mangrove forest is a universe unto itself, utterly unlike other woodlands or jungles. There are no towering, vine-looped trees, no ferns, no wildflowers, no chattering monkeys or cockatoos. Mangrove leaves are tough and leathery, the branches gnarled and the foliage often impassably dense. Visibility is short and the air still and fetid. At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain’s utter hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy and expel them. Every year dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles. (Ghosh 07-08)
There were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe. This proliferation of aquatic life was thought to be the result of the unusually varied composition of the water itself. The waters of river and sea did not intermingle evenly in this part of the delta, rather they interpenetrated each other, creating hundreds of different ecological niches, with streams of fresh water running along the floors of some channels, creating variations of salinity and turbidity. These micro-environments were like balloons suspended in the water, and they had their own patterns of flow. They changed position constantly, sometimes floating into midstream and then wafting back towards the shore, at times being carried well out to sea and at others, retreating deep inland. Each balloon was a floating biodome, filled with endemic fauna and flora, and as they made their way through the waters, strings of predators followed trailing in their wake. This proliferation of environments was responsible for creating and sustaining a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms — from gargantuan crocodiles to microscopic fish. (Ghosh 125)

She [Piya] recalled a class in which the teacher had demonstrated how some kinds of crab actually laundered the mud they lived in, scrubbing it grain by grain. Their feet and their sides were lined with hairs that formed microscopic brushes and spoons. They used this to scrape off the diatoms and other edible matter attached to each grain of sand. They were a sanitation department and a janitorial team rolled into one: they kept the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees would choke on their own debris. Didn’t they represent some fantastically large proportion of the system’s biomass? Didn’t they outweigh even the trees and the leaves? Hadn’t someone said that the intertidal forests should be named after crabs rather than mangroves since it is they — certainly not the crocodile or the tiger or the dolphin — who were the keystone species of the entire ecosystem? (Ghosh 142)
However, Ghosh’s interest lies less with an exploration of the scientific details of the ecology of the Sundarbans. Rather his more urgent concern in the novel is to give voice to the environmental realities of the region. Ghosh’s attempt lies in the direction of what Jalais, in another context, has cited as an endeavour “to correct the dominant perception of the Sundarbans as the realm of the nature — a wilderness, a preserve of wild beast — by a simple reversal and then finally [to] break the silence and talk about people.” (Jalais 195)

Contemporary public notions about the Sundarbans combine a romantic fascination with the natural aspect of the region with an amnesiac ignorance about its social and human realities. By bringing the dichotomous social and the environmental realities of the Sundarbans into a dialogue with each other, Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* not only explores the material realities of the environment of the region, but also tries to unmask the skewed environmental historiography of India and the postcolonial countries at large which places the burden of conservation on the local people and thereby often places them at a disadvantage.

Following up on his essay “Folly in the Sundarbans”, where he severely critiques the grandiose plan of setting up of a mega eco-tourism project in the Sundarbans by the Indian transnational company Sahara India Pariwar, Ghosh subsequently wrote *The Hungry Tide* to make a case for the largest mangrove delta on planet Earth. Ghosh had noted in his essay that “an industrial house that has no special expertise in ecological matters is proposing a massive intervention in an area that is a designated World Heritage site and Biosphere Reserve.” (Web.) By fictionalizing the Morichjhapi incident and by taking up the topical issue of Sahara India’s takeover of Sundarbans in the name of development, Ghosh in his novel uncovers the vicious nexus that often links conservation, transnational private bodies, and the neocolonial State in the global South.
Ghosh critiques the Western philosophy of ‘nature’ which conceives of ‘nature’ and the ‘natural’ as the antithesis of culture and civilization. While nature is understood from this perspective as something that is original, or not controlled by human beings, culture is understood as something cultivated by humans under human control. Kanai remembers how as a school child almost thirty years back, he had come to visit his aunt Nilima and had failed to comprehend the reason behind the presence of so many people in the Sundarbans, a place known to the outside world as a forest. Kanai recollects how he had expressed his surprise before his uncle Nirmal when they arrived at Canning railway station:

‘But there are so many people here?’

Nirmal had smiled in surprise:’ What did you expect? A jungle?’

‘Yes.”

‘It’s only in films, you know, that jungles are empty of people. Here there are places that are crowded as any Kolkata bazaar. And on some of the rivers you’ll find more boats than there are trucks on the Grand Trunk Road.’ (Ghosh17)

Kanai’s question as a small child about the existence of a thick population in a region which is part of the Sundarbans and which is otherwise known to be a dense forest, appears apparently to be naïve. But his uncle Nirmal by virtue of his experience in the islands, is more attuned to the realities of the tide country in which people try to eke out a living in a fragile ecosystem. What Ghosh highlights in his novel is the fact that the culture of the Sundarbans has evolved over time and has constructed a specific locally-based environmental ethics, in which, unlike the West, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are understood to be a co-constitutive whole existing together in sometimes hybrid and sometimes combative ways. This may be understood better with reference to the environmental historian William Cronon’s interrogation of the standard nature/culture dichotomy. Cronon’s argument in his book

*Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* is that it is culture that defines
nature. Referring to the beauty of the Yosemite National Park, Cronon points out that a particular vision of Yosemite that is argued to be conserved is a reflection of the cultural values it has been embedded with. There is nothing intrinsically natural about the Yosemite landscape. It is entirely a cultural construction because it is culture that has determined the way it looks — as a pristine landscape devoid of human habitation. Thus the very absence of humans on a particular landscape is entirely a human choice and is essentially a cultural construction. In other words, as Saberwal and Rangarajan argue, “[t]here is no ‘natural’ state of nature.” (14)

