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Literary Imagination of Climate Change & Climate Disasters: Fiction in the Subcontinent



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Literary Imagination of Climate Change and Climate Disasters: Fiction in the Subcontinent

**Debashree Chakraborty
&
Subhoranjan Dasgupta**

2023

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Literary Imagination of Climate Change and Climate Disasters: Fiction in the Subcontinent

Debashree Chakraborty *

Introduction

Over the last few years, a lot has been written and discussed about the representation of climate change in literature. The discussion escalated with the publication of Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) where he noted, rather sadly, about the conspicuous failure of contemporary “realist”¹ fiction to address climate change. He went on to add that even though science fiction engages with climate change, it does so by relegating it to an extent that makes the literary imagination of climate change “somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel”.² His argument is quite straight forward in this regard—since climate change is an event that is all pervasive, its reflections in literature must also have semblance of its impact in the here and now. With this argument, Ghosh cites a few novels published in recent times that deal with climate change in the present like Barabara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012)³ which looks into climate change and climate migration in the border areas of the USA and Mexico and a few others. Three years after the publication of *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh published *Gun Island* (2019)⁴ which, apart from being an attempt to use climate change as a thematic concern, is also a literary representation of the historiography of climate change beginning with the Little Ice Age⁵ and covering present day events like wildfires, exceeding numbers of cyclones and super cyclones, erratic patterns of non-human migration and of course, human migration.

A look at bookshelves around the world would now reveal a significant number of novels that deal with climate change in its various manifestations and these also straddle a lot with the effects of climate change the most notable of which is climate migration—human and non-human and the subsequent impact such migrations have on ecology and also global governance, energy politics, impact on biodiversity, etc. These novels belong to multiple genres—thrillers, political fiction, realist fiction, petro fiction, etc., and the list goes on. Needless to say, much of this spurt is an outcome of the discourse around climate change in academic, governmental and popular parlance. Also, it may be noted that fiction dealing with climate change or climate fiction is not just an Anglophone literary phenomenon. Rather, such novels are coming up across several other literary systems the world over. Adeline Johns Putra and Adam Trexler in the article “Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism”⁶ provide a comprehensive definition of climate fiction along with an analysis of how it adjusts to other genres. They opine that any work of fiction that deals with human induced climate change (global carbon emissions, global warming or cooling, polar ice melt,

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etc.) and its effects can be termed as climate fiction. Needless to say, such a definition entails a lot of engagement with the concept of the Anthropocene which in the simplest of terms means that human beings have been the pivotal reason behind contemporary climate change. However, a question that becomes necessary to ask here is whether the working definition of climate fiction as suggested by Putra and Trexler is enough to achieve a broad spectrum understanding of climate change as it happens in the here and now. While the scientific discourse on climate change started building up from the time of the discovery of ozone layer depletion, recent sociological and historicist critiques largely attribute the onset of this present-day crisis to the times when colonialism and imperialism were at the peak.

Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange*⁷ (1972) is one of the preliminary works that sought to understand how colonialism brought about unprecedented changes in earth system in North America and elsewhere. Recent critical works like *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014)⁸, Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller's *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* (2020)⁹, Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021)¹⁰, Kohei Saito's *Capital in the Anthropocene* (2021)¹¹ are a few works that have also sought to establish the deep relationship which exists between colonialism and climate change. Add to that the notions of development, liberal economy, etc., and what transpires is an entanglement of multiple factors like deforestation, clearing of catchment areas, recouring of major rivers for dam constructions, scrapping off indigenous forest communities' rights to forests, etc., that play a role in the escalated climate crisis as we face it today. This brings us to the dialectic that lies at the heart of Ghosh's harangue as has been mentioned already. Climate change has largely been represented as a other worldly event that will strike at a momentous occasion and sweep out life as we know exists in this world while in reality, it is more of an incremental phenomena, where the effects that climate change bring show up in bits and pieces. One has to locate these effects against the backdrops of other geological or social phenomenon in order to determine the true nature of the shifts that climate change brings about.

At the same time, one also needs to understand that the effects of climate change are not uniform across the planet. While geographic conditions determine a good deal of how the effects proliferate, socio-political conditions are also a pivotal determinant of how these changes culminate in various spaces thus making the effects of climate change disparate across different spatial regions and probably also in temporal realms as well. The narrative of climate change is further made complex through the introduction of the idea of the Anthropocene¹² which asserts that the driving force of contemporary climate crisis is human action. As has been mentioned briefly in the previous paragraphs, recent scholarships assert that human beings have been the primary driver of the escalating climate crisis that the world grapples with. One has to take into cognizance that climate change is also a political problem and with the setting up of international forums like the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC)¹³, COPs¹⁴ following the Kyoto Protocol (1997)¹⁵ and the Rio Conference (UNCED, 1992)¹⁶, nation states started to think about it as a global and collective problem and also started making interventions to deal with it. In this regard, the determinants of such intervention rests on the system in which the social and political capitals of the nation state lie. One idea that gained currency during this time as the harbinger of climate change is that of "development". Development became a debated notion and increasingly became the center of conversation thereof. This struck a tangible chord all around the world but particularly effected the Global South which at that time was crawling out from the remnants of past which was dotted with the dredges of empires and colonies and shifts in power regimes.

India, being at the forefront of colonial and imperial designs and post-Independent India being an experimental ground of the idea of "development", has been at the receiving end of all

these components mentioned above. While, the country has had a long tradition of living with nature or environment with its economies deeply rooted in the components of environment, the new idea of development facilitated through industrial and technical advancements created a disjunct in the way people in the country lived for the longest time. It was a shift in perception and also in the way people were used to living. Indian literature, Indian fiction in particular, has always documented these factors. As the country continued to toggle between coming out from the shackles of its past and find a new identity of its own, the contestation of development also gained centrality in the political sphere. As post-Independent India embraced the path of self-sufficiency and economic growth, it subscribed to the notion of development as a way of attaining its goals. As these shifts were documented, written about, environmental issues consistently remained at the backdrop of these works of fiction.

