PAEDEIA: **NSU Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Law, Vol 1, 2025**
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47126/nsushssjournal.v1i1.01

Reconciling South Asian Novels with the Anthropocene: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Study

Syeda Fatema Rahman

ABSTRACT

From novelist Amitav Ghosh to historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, the imaginative impediment at the heart of the climate crisis appears to be widely felt. Ghosh has argued that conventional novels often fail to grapple with the scale and improbability of climate change, while Chakrabarty has identified a methodological tension between postcolonial studies and the emerging field of Anthropocene scholarship. This paper attempts to reconcile the rift identified by Chakrabarty through a postcolonial ecocritical analysis of South Asian novels – that is, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Shahidul Zahir's *Life and Political Reality* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*. In doing so, it argues that these texts subvert the Western anthropocentric human-nonhuman binary that Ghosh and Chakrabarty have articulated. The paper illuminates how boundaries between human and nonhuman actors are often refracted through caste and social hierarchies in South Asia, and how alternative conceptions of the natural environment and nonhuman agency are intricately woven into the narrative fabric of these works I further contend that environmental insensibility reflects a colonial mindset embedded within historical and social structures. Overall, this paper seeks to reconsider literature's capacity to overcome its imaginative limitations in addressing climate change—a challenge both enabled and constrained by literary form, as Ghosh notes. Ultimately, the texts under analysis reveal that the project of reassessing human and nonhuman agency and reimagining their relationship in the age of the Anthropocene is well underway. In the words of Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," and more than ever, the current climate crisis underscores the urgent need for writers to engage their imagination in shaping a more ecologically conscious world.

Keywords: Postcolonial Studies, Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, South Asian Literature, Fiction.

Contemporary contention on the present climate crisis is imbued by a certain strand of mutual awareness regarding the imaginative power's shortcoming in grappling the issue of climate change. The issue at hand calls for a reconfiguration of conventional historical understanding and literary representation. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009), in his essay "The Climate of History: Four Theses," builds upon the argument that we have passed the Holocene and are now living in the era of the Anthropocene – a proposed geologic period in which humans, due to their soaring level of largely fossil fuel driven impact on the planet, have collectively become geologic agents. Put simply, human beings are said to have become geologic agents because they have collectively *altered* the earth. To "call human beings geologic agents is to scale up our imagination of the human" (Chakrabarty 2009, 38); geological agency and such radical alteration of the earth, has always, after all, been a nonhuman characteristic associated with meteors and so forth. But, how does one imagine such a scale when one cannot experience *being* a geologic agent? An individual can experience being a biological agent through, for example, the act of reproduction, but one only acquires geological agency through humankind's actions in the aggregate, as manifest in anthropogenic planetary change. Consequently, for the individual, geological agency remains a concept that is experientially distant, even as it has become an urgent reality since the Industrial Revolution and the latter half of the twentieth century. This "deranged" detachment, as Chakrabarty observes, is reflected in the dominant literary tradition, which has increasingly privileged the individual experience—or the psyche—since the height of modernism.

Novelist Amitav Ghosh (2016), in his book *The Great Derangement*, argues that what makes climate events taxing on the literary imagination is its perceived "improbability," which grows out of modernity's tendency to think of the natural environment as a stable, inexhaustible resource depository. If the natural environment is a passive site that can be endlessly exploited for its resources, then climatic disruptions – which implicates nonhuman agency rather than passivity – are to be assumed improbable. Ghosh even warns that "if certain literary forms [by which he means conventional contemporary novels] are unable to negotiate these [wild] torrents [of climate change], then they will have failed – and their failures will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis" (10). Alternatively, I will argue that several South Asian novels offer resources for negotiating this imaginative impediment, with Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* serving as a notable example. Drawing on such literary texts, I argue that they subvert the Western anthropocentric human-nonhuman binary that Ghosh and Chakrabarty have articulated. In doing so, the texts dismantle the human's privileged position in the hierarchy that emerged since the Enlightenment, and, thereby, affirm the nonhuman agency that has been denied by that anthropocentric mode of thinking.

Before engaging with the primary text, it is necessary to address the contested scholarly reception of the term "Anthropocene." For example, in "We Should Be Talking about the Capitalocene," Wendy Arons (2024) wholly criticizes the "Anthropocene" as a theory that overlooks the historical role of global capital and colonization in ushering in today's climate crisis

(35). While her critique raises important points, it reflects a somewhat limited view, rooted in the methodological confines of postcolonial studies—a framework that, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) observes, is insufficient for addressing the planetary scale of the current crisis. As Chakrabarty notes,

> As the [climate] crisis gathered momentum in the last few years, I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last 25 years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today. (33)