Eric Hobsbawm, the eminent British historian has argued in his work *The Age of Extreme* (1994), that “[i]t is no accident that the main support for ecological policies comes from the rich countries and from the comfortable rich and middle classes [...] The poor, multiplying and under-employed, wanted more ‘development’, not less.” (qtd. in Guha, *Environmentalism...* 98) Hobsbawm’s argument is in line with the argument made by the American political scientist Ronald Inglehart, who sees environmental concerns as a product of the move chiefly by the rich people of the North toward ‘postmaterialist’ values, as a shift “from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety toward heavier emphasis on belonging, self-expression, and the quality of life.” (qtd. in Guha, *Environmentalism...* 98) What needs to be noted however is that through these arguments both Hobsbawm and Inglehart doubly discount the poor of the Third World. This category of human beings are discounted as being ecologically insensitive, and discounted as not being rich enough to invest in the environment and thereby protect it for posterity. Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* is a critique of such a skewed environmental assumption by the West. It is through the representation of the religious worldviews of the “ecosystem people” of the region, those communities which depend heavily for their survival on the natural resources of their own locality (Dasmann, 309-310), indicated in the novel by Fokir and Horen that Ghosh explores
the environmentally sensitive attitude of the islanders of the region. Ghosh examines how there exist an attitude of environmental care, protection and management among the people of the Sundarbans and how such an attitude is maintained and mediated through the indigenous religion of the region. Since religion is the storehouse of values in most cultures around the world, religious worldviews are actually instrumental in shaping the ways in which human beings tend to interact with nature. In the islands of the Sundarbans, the inhabitants’ interaction with their environment is guided not only through their relationship to their environment as a practical necessity, but also through numerous social, cultural and religious narratives. One such powerful narrative is the idea of conservation and proper management of the resources of the environment which is mediated through the indigenous religion of the region. It would be pertinent to remember John A. Grim’s observation at this point:

Central to indigenous traditions is an awareness of the integral and whole relationship of symbolic and material life [...] Cosmologies, or oral narrative stories, transmit the worldview values of the people and describe the web of human activities within the powerful spirit world of the local bioregion [...] to analyse religion as a separate system of beliefs and ritual practices apart from subsistence, kinship, language, governance, and landscape is to misunderstand indigenous religion. (Web.)

The story of Bonbibi and Dukhe as narrated in the island’s folklore of Bonbibir Johuranamah allows the islanders an understanding of their relatedness to the nonhumans and the forest of the Sundarbans. The story of Bonbibi is always followed by the tale about Dukhe. An important aspect of the social and cultural life of the Sundarbans is that if one is an inhabitant of the part of the islands attached to the forest, then one is part of that larger environmental collective and has to adhere to the rules of the forest as prescribed by Bonbibi. Annu Jalais’ wonderful anthropological study on the Sundarbans brings out the existence of
such a unique symbiotic relationship between man and nature, a way of life that has been ingrafted and mediated through the native religious folk tales of the region:

Bonbibi had left them the injunctions that they were to enter the forest only with a ‘pure heart/mind’ (pobitro mon) and ‘empty hands’ (khali hate). The islanders explained that they had to identify completely with Dukhe, whose unfailing belief in Bonbibi saved him, and consider the forest as being only for those who are poor and for those who have no intention of taking more than what they need to survive. This is the ‘agreement’ between non-humans and humans that permits them both to depend on the forest and yet respect the others’ needs. (Jalais 72-73)

However, entering the forest with a ‘pure heart/mind’ requires something more than limiting what one takes. It means curbing one’s greed and deceitful motives, the curbing of the desire to hunt and poach the animals in the forest. Animals are considered to be Bonbibi’s elected kin since the lore holds that a deer suckled her and saved her life. Subsequently, Bonbibi considered the animals of the forest as her mother. Similarly, by adopting the sage-cum-tiger Dokhin Rai and by becoming his mother Narayani’s friend, Bonbibi is related to tigers too. But Bonbibi is not only related to nonhumans. She has also adopted Dukhe, a poor Sundarban islander. By adopting Dukhe she has adopted all those islanders who depend on the forest. Animals and humans, linked by the same mother Bonbibi, are thus ‘brothers’ and ‘equal’, as it is believed that, “the forest in its ‘purity’ does not distinguish between the different kinds of beings that depend on it.” (Jalais 85) This understanding of relatedness by the locals as transmitted through their oral tradition or folk narratives has for centuries served to maintain a balance in the ecology of the region, and it constitutes a vital environmental tradition that the West is either oblivious or ignorant of.

It seems evident that Ghosh is not entirely averse to the idea of conservation in general. In India, historically, there have perennially been instances of conservation mediated
either through religion — the sacred grove (e.g. banyan, pipul, mango etc) or the sacred species (e.g. cow, snake, monkey etc.) — or conducted under the tutelage of ancient rulers. But what Ghosh is averse to is the idea of selective conservation. Ghosh’s implicit sympathy and support for Piya’s conservational study of river dolphins becomes explicit through a conversation between Kanai and Piya:

“‘So is it your work that takes you to Canning?’

‘That’s right. I’m hoping to wangle a permit to do a survey of the marine mammals of the Sundarbans.’

For once he was silenced, although only briefly. I’m amazed,’ he said presently. ‘I didn’t even know there were any such.’

‘Oh yes, there are,’ she said. ‘Or there used to be, anyway. Very large numbers of them.’

‘Really? All we hear about is the tigers and the crocodiles.’