However, as the discourse on climate change gained popularity and needfully so in the past few years, fiction in the subcontinent too has turned to addressing it. The works dealing with climate change or even carrying the mention of it are generally informed by the existing research available on the issue. With the turn of the century, fiction in general, the world over, started addressing the issue more and more. Indian fiction too followed suit. Climate change did start to show up as a concern in many Indian novels. But at the same time, what needs to be taken into consideration is India's long tradition of focusing on environmental issues. Right from the times when the post-colonial novel in India was taking its primary footsteps to the present times, Indian fiction has dealt with environmental issues with a lot of care. Some such works are notably Adwaita Mallabharman's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (1973)¹⁷, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aranyak* (1976)¹⁸, Kamala Markandeya's *The Coffin Dams* (1979)¹⁹ to the more recent *The Hungry Tide* (2004)²⁰, *The Folded Earth* (2011)²¹ by Anuradha Roy or Ambikasanthan Mangad's *Enmakaje* (2017)²². All these works have documented change in the form of damage and disaster in some form or the other. The paper would look into these literary works which have addressed issues that could be termed as the foundation of climate change and seek to understand how these facets have influenced the human and by extension, non-human life as the world around them changed and the subsequent ways these changes/occurrences have been represented in Indian fiction. These works have dealt with the effects of environmental crisis long before the proliferation of climate change discourse. Climate change is now seen as a disruptor of existing orders capable of creating unforeseeable and hard to deal with challenges. In this regard, such literary pieces can be termed as pre-cursors of contemporary climate fiction or if I may put it in this way, "proto climate-fiction".

Indian English Fiction

English fiction written in India has a substantive number of works that deal with environmental issues. Unlike other literary systems like American or British Literature, Indian English Fiction (hereafter IEF) has adhered to a unique approach while dealing with the issue of environment. The associations of conservation of nature or celebration of nature as a pristine and beautiful haven of peace and tranquillity takes a backseat as objective descriptions of environment take the center stage in IEF. Arne Næss, the Norwegian philosopher, while talking about his concept of "deep ecology"²³ spoke about environmental interconnectedness and the need to recognise those connections in order to ensure a smooth exchange between nature and environment. His ideas were new and stood in stark difference to the Kantian idea of Enlightenment that reinforced the Renaissance idea of man at the center of all things. In a way, it can be said that IEF has paved the path for a new type of literary

practice to take shape that is not only different from the generic way fiction in English has been written for a long time.

One of the reasons of IEF's approach towards representing environment in the way it does is of course the long tradition of indigenous or regional forms of storytelling combined with the perception of immediate life-worlds as being part of a connected whole. Although it is beyond the ambit of discussion of this paper, but early IEF novels like *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) by Raja Rao stand in testimony to the fact the IEF has drawn heavily from the long traditions of oral literature that one can find strewn across the length and breadth of the country. The reason behind mentioning this fact is to establish the argument that IEF, as one finds it today is a product of the story telling traditions in the subcontinent, as much as it is an output of the English literary traditions. IEF's connection to its land of emergence is important because it is this connection which has made it stand apart in its perception of nature or environment which stands in opposition to the literary practices of England and America in particular as has been mentioned already.

Another reason that could be attributed to the discursivity of IEF's approach towards environment is definitely related to India being a postcolonial space. IEF, in general, has paid minute attention to India as a nation always and has been at the forefront of postcolonial resistance of all forms. The environmental thread of IEF is but an extension of the deep engagements that IEF in general has with such other organic areas like Subaltern Studies, Gender Studies, etc. In fact, the myriad concerns which have been dealt with in many of the 'environmental fiction' written in English in India, presuppose the thematic concerns of what is now popularly known as climate fiction. This paper asserts that climate change concerns occur organically in IEF as opposed to how it emerged in other literary systems like the British or the American where climate change discourse in fiction has come up as a separate genre itself. It is difficult to distinguish between climate change and environmental concerns in IEF as both occur as embedded wholes given India's position as a country that faces the ravages of both due to a plethora of factors like the interconnected ways of living with environment, developmental activities, etc.

A study of select environmental fiction in the tradition of IEF would reveal the recurrence of certain cardinal tropes and themes. Critiquing the idea of 'development' is one of the most important. One of the earlier novels, Kamala Markandya's *The Coffee Dams* (1969) is an objective depiction of how unrequited the idea of development can become if implemented at places where it is not required. The novel under discussion is set in the hills of Karnataka where a dam is being constructed by a out-sourced British company. As part of the construction of the actual big dam called the Great Dam in the novel, a number of small or coffer dams need to be constructed along the entire stretch of the river. It is these constructions that eventually go on to displace indigenous people along the river stretch, topple the ecology and the lifestyle to which these indigenous communities have adhered to for centuries and overall create a discord in the social-economic structure of the communities. The novel follows on the sharp social critique of the Nehruvian idea of development which has emerged from time to time as a counter argument to India's abject adherence to ideas of neo-colonial development, the changes these bring when accelerated to suit the need of a nation that is striving hard to become self-reliant. *The Coffee Dams*, in this way, also becomes a template for many other novels that have followed since then.

Following the course of these early novels and also following the emergence of several environmental movements across the country where people protested against the exigencies of developmental projects, environment became a part of popular imagination. A noticeable spurt in the number of fictional works written on environment can be noticed post 2010 as environment and climate change became part of the popular discourse more than ever before. However, unlike in the

Western literary canon, IEF did not toy with this newly emerging theme of climate change as an apocalyptic vision of death and destruction. It rather continued to follow up on its long-held tradition of objective narration of environmental concerns as a change that is debilitating by nature, but only adding to it the threats posed by this new feature of climate change. Thus, in its core, it continued to explore and underline the social impact that environmental changes can have in a country that is large, geographically diverse, populated and on the throes of emerging as a global power while being the home to one of the largest sections of population being below the poverty index.

A recent novel to question the idea of development taking place in an environmentally fragile zone is Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* (2011). The novel, set in Ranikhet, weaves together a plethora of issues to give an understated statement of how rambunctious ideas of development do not stand in good stead in an ecologically fragile zone as the Himalayas. The narrative takes a jibe at ideas like beautification drives, building of roads to connect remote interiors in the name of connecting the country on the path of progress, etc. The novel also draws parallels between two worlds—the pre and post partition Ranikhet to highlight how “change” has changed it over time. There are dedicated sections in the novel which come as pithy critique of this change. Diwan Sahib, one of the characters in the novel, has lived in both the worlds and becomes a mouthpiece of documenting change. He notes that Ranikhet used to be a self-sustaining place with no dearth of water and with a robust system of vegetation indigenous to the region that catered to the nutritional needs of the people but with the passage of time, Ranikhet has lost all of its charm and become a fragment of what it used to be.

These novels have explored the consequences of such neo-colonial development by throwing light on issues of environmental degradation, loss of livelihood triggering forced migration, displacement as a result of factors like loss of land to developmental projects like construction of dams, roads, industries, etc. The tradition of highlighting the consequences of exhaustive development that began with early novels continued till a long time particularly because such enjambments became a regular feature of the lived experiences of the citizens of the country. In fact, the fault lines of environmental concerns, gender studies, social issues, etc., frequently get blurred in the fiction that emerges from this part of the world. It may be noted here that fictional work from Bhasha literatures also toy with similar concerns.