It is difficult to make sense of the problem in which humanity finds itself today because the problem demands "species thinking." To think of humans as a species – just like all other nonhuman living forms, in an interdependent natural order – is to oppose the smaller-scale humanist thinking that postcolonialism, and many other fields, have traditionally employed to think of the human "as an effect of power" (50) within an unequal, human-made global order." One has only to think about Michel Foucault's (1990) idea of the subject as an effect of an individuating, omnipresent, and multifarious power (48). Where humankind *has* engaged in species thinking, it has only done so in the negative – for instance, 19th-century Victorians constructing the homosexual as an aberrant species in a way that strips them of their individuality (Foucault 1990, 43). Individuality, rather than the kind of collectivity that is inherent in species thinking, has thus always been a privilege of the human in dominant Western thought. The Anthropocene, by contrast, upends the privileging of individual experience, demanding that humans recognize themselves as a collective species whose aggregated actions have geologically transformed the Earth and contributed to phenomena such as global warming. However, while the "planetary conjuncture" at the heart of Anthropocene studies necessitates such species thinking, it "is not to deny the historical role that the richer and mainly Western nations of the world have played in emitting greenhouse gases" (Chakrabarty 2009, 47).

Thus, although postcolonialism and the Anthropocene may initially seem incongruent, Anthropocene studies, in actuality, cannot function without the history of capitalism, industrialization, and colonialization – which are at the heart of postcolonialism – because these are also the indispensable catalysts that ushered in the very epoch the Anthropocene seeks to study, and this is why I disagree with Arons's charge (Arons 2024, 35). Arons's critique, rooted in a caution against universalizing individual responsibility, is understandable; however, Chakrabarty (2009) raises a crucial question: "How do we relate to a universal history of life – to universal thought, that is – while retaining what is of obvious value in our postcolonial suspicion of the universal? The crisis of climate change calls for thinking simultaneously on both registers…It calls for a global approach…without the myth of a global identity" (49). In an attempt to reconcile this theoretical gap between postcolonial studies and Anthropocene studies, my analysis of *The God of Small Things* employs both postcolonialism and ecocriticism. This dual approach allows for an examination of the novel's engagement with marginalized identities, capitalism-driven environmental degradation, and complex human–nonhuman interrelations, while also representing

the "improbable"—that is, large-scale climate events that challenge conventional narrative and imaginative forms.

Chakrabarty (2009) further emphasizes that "all disciplines [even the humanities where 'personhood' is no less of a reduction of the human than the human skeleton is in anatomy] have to create their objects of study," and that the "crisis of climate change calls on academics to rise above their disciplinary prejudices" (45). In other words, understanding the Anthropocene requires thinking beyond rigid disciplinary boundaries. Ecocriticism has in it the capacity to respond to such calls as it probes the limits of literature and harbors space for the interdisciplinary sensibility that is central to addressing the present environmental crisis. As Chakrabarty explains, "Explaining this catastrophe calls for a conversation between disciplines and between recorded and deep histories of human beings in the same way that the agricultural revolution of 10000 years ago could not be explained except through a convergence of…geology, archaeology and history" (48).

Further, ecocriticism collapses the age-old Western binary between the privileged human and the peripheral nonhuman world. As Divya Anand (2023) observes in her article "Inhabiting the Space of Literature: An Ecocritical Study of Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things"* and O.V Vijayan's The *Legends of Khasak",* ecocriticism "aims at de-centering the human subject of the dominant anthropocentric Enlightenment discourse to fashion a habitual environmental sensitivity in human beings" (96). Peter Barry (2017) echoes a similar argument in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, noting that, in "the case of ecocriticism, the intuition we have to counter is a long-standing, deeply ingrained Western cultural tradition of anthropocentric attitudes, which are both religious and humanist, and often enshrined in commonplace…sayings… [such as] 'Man is the measure of all things'" (168). Undoubtedly, the disillusionment of the modernists and post-modernists and their skepticism of such long-standing anthropocentric beliefs have paved the way for ecocriticism to continue the mission.

It is useful to consider two ways in which ecocriticism collapses the anthropocentric binary between nature and human beings. Firstly, it "repudiates the foundational belief in [linguistic and social] 'constructedness' which is such an important aspect of literary theory" (Barry 2017, 163), specifically regarding the natural environment. Nonetheless, this repudiation of "constructedness" is not total and need not invoke doom for fear of a wholly deterministic view of nature because it does not negate the existence of gray areas – "we can say that we have nature, culture, and states partaking of both, and that all three are real" (Barry 2017, 164). While literary texts continue to reflect cultural and social constructions of nature, this approach affirms the independent agency and existence of the natural world. Such recognition is essential for species thinking, enabling an understanding of the collapse between human history and the more expansive timeline of natural history. As Chakrabarty (2009) succinctly puts it, "anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history" (35). Reconciling these previously separated histories radically overturns the anthropocentric binary, challenges conventional historical frameworks, and expands the possibilities of literary imagination. Thus, in this age of the Anthropocene, humans "have *become* a natural condition"

(Chakrabarty 2009 44; emphasis added), eroding the distinction between human and nonhuman like never before. Many South Asian novelists respond to this challenge by reimagining human–nature relations and foregrounding the agency of nonhuman entities.