‘I know,’ she said, ‘the cetacean population has kind of disappeared from view. No one knows whether it’s because they’re gone or because they haven’t been studied. There hasn’t ever been a proper survey.’” (Ghosh 11)

Ghosh here implicitly argues that despite recent day studies of the Sundarbans focussed on the natural aspects of the region and its wildlife, it is mainly the tiger which has placed the Sundarbans on the global map. The emphasis on the tiger has cast into shadow the other comparatively less prominent life forms in the region. Fresh water river dolphins, though endangered, thus do not enjoy the same level of preservation by the State authorities as the tiger. In fact, during the course of her field work on the river, Piya comes across “the carcass of an Irrawaddy dolphin” (Ghosh 346) hit by a propeller of a State police, coast guard or even Forest Department boat. This is something Fokir tells her, is “not an uncommon sight”
(Ghosh 347) in the Sundarbans. Ghosh’s critique of the selective conservational policy of the State, a policy often backed by powerful Western transnational NGOs such as WWF and IUCN, is very much in line with the observation made by Raymond Bonner, who in his book At the Hand of Man, lays bare the hypocrisy of the Western conservational policy: “white people are making rules to protect animals that white people want to see in parks that white people visit.” (qtd. in Guha, The Authoritarian... 16) Ghosh takes this argument further by citing the case of the fresh water dolphins, “a rare and dwindling breed” (Ghosh 123) which once delighted in the “labyrinth of rivers, and creeks to the South and South-East of Calcutta”, (Ghosh 42) through a conversation between Kanai and Piya:

‘Do you think there are fewer dolphins than there used to be?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Piya. ‘It’s known for sure that these waters once held large population of marine mammals.’

‘What happened to them then?’

‘There seems to have been some sort of drastic change in the habitat,’ said Piya.

‘Some kind of dramatic deterioration.’

‘Really?’ said Kanai. ‘That was what my uncle felt too.’

‘He was right,’ said Piya grimly. ‘When marine mammals begin to disappear from an established habitat it means something’s gone very, very wrong.’” (Ghosh 266-67)

By making a proper study of the endangered dolphin species, Piya could make a case for the preservation of this less fortunate member of the mammalian family. She understood that “if she could establish any of this she would have a hypothesis of stunning elegance and economy — a thing of beauty, such as was rarely to be found in the messy domain of mammalian behaviour.” (Ghosh 124) Moreover, “the idea might well have profound implications for the conservation of this endangered species: protective measures would be
very much more effective if they could be focused on particular pools and specific movement corridors.” (Ghosh 124)

Yet if Ghosh implicitly supports Piya’s study of the conservation of the fresh water river dolphin, he is also critical of her tendency to generalise a particularly North American brand of environmental ethics — a ‘one size fits all’ approach — and her tendency to often decertify and diminish the less canonized forms of local knowledge existent in the global South. In fact, Ghosh’s novel contains a critique of the American philosophy of conservation and deep ecology and it questions the wisdom of its blind application to a Third World country like India without taking into consideration the socio-political realities of the region. As Ramachandra Guha argues, deep ecology and wilderness preservation is an American philosophy and “the social consequences of putting deep ecology into practice on a worldwide basis (which its practitioners are aiming for) are very grave indeed.”(Radical American...)

It should not be forgotten in this context that the word “conservation” itself is a First World term. Richard Grove, the British historian points out that the word “conservancy” was first adopted in Britain in the 14th century with relation to the control of whole river basins, such that of the Thames river. (Climatic Fears... 50) However, conservation biology was popularised in the late twentieth century chiefly by Gifford Pinchot, the Chief Forester of the United States Forest Service when it was used for the protection of the American wilderness (Grove considers US as a latecomer in forest conservation). However, such an environmental philosophy fails to understand the dilemmas involved in conserving the endangered ecosystems, when the livelihoods of the people of the region are simultaneously put at risk. While Western instrumentalist attitudes and the corporate exploitation of the environment of the global South continues, counter-moves, often in the name of environmental conservation
has proved destructive in the global South. Ironically, it is those same animals and humans who are supposed to be protected who are the ones who are the first to suffer. A case in point is the Sundarbans. In recent times the Indian government has been subjected to strongest international pressures not for the conservation of river dolphins but the Bengal tiger, the Government of India’s signature species for wildlife conservation, and which has achieved a totemic status among Western wilderness lovers. In 1979, the West Bengal government in order to appease the international conservation bodies declared the Sundarbans area as a reserve forest and implemented a drastic eviction of the settlers living on these islands. Initially, economic blockades were instituted by the government on the islanders to force them to leave. When this was not successful, the government resorted to more draconian measures by recruiting off-duty policemen and other people to evict the refugee settlers. Carried out unofficially and in a clandestine manner, this resulted in the rape and murder of thousands of people on the islands. Ghosh fictionalises this incident in the novel through the voice of Kusum and Nirmal:

*the worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them to say that our lives, our existence, was worth less than dirt or dust. “This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of the reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world.” Every day sitting here, with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings,*
trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No human
being could think this is a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans
have always lived — by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (Ghosh
261-62, emphasis in original)

These lines encapsulate the fictional and factual crux of the conflict of the novel which
focuses on the socio-environmental politics of the conservational drives implemented by the
State and backed by the transnational environmental NGOs. Ghosh’s narrative gives voice to
the marginalized living in the Sundarbans. Ramachandra Guha has severely critiqued such
conservational drives calling them the products of a “distinctly North Atlantic brand of anti-
human environmentalism”, and as an “ecologically updated version of the White Man’s
Burden, where the biologist [...] knows that it is in the natives’ true interest to abandon their
homes and hearths and leave the fields and forest clear for the new rulers of the domain —
not the animals they once co-existed with, but the biologists, park managers and wildlifers —
to determine how the territory is to be managed.” (The Authoritarian... 16-18)