As mentioned earlier, climate change in IEF thus does not get reflected as an apocalyptic event about to render the world into a veritable dystopia. IEF rather explores climate change as the backdrop of subtle changes that fundamentally alter social, economic and even political dynamics between communities thus leading to civil strife related to sharing of the commons resource like water or land, etc. Recent works of fiction like *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* have purposefully explored the theme of urban riots and migration generated by sharing of resources. Migration has emerged as an important thematic concern in such works of IEF in recent times thus consolidating the representation of climate change as a considerable force triggering migration. This becomes important given the fact that climate change related migration is difficult to point out and explain.

All Quiet in Vikaspuri explores the complex conjunctions of development induced environmental degradation related to the building of dams, release of effluents into rivers and the subsequent displacement of peoples and communities. The novel further takes into account the effects of migration from rural pockets to urban areas and the changing socio-economic dynamics of the country as a result of changing demography. A close reading of most of these novels would reveal that a significant part of the narration concerns with migration. It would not be too much stressing to assert that IEF has paid significant attention to this issue by locating

environment/climate as a cause of its trigger. These novels undertake a nuanced approach in positing such causes which are basically intertwined along with several aspects which do not usually meet casual sight. The mélange of rural politics rooted in caste and gender hierarchies, development activities taking place as a result of government policies, complex socio-economic dynamics, etc., feature as metonymy in the narratives and actually compel the readers to think critically of the process of migration and also of the affairs of the state. These novels are thus also social critiques. These posit migration not as a causal phenomenon which of course, it is not, but as an effect the trigger of which rests somewhere else, in factors that are beyond the control and even understanding of the migrants.

Another noticeable trend is the growing number of novels written in English by authors who are not really part of cities or mainstream urban landscapes but belong to smaller cities or parts of the country which do not fit in the upstream social imagination of the country. Writers from the Northeast are prime examples. In the past few years, young authors like Aruni Kashyap, Janice Pariat, Nabaneeta Kanungo, Jhanvi Baru, Avinuo Kire, et al., along with senior authors like Mamang Dai, Easternie Kire, Mitra Phukan et al., have contributed to the creation of a substantial body of work that highlight extremely local, concentrated issues related to environmental and climate change concerns pertaining to small places. These issues are at times hardly discernable as they lack the fortitude of being destructive on a grand scale while the opposite is also true in some cases. Whatever be the case, these novels strive to represent the exigencies of climate change, environmental degradation, etc., as they happen in real time and space and the output from these authors, writing about places that are on the fringe not only adds to the growing body of environmental fiction and also adds more depth and dimension to this emerging and grave problem.

One can go back to Mamang Dai's much celebrated work *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) to understand how environmental concerns play out in an ecologically pristine and fragile zone as the notions of progress and development, the core prerogatives of the nation state take over the age-old traditions and accumulated knowledge of living. One of the ways of engaging with the text is to look into it through the theoretical lens of "pollution" as noted by Greg Garrard in his work *Ecocriticism*. In his opinion, apart from the traditional meaning that the word pollution has, i.e., the presence of harmful substances in excessive amounts at a particular place, it also has an additional meaning "that too much of something is present in the environment, usually in the wrong place" (6). With regard to change, Jared Diamond in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* refers to changetaking place in unnoticed increments as "creeping normalcy". However, the change experienced by the Adis, the central community around whom the stories in the work revolve, has been at a ferocious pace. Not only did their ethnic life-world underwent changes but their land went under the occupation of people who had no clue as to how to negotiate with the physical characteristics of the place.

The Legends of Pensam is a collection of nineteen short stories that deal with how the ethnic life world of the Adi community which has been living in parts of modern-day Arunachal Pradesh has undergone changes over time. The narrative sways between talking about the life of the Adis through their belief systems, their gods and rituals and how these are challenged as the tribe meets with increased challenges that sway the state in the name of business, development and globalisation and how they fail to grapple with they are left with no other choice but to align themselves with their changing world.

Orijit Sen's *River of Stories* (1994), also touted as IEF's first graphic novel, touches upon the Sardar Sarovar Dam Project which has been a flagship endeavour of the Government of India. Following on a method of terse storytelling, the novel assumes a near magic realist narrative fusing

myths with the here and now. The novel dwells on how the dam, to be built on the Narmada, would absolutely wash away a certain section of the river bank thus endangering the tribes who have been living there for centuries now and also the rich animal life that has thrived in the forests. Through the narrative persona Malgu Gayen, the narrative fuses the origin story of the Gond tribe and juxtaposes it with the promises that the Government has been making about new India. These two stories—one, of the origin of a tribe at a certain time and the other, of a new nation, stand in stark contrast to each other. While the first has elements of being one with its immediate surroundings, the other wants to have control over it. Critiquing the idea of development, the novel foregrounds the need to weigh in how much of it is required and at what expense it is coming. Considered as an important document in the realm of resistance literature, *River of Stories* falls in the category of novels that talks of the environment by bringing together the factors that influence it present times. It also throws light on how indigenous systems and people are often neglected by the Government while imagining the nation-state.

Environment also finds itself embedded in narratives that do not fall in the genre of environmental novels as such. Nilanjana Roy's *Black River* (2022) is one such recent example. Although a noir crime novel navigating its way to understand why and how crime flourishes in the labyrinths of the national capital, through the alleys of caste, class and gender, it also focuses on the death of the Yamuna River. Keeping the river as a motif, and the businesses that abounds around it, the novel, in a way, explores crime through the lens of environmental degradation. The dying Yamuna, a black cesspool of murk and effluents, thus becomes a powerful symbol of oppression.

All these above-mentioned instances highlight the overarching presence of environment in IEF not just in myriad forms but also over a considerable duration of time now. However, at the same time, there is also a trend of popular fiction dealing with climate change as an apocalyptic event quite similar to the way it is represented in Western fiction. These are mostly works of fantasy. There is no gainsaying that climate change is increasingly becoming a part of India's literary imagination. *A Year Without Summer* (2020), *Decoding the Feronia Files* (2019), *The Butterfly Effect* (2018) are a few novels that have climate change as the central concern. These novels are mostly speculative in nature focused on the imagination of a future that is dislodged considerably due to climate change. Following the footsteps of western climate fiction novels, these latest collections of Indian novels are more direct in their approach to climate change.

Bhasha Literatures

If we talk of literature produced in the regional languages that dwell on similar issues as discussed so far, one of the works that takes the central stage is of course Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay's *Aranyak* (1979). While the novel is an account of a young man who sees a very different side of life as he moves away from the city where he was raised to a remote corner of the country, in the midst of forests and ancient tribes who adhere to centuries old system of living, in essence, it is actually a documentation of a country's changing imagination of the 'social'. The novel is set at a time when the country had started to become increasingly cosmopolitan and mobile and when its rising population demanded that more land be brought under the ambit of production so that it could be fed. Hence, the central theme of the novel is deforestation. It is a nuanced take on how growing needs in a country paves the path for increased land use in various forms thus throwing off balance the age-old ways of living and also gives birth to several new challenges like migration, social-cohesion, etc., that come as addendum.

Satyacharan, the narrator and the protagonist, suffers from guilt while distributing densely forested lands among people who have arrived in Lobotulia to carry out cultivation. He is shattered to realise that it is incumbent on him to distribute the land that has stood forested since ancient times to facilitate cultivation. Here Satyacharan's role is symbolic of the state itself. He is the one who facilitates the distribution of primordial lands to be used up in a more capitalist settlement now. The conundrum he suffers initially is soon replaced by a sense of assurance when the green forests are replaced with the yellow of ripe wheat or mustard. He notes that this transition is beautiful nonetheless. But the author does not let the complacency of the narrator take over the narrative. So, there are also sections in the novel where the narrator observes how indigenous communities are hardly considered as part of the nation-state which takes upon a more amnesiac attitude towards these peoples and communities.

The relationship that Satyacharan's employers who own the forests around Lobotulia share with the land is analogous to the relationship between the nation-state and what it terms as "natural resources". The relationship is determined on the basis of scoring capitalist gains through them. *Aranyak*, one of the first of the environmental novels written in India skilfully navigates this new conundrum, that is, of the relationship between the state and its natural resources, which has eventually become a sustained question in the spheres of the political and social sciences now. Several other novels written in Bengali and other Indian languages have also explored these contentions vividly. Needless to say, the interconnections between environment and humans and the effects of change in environment on humans form the central concern in most of these works.

Titas Ekti Nadir Naam (1956) by Advaita Mallabarman is another popular novel written in Bengali that documents environmental exigencies through the lives and challenges faced by the Malo community living on the banks of the Titas River. The central character in the novel is of course the river, and around it revolves the lives of the small angler community. A primary contention that one comes across in the novel is the juxtaposition of the seemingly well-off strides of the Malos living on the banks of the Titas as against the ones living along the banks of the Bijoy River. Titas, with its bounty of water the year around, always provided the Malos with food and livelihood but the Bijoy, being a dead river, hardly sustains the ones who live by its bank. This contrast highlights how environmental factors influence people and communities.

More recent novels like Anita Agnihotri's *Mahanadi* (2015) explores the intertwined lives of multiple communities living on the banks of it and the challenges they face as a result of the Hirakud dam being constructed on it. *Acchev* (1977) is a Konkani novel by Pundalik Naik that explores how iron ore mining in the Konkani region has rendered the Mandovi polluted leading to tuberculosis outbreaks along the Ponda region in Goa. The Telegu novel *Koleti Jadalu* (2020) by Akkineni Kutumbarao explores the slow death of one of India's largest freshwater lakes, the Kolleru due to excessive industrialisation around its banks, illegal encroachment, etc., thus rendering the fishing community living around it at a loss. One recurring theme around these novels is the exploration of how development impacts environment. Going back to the initial assertion made towards the beginning of the paper, it can be reiterated that like IEF, the Bhasha Literatures too have dealt with the cause of environment and have oftentimes seamlessly integrated environmental and climate change concerns while narrating stories of protest, resilience, rights, etc.

Conclusion

All these novels mentioned above have certain common concerns—the relationship between humans and environment, the centrality of environment in the lives of people, the degradation of

environment due to factors such as deforestation, industrialisation and most importantly, for the facilitation of neoliberal development ideas. The idea of “slow violence”²⁴ put forward by Robert Nixon can be a cogent way to understand the relationship between environment and the nation-state of India. Nixon defines slow violence as “violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence”. IEF and the Bhasha Literatures have always dealt with environmental concerns as these have happened in the here and now in India. The focus has always been to explore how these ruptures in environment as determined by policy decisions, developmental goals, etc., have influenced the life-worlds of people in this country. The exigencies of climate change continue to be explored in IEF and the Bhasha Literatures obliquely through the explorations of environmental concerns. The field of climate change studies is new and multidisciplinary but the effects of it are hardly new. These have been going on in tandem with environmental concerns for quite some time now in the form of slow violence as noted by Nixon.

Indian fiction has commented on the aftereffects of such environmental concerns of which displacement and migration are of prime importance. The novels predominantly deal with human stories of the effects of environmental concerns and bring to the readers alternative visions of how societies could be if the focus is on sustainability. These novels try to put perspective on how environmental and climatic concerns are not isolated events happening out of the blue but are part of intrinsic connections among multiple factors. Indian fiction does not locate climate change as an extrinsic factor. It contends that it is rooted in a liminal space and is influenced by multiple factors and interlocutors. It stresses on the need to examine climate change not as an isolated event that will happen in the form sudden or random action but as an ongoing process, something that will show its effects in increments. It also stresses on the need to view climate change as an aggregator of social, cultural and political change and calls attention to the fact that it is equally incumbent on the society to resist it as much as possible through positive interventions. The literary imagination of climate change in the subcontinent is not merely of an apocalyptic event in the manner it is in western literary tradition. Rather, it is focused on locating climate change as an effect resulting out of factors which are outcomes of accumulated elements. The imagination of climate change lies in environment, in processes like displacement and migration, in effects like floods, droughts, social-collapse, poverty, on the intersections of human—non-human conflicts rather than in the apocalyptic and collapse.

Notes

¹ A genre of fiction. It consists of novels or stories which portrays mundane, everyday experiences as they can occur in real life as lived experiences of people. It is a nineteenth century phenomenon. The narrative or plot of a realist novel is structured around an opening enigma which throws the conventional cultural and signifying practices into disarray.

² Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2016), 6

³ Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Flight Behaviour*. (New York: Harper Perrineal, 2012)

⁴ Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. (New Delhi: Penguin, 2019)

⁵ Little Ice Age, also known as Neoglacial Age was a period of rapid and wide-spread cooling from around 1300 to around 1850 CE when average global temperatures dropped by as much as 2°C (3.6°F), particularly in Europe and North America. It started around early 14th century and lasted till the 19th century.

⁶ Johns Putra, Adeline and Adam Trexler. “Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism” in *Wiley Interdisciplinary Review*, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.105>

⁷ Crosby, Alfred W. *The Columbian Exchange*. (India: Praeger Publishers Inc, 2003)

This work of Crosby documents the coming of Columbus to the New World, America, and the ecological ramifications of this incident on the world. It is considered a fundamental text of environmental history. It documents how the exchange of biological materials like plants, in particular potatoes, maize, wheat etc., and also animals like horses, and also of diseases like malaria, accelerated the global process of capitalism in which the roots of contemporary environmental crisis lie.