Like the Bengal tiger the people living on the Sundarban islands were not indigenous
to the islands. Although there is little official record to trace the factual accuracy about the
advent of humans in the islands, it is believed that humans have been living there for almost
seven to eight hundred years (Jalais 2011; Herring. Web.). However, a majority of them were
refugees from Bangladesh who arrived there during the partition of India and later on in the
1970’s, during the creation of Bangladesh (Jalais 03). Both the refugees and the tigers thus
share a history of migration, the tigers having found in the Sundarbans a final refuge after
having been hunted to extinction in other parts of South East Asia, and the refugees having
settled after being forced to leave their homeland. Again, there has been a transformation in
the way the Sunderbans has been imagined for the last three centuries — from being a
wasteland during the British, to being used for colonial revenues through the growing of rice
and wood, to being an exotic garden where the Royal Bengal Tigers live (Jalais 2011, Herring. Web.). This gradual transformation of the Sunderbans from being a wasteland to a reserve forest shows the process through which the Sundarbans has been territorialised. This in turn has reinforced the idea that humans do not belong there and that humans are not only outsiders but also detrimental to the cause of the proliferation of nonhuman life forms. The contemporary wildlife heritage status of the Sunderbans under the present neocolonial government only perpetuates this colonial heritage. In such a representation, there was and is no place for the humans especially when the poor and the marginalized are seen as threats to the resources of the state owned forest and the animals. Thus in its hurry to adopt a self professed brand of environmentalism to protect forest resources for commercial use, the British colonial government and later the Indian government broke the traditional pattern of forest management prevalent among the settlers of the region which was normative and flexible. Piya who had earlier assumed Fokir to be “some kind of grass-roots ecologist” (Ghosh 297), and as a ‘noble savage’ is horrified to find him participating in the gruesome killing of a forest tiger. Piya feels subsequently that Fokir, far from being an “ecological Indian”, is rather someone who “kills animals for a living” (Ghosh 297), and that there is a difference between his environmental ethics and any proper environmental ethos. However, Piya’s notion about the environment is unidimensional and monolithic. She fails to realise the plight of the islanders who are frequently attacked by man-eating tigers and killed. Amitav Ghosh shows by this that the discourse of expertise that Pia believes in, one that has been instituted for the conservation of the Sundarbans backed by the transnational agencies, the State and the Indian middle class elites, leaves the ordinary islanders and their knowledge outside and behind. The incident of Morichjhapi, the state’s investment in tourism and wildlife sanctuary creation has affected the islanders most and created an unequal distribution of resources between humans and tigers. This in turn redrew the lines between the locals and
the tigers so much that they are now pitted against each other. It is not that the tigers are no longer related to the islanders but rather they are related to some other kinds of people, the elites, the NGOs and the State. As Jalais pertinently remarks, the “tigers are no longer the neighbours with whom the forest had to be shared but ‘state property’, and backed by ruling elite they had begun to treat the islanders as ‘tiger food’” (172). Thus every time the islanders are angry and feel betrayed by the state, they destroy state property, the tiger being the most important symbol of it in the region. Hence, when Piya accuses Fokir to be an accomplice in the killing of the tiger, Kanai tries to make her realize the material realities of the situation. Kanai points out that it is not Fokir but they (both Kanai and Piya) who are to be blamed for such a gruesome act since it was people like them, the so called learned and elite of the society, who made push for and support conservation drives without taking into account the ground realities of the region:

‘Because, we’re complicit in this, Piya; that’s why.’

Piya dissociated herself with a shake of her head ‘I don’t see how I’m complicit.’

‘Because it was people like you,’ said Kanai, ‘who made a push to protect the wildlife here, without regard for the human costs. And I am complicit because people like me — Indians of my class, that is--- have chosen to hide these costs, basically in order to curry favour with their Western patrons.’ (Ghosh 301)

Ghosh’s argument here is in consonance with what Ramachandra Guha calls the politics of global environmentalism, i.e. those who are obsessively vocal about the cause of nature and wildlife are the ones who are often making the problem worse. Although both freshwater river dolphins and tigers are equally endangered and threatened, the locals of the islands do not have any issue with the dolphins since they do not share the same resource base. By the end of the novel both Piya and Kanai learn to temper their cosmopolitan environmental concerns, a brand of environmental concern which tends to generalize environmental issues
and which is of no use to the humans and the animals most affected. Piya realises at the end that she “[doesn’t] want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it.” (Ghosh 397) By extension, Ghosh seems to argue that there can be no ecological justice without social justice and that conservation efforts can never succeed unless the locals are given a stake in that conservation — a point that reverberates with an argument made by the Indian environmentalist Anil Agarwal:

If you want to rehabilitate the environment, you must rely on villagers and not on government officers to do the job. But people will care for their environment only if they have legal rights to manage it and to use its products. People already have the knowledge, what they must get are rights over their local environments. (qtd. in Cooper, *Biodiversity*... 117)

One other significant feature of the environmentalism of the poor upheld by Amitav Ghosh in *The Hungry Tide* is the central role played by women in environmental movements of the postcolonial global South. Women environmental activists from postcolonial countries such as Medha Patkar and Wangari Maathai have worked at the grassroot level and have fought for socio-environmental justice. Environmental critics such as Vandana Shiva and Bina Agarwal have outlined several reasons behind the leadership role taken by environmentalists in the global South. They have pointed out that women have been the original food producers in terms of the kind of work they do in the food chain and continue to be central not only in the production of food but also in the provisioning and the taking care of the household in the global South. Thus when natural resources become degraded and depleted, it is natural that women will be at the forefront of resistance. Besides, when the household becomes food insecure, it is the girl child that suffers. As Vandana Shiva points out:
Women-centered agriculture is the basis of food security for rural communities. When the household and community are food-secure, the girl child is food secure. When the household and community are food-insecure, it is the girl child who, because of gender discrimination, pays the highest price in terms of malnutrition. When access to food diminishes, the girl child’s share is last and least.