⁸ Klein, Naomi. *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. Climate*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014)

⁹ Horn, Eva and Hannes Bergthaller *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities*. (Routledge: 2019)

¹⁰ Ghosh, Amitav. *Nutmeg's Curse*. (New Delhi: Penguin, 2022)

¹¹ Saito, Kohei. *Capital in the Anthropocene*. (Ediciones, 2020)

This book talks about the importance of “degrowth” or the slowing of economic activities through democratic reform of labour and production to mitigate climate change. It draws from the unpublished writings on ecology and natural science by Marx and talks of ending mass production and consumption by allowing the process of decarbonisation to take place through implementation of shorter work hours.

¹² A much-debated term in recent times, the word became popular after the noble prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen who is also known for the discovery of the ozone layer depletion used it to underscore the impact of human beings in changing the environment along with Eugene Stoermer in 2000. He noted that human beings are a geological agent now responsible for altering the earth systems now more than ever. The term is used to denote present geological time interval, in which many conditions and processes on Earth are profoundly altered by human impact. This impact has intensified significantly since the onset of industrialisation, taking us out of the Earth System state typical of the Holocene Epoch that post-dates the last glaciation. The Anthropocene concept argues for a new, holistic view of the role of humans in shaping natural systems. The debate with regards to the concept of Anthropocene lies more in its location rather than its conceptualisation. A section of scientists, geologists and experts are not convinced whether an actual end can be put to the ongoing and mandated epoch of the Holocene to declare the Anthropocene, fueled by human activities as a new epoch.

¹³ “United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change”, United Nations, <https://unfccc.int/>

The UNFCCC or the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is an organisation of the United Nations tasked with supporting the global response on climate change. It was established in 1992 in Geneva. It is also tasked to support the complex architecture of bodies that serve to advance the implementation of the Convention, the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. It facilitates the analysis and review of information related to climate change and the organisation of the yearly Conference of the Parties (COP). The UNFCCC was created with a view to capping “unnecessary” and “dangerous” human intervention with the climate system. At present, it has a near universal membership with 198 signatories.

¹⁴ “Conference of Parties”, United Nations, <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>

The Conference of Parties (COP) is the supreme decision-making body of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It meets once every year and reviews the implementation of the Convention and any other legal instruments. It makes sure to effectively implement the Convention. A key task for the COP is to review the national communications and emission inventories submitted by Parties. Based on this information, the COP assesses the effects of the measures taken by Parties and the progress made in achieving the ultimate objective of the Convention. The first COP meeting was held in Berlin, Germany in March, 1995. The COP meets in Bonn, which is now the seat of the secretariat.

¹⁵ “Kyoto Protocol”, United Nations, https://unfccc.int/kyoto_protocol

The Kyoto Protocol was a meet up of nations to deliberate on climate change. It was adopted on 11 December 1997 but came into force on 16 February 2005 owing to some delays in the process of ratification. Currently, there are 192 Parties to the Kyoto Protocol. It sets into motion the Framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change by making the committed nations and economies in transition, that is emerging economies to limit and reduce greenhouse gases (GHG) emissions in accordance with agreed individual targets. It is based on an annex-based structure and puts the onus on the more developed countries

to control and reduce their Green House Gas emissions under the concept of “common but differentiated responsibility and respective capabilities”, because it recognizes that they are largely responsible for the current high levels of GHG emissions in the atmosphere. The Kyoto Protocol sets binding emission reduction targets for 37 industrialised countries and economies in transition and the European Union.

¹⁶ “United Nations Conference on Environment and Development”, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992>

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the 'Earth Summit', was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 3-14 June 1992. It espoused the need to focus on sustainable development regardless of its local, national or international status. 172 countries took part in the Summit. The Summit is the precursor to the United Nations Climate Change Convention which in turn led to the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. This summit led to the development of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Agenda 21 and the Forest Principles. The Rio Declaration, in short, contained 27 principles to guide countries in future with regard to achieving the goal of sustainable development. Agenda 21 is an action plan concerning sustainable development, but it is non-binding and the Forest Principles is formally called 'Non-Legally Binding Authoritative Statement of Principles for a Global Consensus on the Management, Conservation and Sustainable Development of All Types of Forests' and has recommendations for conservation and sustainable development forestry. It is non-binding too.

¹⁷ Mallabharman, Adwaita. *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*. (Kolkata: Ananda, 2018)

¹⁸ Bandopadhyay, Bibhutibhusan. *Aranyak*. (Kolkata: Mitra O Ghosh, 2016)

¹⁹ Markandya, Kamala. *The Coffin Dams*. (New Delhi: Penguin, 2020)

²⁰ Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2004).

²¹ Roy, Anuradha. *The Folded Earth*. (New Delhi: Hachette, 2011)

²² Mangad, Ambikasuthan. *Enmakaje*. (India: DC Books, 2017)

²³ Naes, Arne. “Deep Ecology”. DOI: 10.1016/B978-0-12-373932-2.00352-5

The idea was proposed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naes and a long-term supporter of human rights, women rights, peace movements and ecological egalitarianism. Drawing heavily from the intersections ecology and philosophy and drawing from the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, Deep Ecology proposes coherent living with environment and is based upon two principles. The first is, there has to be shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism, that is, human beings must accord value to every other living organism rather than perceiving a “master-slave” attitude; and secondly, it contends that humans are part of nature rather than superior and apart from it, and therefore must protect all life on Earth as they would protect their family or self.

²⁴ Nixon, Richard. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Harvard University Press)

<https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194>

Creative Protest against Pillage of Nature

Subhoranjan Dasgupta *

Prefatory Note

This essay, independent in nature, has grown out of my admired response to Debashree Chakrabarti's proposal which is appended after my article in order to provide the appropriate context. It also seeks to address, with all humility, the questions that were raised after my presentation. Needless to add, my close friends of CRG, Ranabir Samaddar and Sabyasachi Basu Roy Chudhuri, in particular, encouraged me to write the text.

Epigraph as Warning

This year is on track to become the hottest on record, with the global mean temperature to date this year 0.52° Celsius higher than average, the EU's Copernicus climate Change Service said on Thursday. Scientists have said climate change combined with the emergence this year of the El Nino weather pattern, which warms surface waters in the eastern and central Pacific Ocean, has fuelled recent record-breaking temperatures. (The Telegraph dt., 06/10/2023).

"Economy without Ecology is unthinkable and criminal"

-- Willy Brandt, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and Elder Statesman (1960)

Cognitive Evaluation of the Proposal

Let me begin with a candid confession. I am not an acknowledged expert on climate change, on the ravage and destruction that it has been causing in the present-day world. Nor am I a recognized authority on the variegated and protesting creativity (particularly fiction) that this change has provoked. In fact, while reading the excellent synopsis written by Debashree Chakravarti, learned and sensitive, I felt that I should not comment on it. But -- and this 'but' is crucially important -- with Debashree and million others -- I share the same, intrinsic concern. I am intensely aware of the havoc that is being wrought by global warming and deforestation, and more than anything else, this impassioned human concern has prompted me to concentrate, gratefully, on her research proposal. I would like to identify myself, ethically and fervently, with the soldiers of *Extinction Rebellion*.