The politics of food is gendered at multiple levels. (*Staying Alive...* xvi)

Such a concern for the environment by women is motivated by social situation and what commonly goes by the term social ecofeminism. The idiom of such struggle is often distinct to that of both environmentalism and feminism. In Ghosh’s novel the vocabulary of protest of the women characters emerge from the struggle about environmental justice on the one hand and social justice on the other. Kusum’s struggle is at once a struggle both for environmental rights and social rights as she fails to realize the appropriateness of setting up a tiger reserve by depriving the locals of their livelihood. Fokir’s wife Moyna points out how the forces of globalization and neoliberalism have threatened not only the ecology of the Sundarbans but also the very livelihood of the people who depend on it. It is the ruthless environmental carnage unleashed by the “resource omnivores” (Allier and Guha) that forces the islanders of the region toward a tragedy of the commons. Moyna expresses her awareness of just this danger when she speaks out about her concern for her son’s future:

“I don’t want him growing up catching crabs [...] Mashima says that in fifteen years the fish will all be gone [...] These new nylon nets, which they use to catch *chingrir meen* — the spawn of tiger prawns. The nets are so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well. Mashima wanted to get the nets banned but was impossible [...] Because there’s lot of money in prawn and the traders had paid off the politicians [...] It’s people like us who’re going to suffer and it’s up to us to think ahead. (Ghosh 134)
Nilima herself admits that she knows nothing about dolphins or conservation, but her views are shaped by the daily lives of the people of the region. As environmental justice movements, these are as much a struggle to conserve the environment as they are a struggle to ensure one’s livelihood.

Ghosh also throws light on the issues of global warming and climate change and the sheer possibility of its precipitating a tragedy on an epic scale for both the humans and the non-humans living in the Sundarbans. Although the topic of global warming and climate change figures rather obliquely in Ghosh’s narrative in *The Hungry Tide*, yet an avoidance or indifference to deal with such a contemporary and glaring issue will not only ignore the climatic realities of the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans but any criticism bereft of it is bound to suffer from intellectual and theoretical incompetence. Historically, it is the Western developed countries that are mainly responsible for global warming and climate change.\(^6\)

Scientific studies about global warming and its consequent possibility of climate change are often assumed to have begun with the Swedish scientist Svante Arrhenius in the 1890’s. However, self conscious discussions about global warming and climate change began in the late 1980s and early 1990’s, the same period when social scientists and humanists started a debate about globalization. But, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in his paper “The Climate of History: Four Thesis”, “[w]hile globalization, once recognized was of immediate interest to humanists and social scientists, global warming, in spite of [a] good number of books published in the 1990’s did not become a public concern until the 2000s.” (199) Ghosh’s concern for climate change and its calamitous effect on the Sundarbans was made clear by him in an interview published in *The Guardian* under the title “Amitav Ghosh: There is now a vibrant literary world in India — It all began with Naipaul”. In the interview Ghosh points out:
If you are from my part of the world, climate change hits you in the face. In front of my eyes I’ve seen islands disappearing. I’ve seen saltwater invading deeper and deeper. This is the most vulnerable part of the world apart from the low-lying islands, and unlike the low-lying islands, Bengal has 250 million people. What is of much interest to me is why the arts, which are meant to be in the avant garde, have been so slow to recognize this. It is a profound challenge to all our procedures...

Ghosh argues that while global warming and climate change have started to threaten the very existence of low lying islands including the Sundarbans, such an issue had remained peculiarly resistant to reflection in contemporary fiction. It is certainly true that while climate change has been accepted by a large majority as the most pressing issue of the twenty first century, the subject does not loom large in novels and stories as it does in public discourse. In speaking in the Berlin Family Lecture Series titled “The Great Derangement: Literature, History, and Politics in the Age of Global Warming” delivered in autumn 2015, Amitav Ghosh reiterated his concern and tried to establish a link between climate change, theory and fiction with reference to *The Hungry Tide*:

I happened to be writing about the Sundarbans [*The Hungry Tide*], the great mangrove forest of the Bengal delta, where the flow of water and silt is such that geological processes that unfolded and appeared to occur in deep time appears to occur at such speed that they could be followed from week to week and month to month. Most of these processes are cyclical. But even back then, in the first years of the twenty first century portents of change of a different kind could also be seen in receding shore lines and a steady encroachment of salt water on lands that has previously been cultivated.

In the novel itself, Ghosh refers to several incidents in the Sundarbans which he correlates with climate change. Nilima says at one point that “there isn’t as much water in the river
[Matla] nowadays and at low tide it gets very shallow.” (25) Elsewhere we are informed that the soil of the islands remains leached with salt making it all the more difficult to cultivate crops. We are also told in the novel that of late, marine mammals such as “dolphins, whales, dugongs and so on [...] have kind of disappeared from view.” (11) The situation is most poignantly described by Nirmal as he reflects about the life of both the humans and non-human denizens of the Sundarbans:

Age teaches you to recognize the signs of death. You do not see them suddenly; you become aware of them very slowly over a period of many, many years. Now it was as if I could see those signs everywhere, not just in myself, but in this place that I had lived in for thirty years. The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take, to submerge the tide country? Not much — a miniscule change of the sea would be enough.