I am not going to spend much time on the extensive arena of creative literature that she has immaculately outlined, which considers climate change as its overriding theme. Rather, at the outset, I would like to focus on the cause, the primal and overwhelming cause, that triggers climate change,

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that destroys nature with impunity. What is the cause ? In order to answer this fundamental query, I have to go back to the creativity and cogitations of the great German author, Gunter Grass, for whom Amitav Ghosh has an abiding admiration. I interviewed Gunter Grass (undoubtedly, the most remarkable novelist of post-War Europe) several times, and in the very first interview I placed that question, which was indeed the very last : “What is the overriding curse of our age ?”

The thoughtful novelist paused for a moment, cleaned his pipe and answered *Hubris*. I requested him to elaborate and he responded to my request with a flurry of words. He said, “The overwhelming curse of this age, our age, is hubris or arrogance. And who is the agent or architect of this arrogance ? The answer is : petty and inconsequential human being. This human being is supremely arrogant, he thinks he can control and subjugate nature, he can change the cycle of nature, the preordained rhythm of climate. He sees all around him the disastrous effect of this arrogant scheme but still he pursues relentlessly.” I interjected modestly by asking, “Mr. Grass, wherein lies the solution?” The novelist was in an eloquent mood in his simple apartment in Hamburg. After filling his pipe with tobacco, he replied, “Humility. Man needs to be humble. He should realize his insignificance in this vast cosmos and try his utmost to follow the rhythm of this cosmos, of nature, of the creative cycle. It is high time that we accept the simple though profound teaching of the Testaments and the Upanishads and terminate for once and for all our dangerous game. I earnestly hope he will, but at the same time, I am aware of his pernicious propensity. In other words, this entire conflict between creation and destruction appears to me as searingly dialectical.”

It is highly interesting to note that this very dialectic, swaying between irresistible hope and agonizing fear, is celebrated in his remarkable novel *Die Raettin* or the *She-Rat*. While explaining the main thesis of this parable, Grass told me, My literary imagination has been placed in the prevailing grim scenario spelling death and deprivation and it rests on a sharp, bitter dialogue between a rat and a man on the issue ‘who will survive’. Well, the rat has the last word. Human beings will destroy themselves because they are much too cowardly to express their fear and, hence, unable to remove the root of that fear as well.” The inexorable predicament of this arrogant human being, who is essentially insignificant, is caught in splendid verse :

Man Oh Man.
Once again say ‘I’
Once again think penetratingly.
Once again look through
Once again be right.
Once again be profoundly silent
Stand or fall just once more.

Those who met and exchanged words in the international conference on Environment held in Paris in 2015 and in Glasgow in 2021 should have recited together this grim warning quoted above.

I must admit that I was enormously impressed by the bibliography Debashree has offered. She has gone deep into the subject and has read almost all creative fiction available on the specific subject. With all modesty and hesitation at my command. I would request her to read *Die Raettin* where apocalyptic despair and redemptive renaissance are interwoven with consummate ease. This novel could perhaps provide the epistemological basis.

Now I come to my second theme. To which other predominant human inclination is this suicidal arrogance linked ? We do not need to take even the slightest pause to answer this query. This

predominant human inclination is 'avarice' or 'greed'. And this inevitable answer leads us to the colonial question, to the imperialist dictum based as it is primarily on *avarice*. The single determining impulse of colonialism is avarice and Debashree has hit the nail on the head when she says – I quote from her synopsis – “Recent critical works like *This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus The Climate* by Eva Horn (2014), Hannes Bergthaler’s *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* (2020), Amitav Ghosh’s *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021), Naomi Klein’s *Kobei Sauto’s Capital in the Anthropocene* (2021) are a few works that have also sought to establish the deep relationship that exists between colonialism as well as its illegitimate child, imperialism, and climate change”. The reading list she has provided is really remarkable. To the names of the books she has mentioned, we can perhaps add our very own Mahasveta Devi’s *Aranyer Adhikar*, which not only celebrates subaltern defiance but also the primeval sanctity of forest, of nature of *brihadaranya*.

It goes without saying that the deformed children of colonialism, imperialism and neoliberalism, are also 'culpable'. In point of fact, the entire pressure of 'development' as stressed by Debashree is the abrasive criminal. By 'development', both Debashree and I mean, rampant and unbridled commercial expansion, mechanical progress, monetary extravaganza, pseudo-scientific onslaught, industrial aggrandisement propelled by instrumental, self-devouring reason. Please note, I am not advocating a fanciful return to an impossible Elysium where milk and honey flow in abundance, but to the use, nurture and application of redemptive reason. I am not advocating the total elimination of the category of Reason, which Ashis Nandy would perhaps prefer. On the contrary, I am appealing to the return of Kantian Reason based on ethics which formed the bedrock of Enlightenment. It needs to be underlined here that this Reason based on ethics stood against colonialism and imperialism. Marx was the very child of this Enlightenment.

Reason as an Indispensable Dialectical Category

A scholar-friend of mine, a renowned political scientist, sternly objected to my invocation of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and Kantian reason. He went to the extent of describing Kant as the 'destroyer of Nature'. I did not object to his opposition at that precise moment because I wanted to avoid an altercation. But I think, I should posit my point of view with all possible deference at this moment. I have read almost all the classics of Immanuel Kant (not in questionable English translation but in original German) and nowhere have I found a single statement directed against the principle and preservation of nature. In fact, I would be immensely grateful if some Kantian scholar can discover a statement made by this philosopher disparaging or denigrating nature.

The confusion, however, lies elsewhere. Kant, the apostle of Enlightenment, divorced man or the human being from his preordained, religious inheritance and association and declared his primacy as well as individual freedom. The essential base of this freedom was the inculcation, use and practice of Reason. In other words, Reason in place of the apparently inexorable faith. That was the very essence of his seminal essay *What in Enlightenment*. But this advocacy of reason was essentially 'dialectical' in nature. Anyone who has read the great Polish theorist Karel Kosik's pathbreaking text *Dialectics of the Concrete* (I do not know if this book has been translated into English), he would realize to what extent Hegel, the champion of dialectical thought, was indebted to Kant in this specific sphere. By the way, Kant, himself, regarded 'Reason' as a dialectical process and stream of thinking.

It is a pity that Ashis Nandy, and to a certain extent, the Subalterns, ignored this intrinsic dialectical core of reason. They have regarded reason as something unilinear and monochromatic and thereby forgot the very title and thesis of the classic text *Dialectic of Enlightenment* authored by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (this text is available in English translation).