(Ghosh 214)

For Nirmal such a realization is precisely what Ghosh in his lecture termed the “paradox of recognition”, something which is not a discovery but a renewed reckoning of something within oneself. Perhaps Nirmal’s childhood or even Ghosh’s childhood in Bangladesh, where life was and often still is lived according to the whims of the rivers’ changing course, is responsible for such instances of recognition.

These insights of Ghosh instanced in his novel The Hungry Tide may validly be read as a critique of the mainstream American environmental philosophies and activism. By trying to demystify the planetary notions of American environmentalism represented by Pia in particular on the one hand, and by taking into consideration specific environmental issues relevant to the postcolonial global South (especially the Sundarbans) on the other, Ghosh shows up the inadequacies of the American environmental model by addressing some of the basic environmental issues of the Third World. By voicing forth a plurality of attitudes and
articulations about the environment, especially at the local level, Ghosh addresses not only the complex ecological issues of the Sundarbans but also expands the ecocritical debate.

Notes

1. The Ibis trilogy consists of three novels by Amitav Ghosh — *Sea of Poppies*, *River of Smoke* and the forthcoming *Flood of Fire*.

2. Anthropocentrism refers to the belief that human beings are the most central and important species of the planet. It also refers to the approach of the study of reality from a human centred perspective. Anthropocentrism is a major concept in the field of environmental ethics and environmental philosophy and it is often considered to be root cause behind the current environmental degradation. The opposite of anthropocentrism is biocentrism, a belief that all living and non-living organisms are intimately connected to each other. Biocentrism places a greater focus on the non-human life on earth. For more details, see George Sessions, ed. *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, Boston & London: Shambhala, 1995.

3. The concept of posthuman represents a new dimension in the reading of environmental literature. It both question and challenge the category of the human. It tries to explore whether humans are really separate and distinct category from animal or nature. Study into posthuman reveals the dirty underpinnings of the carefully crafted role as beings autonomous from the world we are part of. For more details, see Ronald Inglehart. *Cultural Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

4. Ghosh has written that “[i]n 2003 the business group, Sahara India Pariwar, submitted an ambitious plan to the government of West Bengal proposing the creation of an enormous new tourism complex in Sundarbans [...] the project will include many different
kinds of accommodation, including ’5-star floating hotels, high-speedboat houses, land-based huts, luxury cottages and an ‘eco-village’. Landing jetties are to be built and the project is to be serviced by hovercraft and helicopters. ‘Exclusive, beautiful virgin beaches’ are to be created and hundreds of kilometres of water ways are to be developed. The facilities will include casino, spa, health, shopping and meditation centres, restaurant complexes and a mini golf course’, and tourist will be offered a choice of ‘aqua sports’ including scuba diving.” For details, see Amitav Ghosh. “Folly in the Sundarbans.” Amitav Ghosh. www.amitavghosh.com/essays/folly.html. Web.


6. Western developed countries share the largest responsibility. Historically, the majority of carbon emissions may be traced back to the Western developed countries. The West has been responsible for three quarters of the carbon emissions released into the earth’s atmosphere during 1705 to 2005. For details, see Edward Page “Distributing the Burdens of Climate Change” *Environmental Politics* 17.4 (2008).

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Conclusion

It is the basic argument of this thesis that mainstream Euro-American ecocriticism, fuelled by the environmental strategies, theories and methodologies of the environmental activism arising out in the European and North American continents in the 1960’s and 70’s, often proves to be grossly inadequate in its ability to comprehend the complex environmental realities and aspirations of the postcolonial countries of the global South. By examining four fictional works which have a story ecological in orientation, it has been sought to be established that the poor, marginalised and disenfranchised people of the postcolonial Third World, who are often treated as disposable citizens by their comparatively well off Western brethren, continue to deal with the realities of nature that make up their immediate environment. It has been argued above that all the works of fiction which have been studied indicate that the heterogeneity, plurality and the internal complexity of the environmental issues of the global South cannot be understood through the nature/culture dyad as prevalent in the Western theorization about the environment. The thesis has instead detected in Habila’s *Oil on Water*, Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, Barclay’s *Melal* and Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* an appreciation of an everyday environmental perspective, an understanding of the conflicts arising out of the unequal distribution of environmental resources, a concern for environmental justice and social justice, the realization of the truths about an environmentally destructive colonial past and an equally threatening postcolonial environmental present, all vital concerns which in totality help to ground and de-exoticise the reading of the postcolonial environment in literature.

Taken as a whole, it has been the attempt of this thesis to present through the lens of literary reading a picture of the reality of the environment of the global South, a picture that celebrates the sense of care and awareness about the environment manifested at the local level by the people of the postcolonial nations. It has also been an effort to write against the
more popular assumptions of a section of Western theorists, economists and historians such as William Slaymaker, Lester Thurow and Eric Hobsbawm who argue that the white people have more time, energy and wealth to appreciate and aestheticize nature and the environment, and that what the poor of the Third World want is more development without any commitment to any environmental cause. The foregoing chapters have tried to explore the environmental concerns of the postcolonial global South as reflected in literature, and have attempted to show how environmentalism is but intimately connected to the postcolonial project.

The Introduction of this research work began by trying to critique mainstream American ecocriticism on several grounds. The first of these is that mainstream American ecocriticism, despite claiming for itself a planetary position, is highly parochial to the extent of remaining obsessed with the issues and conflicts in the sphere of the environment of America. Secondly, US ecocriticism is predominantly a white movement which has ignored and utterly failed to voice forth the environmental aspirations of the non-whites or people of colour. Even when there has been an attempt made within American ecocriticism, to diversify ecocriticism by accommodating multi-ethnic and multi-cultural voices, it has limited itself to ethnicities and cultures mainly within America. Ethnic issues of the environment outside the American geographical border have hardly found any space within mainstream American ecocriticism. Thirdly, many ecocritics within the American and hence Western academia seem to adhere to the belief that ecocriticism is a movement peculiar to the rich nations of the North and that the people of the global South are too poor and too ignorant or underdeveloped to go green. Indeed, the general feeling is that the ecocritical literature from the global South often is at best only secondary to mainstream American ecocritical literature, and little more than as an exotic new arrival on the ecocritical scene. Against this, ecocritics of the postcolonial countries are often critical about American ecocriticism’s reliance on the
philosophies of deep ecology and wilderness conservation and they are often interrogative of such philosophies being regarded as the natural, political and spiritual vanguard of world environmentalism in general. It has been argued too that ecocriticism’s focus only on the superficial aspects of the environment has served to concretise the split that exists between nature and culture. Further, it is stressed that American ecocriticism in its paranoid obsession with the conservation of the wilderness ended up being xenophobic. It failed to take into consideration societies in which man and nature live in close proximity and harmony with each other, societies which have evolved a specific and locally based environmental ethic, one which unlike the Western ethos understands ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in co-constitutive ways. Beyond this, it has been indicated that American ecocriticism is often hypocritical, since it is preoccupied with issues of environmental conservation within its national borders while remaining amnesiac to the repercussions of the American foreign policy that has often led to the destruction of environments outside of America. Hence it is, and has been, the argument of this thesis that mainstream American ecocritical literature suffers in general from an imaginative failure in its regarding of transnational environmental issues. It is held, in other words, that radical ecocritical philosophies of deep ecology and wilderness preservation are not only inadequate in understanding the environmental realities of the Third World countries but are also harmful with severe social and environmental consequences when applied indiscreetly.

This theoretical insufficiency of traditional ecocriticism in addressing the environmental issues of the Third World countries of the global South has led to the emergence of a postcolonial turn in ecocriticism. Postcolonial ecocriticism is rooted in the belief that Third World spaces are fundamentally different from Walden Pond or Wuthering Heights — ideal environmental spaces as conceived by the West, particularly the British romantics and the American transcendentalists. Thereby, the process of understanding and
problematising the Third World environments should reflect such differences. There is a considerable difference between the egalitarian environmental concerns of the rich countries of the West and the environmental concerns of the poorer countries of the global South. Postcolonial ecocriticism refuses to accept the definition of environmental concerns and care invented in the centre and exported to and imposed on the periphery. It argues that the South has a distinct voice of its own, that its concern for the environment and ecology, as reflected in its literary texts, are often more genuine than the concerns of the North which are mainly obsessed with notions of preservation and the philosophy of deep ecology. For the poor and marginalised people of the postcolonial world, the environment is not an abstract concept, but rather a concrete reality, an existential foundation upon which their basic sustenance depends. If for the people of the affluent countries of the West, environmental concern stems from a fear of an impending environmental catastrophe, for men and women of the poor countries the environment is a reality they are forced to engage with and even grapple with every day. For the marginalized people of the global South, ecological concerns are almost inseparable from social concerns, for there can be no social justice without ecological justice and vice versa. Thus, while mainstream ecocriticism has come to understand nature as a neutral space and conservation as an apolitical act, postcolonial ecocriticism regards both nature and its conservation as “a profoundly political process.” (Saberwal and Rangarajan 04) Postcolonial ecocriticism has explored the roots existing between environment and the empire by bringing environmental histories and colonial legacies in conversation with each other, which earlier, the mainstream American ecocriticism, for some reason or the other did not feel compelled enough to engage with. It is a recognition that the social inequalities and the current state of environmental degradation in the Third World is but the consequence of a colonised past. Again, if it is possible to trace the roots of the current environmental degradation in the global South to the European expansion during colonial times, postcolonial ecocritical
theories have also explored the relationship between current environmental degradation and the contemporary necolonial and neoliberal order. Though colonialism in the global South came to an end during the middle and late twentieth century, mainly after the World War II, it inaugurated a new form of colonialism, a more severe and sustained exploitation of the marginalised people and their environments through a cartel composed of their own new elites of the Third World and the earlier colonial masters, whose interests were now linked to the giant transnational corporations and the labyrinthine world of global financial transactions. But very often than not, it is the poor people and people of colour who have to pay the maximum price for ecological hazards.

But, postcolonial ecocriticism is not simply a postcolonization of ecocriticism: it is as much a critique of postcolonialism’s disregard for nature as it is of the North’s ecocriticism’s disregard for the environmental issues of the global South. This is exactly where postcolonial ecocriticism differs from simple postcolonial criticism. Postcolonialism deals with the political, social and cultural ramifications of colonialism as it has affected human life while remaining silent on environmental issues. It rarely addresses the ecological aspects of colonialism in detail, issues like resource conflicts, the forced changes in human and animal settlement patterns and the dissolution of traditional means of arranging and using land. Similarly, pure ecocriticism primarily deals with issues of nature and is reluctant in engaging with human issues. Postcolonial ecocriticism looks at the colonial and postcolonial imperatives of the environmental crisis. It inspects the often fraught relationships existing between ethnicity, pollution and human rights as well as the equally fraught relationship between local, national and global politics.