Now, what were the two contradictory coordinates of ‘Dialectical Reason’ ? On one end, we had ‘Instrumental Reason’, and, on the other end, ‘Redemptive Reason’. Again, Reason, we must bear in mind, cannot be divorced from Passion (Kant would use the term ‘reverence’) – they are two sides of the same coin. Thus, while ‘Instrumental Reason’, inflamed by passion (often dangerously creative at times) led us to Wagner, Nietzsche, Leni Riefenstahl Mussolini and Hitler; ‘Redemptive Reason’ led us to August Bebel, Rosa Luxemburg, Rabindranath, Gandhi, Bertrand Russell and Jean Paul Sartre. Even later, ‘Instrumental Reason’ and its application confirmed the spread and ascent of rapacious colonialism and economic imperialism. We need to recall at this moment that not Lenin but Rosa Luxemburg warned first and foremost about the worldwide aggression of capitalism and imperialism. She predicted that the hunger of Western capitalism has to cross its shores and occupy the regions of South and East. At our very present moment, this ‘instrumental’, unholy reason is represented the Vedanta and other mammoth corporate houses, who care two hoots about the quality and nature of environment and its preservation or protection. In other words, the historical trend is clear and categorical. It goes without saying that when Immanuel Kant formulated and posited his concept of liberated man armed with redemptive reason, he did not think of such naked perversion.

Professor Manidipa Sanyal, an authority on Kant (she teaches Kant at Calcutta University and has read Kant in German original) made a succinct comment in this context. She said, ‘Pillage and plunder of nature which we see today, did not prevail in Kantian times. So, how could Kant destroy something which did not exist during of that temporal phase ?’ Pollution, in fact, began gradually with the onset of the Industrial Revolution. We are afforded glimpses of it in Engels’ depiction of the condition of the working class in England. Thereafter, the sanctity to preserve Nature received a clarion call in the early texts of Karl Marx. At this stage, I am reminded of Kant’s remarkable Essay written in 1764 : *Beobachtungen ueber das Gafuhl des Schoenen und Erhabenen (Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime)*. This essay invokes the beauty of Nature as an extension of his overall moral realization. I am tempted to write many more words on this subject but I limit myself here.

I am neither a student of philosophy nor political science. I am a student of literature and the most resplendent example of this Kantian man has been offered by Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, where the tragic hero exclaims : “What a piece of work is a man ! / How noble in reason ! / How in finite in faculty !” ... Creativity, at times, predates philosophy. In this case Shakespeare predated Kant.

Incidentally, the greatest Indian philosopher after Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Bimal Krishna Matilal, the last glorious example of Navya Nyaya Darshan, had a close relationship with me. He confessed to me that he had one ultimate desire. What was it ? He said, “I would, if it is possible, have a dialogue with Immanuel Kant”. But why ? His answer was, “Because, like the logicians of Buddhist philosophy, he placed Reason and Argument above everything else, and never divorced the primary principles of ethics from their philosophical enquiry.” Anyone who has read, Bimal Krishna Matilal’s incomparable evaluation of the dialogue between Western and Indian philosophy, *Perception* would realize what I imply by referring particularly to him. He simply did not consider either Nagarjuna or Kant as implacable adversary of Nature. Let alone an outstanding thinker like Bimal Krishna Matilal, for whom Amartya Sen cherished an abiding affection (they were colleagues at Cambridge), even a suave dilettante like Nirad C. Chaudhuri, in his book on Max Mueller, (*The Scholar Extraordinary*) traced the latter’s process of dialectical thinking to that of Immanuel Kant.

Who are then the committed representatives and practitioners of ‘redemptive’ reason in our age ? Certainly the communists and social democrats who challenged Fascist oppression in Germany and Italy, a seminal thinker and activist like Antonio Gramsci; certainly the fighters of the Third World who defied colonialism, Franz-Fanon, Bhagat Singh and others; certainly, the Leftists who

struggled tooth and nail against forces and agents of neo-colonialism; certainly Rabindranath (let us recall his resplendent essays on the devouring nature of monopoly capital written in English); Nazrul Islam, who translated the *Communist Internationale* into Bengali, and down to Shankar Guha Neogi who fought till the last breath of his life the murderous miners. They were immortal advocates and practitioners of 'Redemptive Reason', whom we try to forget in our days of new-fangled theories.

But can we afford to forget the indisputable fact that even the great Michel Foucault was positively irritated by the continuing invective that he was an implacable enemy of Kant and Enlightenment. He was almost provoked to write an essay on this subject where he recognized the positives of Kant and Enlightenment, with which the must-read *Foucault Reader* begins. Similarly, the other great post-modernist pillar, Jacques Derrida, who was craftily exhibited as an inveterate anti-Marxist by interested circles, had to write *Pour Marx* or *For Marx* where he unequivocally stated that as long as tyranny, injustice, inequality and exploitation prevail, Karl Marx, would continue to be relevant. This Marx, incidentally did not fall from the sky, he was a product of Enlightenment.

Then, how did the estimate go wrong ? The mistake or unfortunate contradiction was candidly explained by Gunter Grass himself, to whom I had referred earlier. I had many dialogues with him, and in one such interaction he said, "I am certainly an inheritor of Enlightenment which accords prime importance to the human being. But, at the same time, I am thoroughly opposed to the religio-Christian thesis which claims that man is supreme, all-powerful and ultimate dominator. I crave for the emergence of that human being who dwells at the centre but who is at the same time in harmonious communion with other Nature and other humans. As the most superb example of such a human crusader, I shall recall your Gandhi. Holding his portrait in our hands, our peace-marchers walked on the streets to save the environment, to stop the construction of the nuclear energy centre at Gorleben." Professor and eminent columnist, Ramachandra Guha, paid homage to this redemptive Gandhi in his excellent essay *The Green Gandhi* published in *The Telegraph* on June 3, 2023. "We forget what Gandhi himself wrote in *Young India* dated 20.12.1925 'God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts'."

While recollecting what Grass had pronounced and Gandhi had written, I was reminded of the two most palpable examples of 'instrumental' and 'redemptive' reason, which have engrossed our contemporary attention. We have all seen the breathtaking film *Oppenheimer*. The embodiment of 'instrumental' reason in that film is Oppenheimer himself, who like Faust in Goethe's immortal tragedy, sold his soul to the Devil, and the example of 'redemptive' reason is of course Albert Einstein who refused to be a part of the destructive design.

The question is what weapons should we wield against arrogance and avarice which act as the prime impulse of climate change, global warming and deforestation ? If we really want to seek an answer, we have to return inescapably to the neo-Marxians, to Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse. Adorno posited the corrective world of liberated nature, in short, transcendence, to battle the destruction caused by instrumental reason and the reified world pockmarked with commodities. Walter Benjamin etched his salvational reality of 'aura' which preserves Nature and History in their pristine significance. Herbert Marcuse combated the strutting of the deaf and blind, self-serving one-dimensional man with the flowering of the many-sided, sensuous individual who would remain true to the coordinates of nature and beauty in his classic *Eros and Civilisation*. And, last but not the least, Ernst Bloch, who challenged the devastation all around with his unvanquished Principle of Hope, *Die Prinzip Hoffnung*.

All these theoretical resolutions and aesthetic commitments of the Neo-Marxians coalesce superbly to construct the counterworld and to posit the counter-principle, which stand in total opposition to the prevailing world, which tragically is being pillaged by the inhuman hand. This pillage of nature adopts various forms extending from the assault on the climate cycle to the indiscriminate rape of the green, from murderous global warming to the limitless dissemination of toxicity. I personally think that Debashree could fruitfully use or apply these theoretical postulates to define and measure the depth and extent of desecrated nature. Her dissection and critique will spontaneously lead to the articulation of the aspired for counter-world, no matter how much Utopian it appears in the midst of the diurnal, oppressive reality. In short, I am requesting her to consider the Neo-Marxian methodology with emphasis on Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse who have linked the sacred inviolability of nature with the inviolability of creative imagination, as they say in German. 'Natur Schoenen with Kunst Schoenen'.

But, dear friends, why should we limit ourselves to the neo-Marxians who did not after emerge all of a sudden from thin air. That very much discredited, anachronistic, bearded savant, whom we have all but forgotten, acted as the vibrant forerunner when he said that capitalism and private property raise the crucial barrier between Man and Nature. Man is alienated from nature, from other human beings, from the fruit of his work and from the process of his labour. This four-pronged alienation will disappear and end only when the primal bond between Man and Nature is restored, when harmony is the guiding principle again. All these nuggets are to be found in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and who is this 'he' – I do not mention the name, because we all know who he is.

Return to the Poetic-Creative Dimension

But I think I have strayed beyond my prescribed limits. I am, basically, a student of literature and literary theory, and I would like to supplement Debashree's wonderful selection of fiction and prose narratives dramatising the destruction of environment and nature by recollecting the unforgettable pillars, Bertolt Brecht and Pablo Neruda, undoubtedly, two supreme poets of the last century. While Brecht (whose 125th birth anniversary we are celebrating this year) in one poem after another, like a true historical materialist in the spirit of Friedrich Engels, reiterated the communion between man and nature, Pablo Neruda (whose 50th death anniversary is being observed this year) in his tumultuous *Canto General* recreated that nature and environment of his beloved Latin America in all its elemental splendour and richness.

In his poem *Murmur*, the indefatigable German Communist, Bertie Brecht, found his lasting peace in the call of birds, beauty of poplars and warmth of human companionship :

Towards the end, in autumn
Flocks of crows build nests in silvery poplar trees
But all through the summer, when birds are scarce
I hear the murmur and whisper of human beings
And I am happy with that.

You could well wonder why I quote below the immortal poem *The Lovers* by the same poet to the full:

The Lovers

See, the cranes are flying away in great circles
They leave behind the garland of clouds,
Those clouds, soft and tender, float with the
Rhythm of their wings. When they are ever-rising,
Leaving behind old lives in search of the new.

Split into two groups, the cranes fly at the same speed
And at the same height, as if they are intertwined
By the rhythm of mutual relevance.

Clouds and wild cranes fly like this in the same cluster,
Merging into the pleasant-sweet sky,
One after the other in intense gradation.

Not a single crane stands still in the flock
None looks behind or turns around,
They only observe one another and feel
The pulsation of the wind, everyone realizes
That the wind is clinging to its frame,
The wind is also free and ascending.

Thus, no matter how the wind pushes them,
If they remain changeless and do not scatter,
None has the power to touch them.

In the meanwhile they have been driven away
From all the corners of the world, where
Storm or gunfire raise fearful echoes.
That is why, merging the sun and the moon,
They go on flying under the same sky, all together.
Where do they go ? – Nowhere.
From which sphere do they try to escape, from where ?
They fly away soaringly from you all.

This poem appears in one of his remarkable plays, *The Rise and Fall of the City Mahogany*, which traces the pervasive and corruptible influence of filthy lucre. It is filled with monetary depredations and the instinct of avarice. But in this very play, wedded to crass avarice, this immortal lyric challenges the prevailing scheme of things. Voiced by the two protagonists, Paul and Jenny, it celebrates the liberation of unsullied nature. Adorno, Marcuse and our very own Bishnu Dey chose this poem of singular defiance as a passport to the world of redemption, unalienated nature symbolized in the inexorable flight of cranes. Indeed, in the words of Bishnu Dey, “Rabindranath’s

ceaseless quest of unsullied nature forever seeking freedom and sanctity finds its ultimate expression in this invocation. The cranes symbolize the final movement and attainment of freedom.” (*Rabindranath O Silpasabitya Adhunikotar Samasya*).

Similarly, Pablo Neruda, in *Canto Generale*, celebrates the turbulent sacredness of nature and environment in Chile and Bolivia before the murderous United Fruit Company and Standard Oil trooped in. Neruda has, of course, castigated these hellish conglomerates in poems written later, but what inspires us at this very moment in his recreation of the primeval world untouched by climate change and deforestation. It bears mention that the great Leftist Greek composer, Mikis Theodorakis set *Canto general* to enthralling music. Neruda and Theodorakis– they constituted an incomparable duo . Let us revisit with the help of words that Latin America where man and nature, plants and animals dwelt in the past in blessed amity : “Who awaits me ? /and I closed my hand / around a fistful of empty flint. / but I walked among Zapotec flowers/ and the light was soft like a deer, / and the shade was a green eyelid. / my land without name, without America, / equinoctial stamen, purple lance, / your aroma climbed my roots up to the glass / raised to my lips, up to the slenderest / word as yet unborn in my mouth.

At the very end, dear friends, let us say good bye to the German village of Bertolt Brecht and the Chilean forest of Pablo Neruda. Let us return to our own Bengal and offer one deathless instance of pristine and unadulterated nature untouched by global warming and deforestation. I am underlining the beauty, depth, poignancy and solemnity of *Rupashi Bangla* created by Jibanananda Das. It defies the present-day process of criminal ruin and reinstates that paradisiacal peace which is our yearning and commitment :

Sandhya hoi – charidike santo neerabata;

Evening falls – tranquil silence on all sides;
A shalik wordless flies with straw in its beaks;
The cow-cart trudges on the country road slowly slowly;
The courtyard is filled with mounds of golden hay;

All the doves of the world are cooing in the oak forest;
All the beauty of the world is clinging to the grass;
All the love of this world dwells in our two hearts;
The sky peace incarnate is spread in sky after sky.

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