In the first chapter of the thesis which has examined Helon Habila’s novel *Oil on Water*, an attempt has been made to appreciate how the novelist has explored the environmental realities of the Niger Delta in Africa by addressing issues of the environment
along with issues of pollution and human rights and violence. This chapter shows how Habila represented the fact that the environmental degradation of the Niger delta is connected to a vicious link between local, national and global politics and economics. Habila indicates in and through his text that it is futile to try to understand and thereby to protest against the despoliation of the region’s land, water and people’s health on a purely nationalist framework since the environmental degradation of the Niger Delta was the result of the joint collaborative plunder indulged in by Nigeria’s own government and foreign transnational companies like Shell and Chevron.

The second chapter of this research work concentrates on Indra Sinha’s depiction in his novel *Animal’s People* of India’s toxic postcolonial landscape. Sinha’s fictional environmental setting of his novel in Khaufur is based on the real life incident of the gas disaster that struck the Indian city of Bhopal in the 1980s. Sinha’s fiction embodies the lives of the locals, especially the poor, whose lives were traumatically damaged due to the poison-gas leak accident in the factory. But the novel is not only about an environmental crisis but equally about how the people fight for environmental and social justice. Sinha also examines in his novel how issues of violence and racism are inherently linked to the issue of the environment in postcolonial India.

Robert Barclay’s *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific* which has been studied in the third chapter of this thesis, brings into focus the unimaginable environmental horrors faced by the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands as a result of the continuous nuclear tests carried out by the USA in the Pacific Islands. Barclay contrasts the environmental ethics of the Marshall Islanders with the environmental consciousness of the Americans. Through its study of Barclay’s text, this chapter reveals the duality and hypocrisy implicit within American foreign and environmental policies which profess a concern for the world environment on
one hand, while being least bothered about the nuclear affect on an environment which is home to the marginalised.

The final chapter focuses on the environmental realities of the Sundarbans of India as depicted in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*. This chapter in the thesis shows how Ghosh compares and contradicts the environmental philosophies of the Americans with that of the natives of the Sundarbans. Ghosh critiques the assumed planetary notions of mainstream American environmentalism and argues that it is entirely fallacious to apply conservational policies inspired by the West in a postcolonial setting like India. By bringing the much debated issue of the conflict between tiger and humans into public visibility, Ghosh in his novel reveals how the vanguards of modern environmentalism, in their paranoia for conservation, end up doing more damage to the lives and ecologies of those they seek to protect. It is the argument of this chapter that Ghosh points out the more sensible policy that in the global South, there can be no conservation without local consultation, and that ecological justice is impossible without social justice.

Taken together, the four chapters of this thesis tries to problematize what Ramachandra Guha calls the divide between “full-stomach” environmentalism and “empty-stomach” environmentalism. Although the present thesis has been concerned with the environmental realities of the postcolonial global South as they are reflected in literary texts originating from three postcolonial countries (Nigeria, Marshall Islands and India), the realities of the environment reflected in these texts are very much symptomatic of the general environmental conditions in the majority of Third World countries. These texts also go a long way to illustrate how the environmental degradation of the global South can barely be understood without reference to colonial and postcolonial (neo-colonial) politics as well as to the economic linkages at local, national and global levels. It should be indicated too that each of the chapters of the thesis has dealt with a particular environmental issue. But it needs to be
realized that all of them are interconnected in the sense that all of them depict a postcolonial
nation or state which is the site of an intensified environmental exploitation (and a struggle
against this exploitation as well) initiated by a globalised ruling class. Hence the
environmental issues reflected in these texts are both global and local at the same time.

This said, it has also to be mentioned that just as traditional ecocriticism’s overt
reliance on the philosophies of wilderness preservation and deep ecology, its denying of any
alternative definition of wilderness and environment, limits its effectiveness, so too does the
activist orientation of the environmental justice movement inherent within postcolonial
ecocriticism also limit its reach.

Indeed, it may be said in conclusion that the four novels studied above demonstrate
that for postcolonial Third World countries, ecological concerns have a totally different
meaning due to divergent social, cultural and historical conditions. Unlike the self
perpetuating U.S. national literary lineage of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Edward
Abbey and Gary Synder, the novels of Helon Habila, Indra Sinha, Robert Barclay and
Amitav Ghosh give the reader an opportunity to explore the environmental realities of the
postcolonial countries of the global South by engaging with issues of environmental politics
through resource conflicts between the unprivileged locals, autocratic nation states and
macroeconomic transnational powers. This thesis has tried to derive environmental meaning
out of seemingly non-environmental texts, texts which are apparently concerned with
mystery, disability, human rights and migration. In short this thesis on the interface between
literature and postcolonial ecocriticism, presses for a more cosmopolitan way of approaching
dominant Western ecodiscourse. It attempts to address the “intellectual challenge” of drawing
“on the strengths of bioregionalism without succumbing to ecoparochialism”; and it tries to
“render ecocriticism more accommodating of what [Nixon calls] a transnational ethics of
This approach may not be ‘green’ in the traditional ecocritical sense of the term, but perhaps it goes some way in bringing what Lawrence Buell describes as engaging ‘‘green’ and ‘brown’ landscapes, in conversation with each other.”

Notes

1. Full stomach phenomenon refers to the myth that environmentalism is a phenomenon affordable only to the middle and upper-middle classes of the richest societies. The people of the developing countries are too poor to go green. However, Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier has done more than any intellectual to dispel this myth, pointing out that the poor do have their own environmental concerns which are more genuine compared to the hypocritical and egalitarian environmentalism of the rich. For details see, Guha, Ramachandra. How Much Should a Person Consume? Environmentalism in India and the United States. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. 20. Print.

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