I begin with Arundhati Roy's novel The God of Small Things, set in Kerala and narrated through a non-linear, fragmented structure. The story alternates between the perspectives of the seven-year-old twins, Rahel and Estha, and that of Rahel at the age of thirty-one, requiring the reader to navigate shifts in time and consciousness. In adulthood, Rahel revisits her childhood home in Ayemenem, recalling the traumatic events of the night of "Terror," which left the twins deeply scarred and ultimately precipitated the death of their mother, Ammu. On that night, their nine-year-old cousin Sophie Mol drowns and the twins' beloved Velutha, a Dalit [1] carpenter – also Ammu's lover – is brutally murdered by the police upon their grandaunt's false allegation that he raped Ammu. The novel offers a scathing critique of caste discrimination and the rigid "Love Laws" governing 1960s Kerala. At the same time, it probes the limits of human emotion and connection, and, I argue, subverts the conventional nature/human binary by vividly portraying nonhuman life and the intimate, interdependent relationships between human and nonhuman entities, particularly in the lives of marginalized characters.

The title, "The God of Small Things" is a motif that recurs throughout the novel in explicit reference to Velutha. Implicitly, although "'smallness' is…not a stable signifier within the text, encompassing notions of subaltern agency, the workings of memory…" (Poyner 2023, 62) – according to Jane Poyner's article "Subalternity and Scale in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*" – I want to focus on smallness insofar as it signifies the natural environment, to which subaltern agency is depicted as indelibly intertwined. For instance, Ammu and Velutha, both subaltern figures – Ammu as a woman and Velutha as a Dalit, and both as a pair excluded from society for defying the Love Laws – "instinctively stuck to the small things…They laughed at antbites on each other's bottoms. At clumsy caterpillars" (Roy 1997, 236) and at the spider whom Velutha named Chappa Thamburan. They invest painstaking emotional energy in this spider, take offense when it rejects their articles and, importantly,

> Without admitting it to each other or themselves, they linked their fates, their futures (their Love, their Madness, their Hope, their Infinnate joy), to his. They checked on him every night (with growing panic as time went by) to see if he had survived the day. They fretted over his frailty. His smallness…They chose him because they knew they had to put their faith in fragility. (Roy 1997, 237)

This passage conveys how, as "fragile" subaltern themselves, they are doubly "linked" to their nonhuman environment on not only a biological register like all human beings, but also on a deeper, emotional register. After twenty-three years, Estha too, being a subaltern figure, finds

[1] "Dalits," previously known as "Untouchables" in a derogatory sense, refers to members of the lowest caste in the Hindu caste system – those who have historically been deemed impure as if to defile others upon touch. Roy uses the term "Untouchable" throughout the novel.

solace in fragility when in his dead dog's eyes, he sees "a bird that flew across. To Estha…the fact that something so fragile, so unbearably tender had survived…was a miracle…It made him smile out loud" (Roy 1997, 9). However, in the case of Velutha's spider, the narrator adds, "He [the spider] outlived Velutha…He died of natural causes" (Roy 1997, 237), which alludes to the unnatural cause of Velutha's demise. Significantly, this reinforces the argument I develop in this paper: the police murder Velutha with an impersonal, bureaucratic brutality reminiscent of the colonial attitude toward both marginalized humans and the natural world. By portraying these enforcers of an entrenched colonial order— "history's henchmen," as they are called—as violators of the natural order, Roy seamlessly embeds a postcolonial critique within her ecologically attuned narrative.

Concurrently, Estha and Rahel's emotional connection to the nonhuman environment is underscored by the striking contrast between the end of chapter four and the beginning of chapter five, which depict the Meenachal River twenty-three years apart. In chapter four, the river is portrayed as a lush site of solace and wonder for the twins: "They dreamed of their river. Of coconut trees that bent into it…It was warm, the water. Graygreen. Like rippled silk. With the sky and trees in it" (Roy 1997, 90). By contrast, the consecutive scene in chapter five presents the river as environmentally degraded, reflecting the impacts of capitalist ventures such as tourism:

> Years later, when Rahel returned to the river, it greeted her with a ghastly skull's smile…and a limp hand raised from a hospital bed…sequined with the occasional slant of a dead fish. It was choked with succulent weed…Once it had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea. Bright plastic bags blew…Children…defecated directly onto the mud…of the exposed riverbed…the river would rouse itself to accept the day's offerings and sludge off to the sea, leaving wavy lines of thick scum in its wake…mothers washed clothes and pots in unadulterated factory effluents…On warm days the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat." (91).

The withering of the twins' inner lives, manifest in Rahel's "Hollowness" and Estha's "Quietness," parallels the river's physical and spiritual decline, which is now marked by its "ghastly skull's smile." Once vibrant and life-giving, the river has become a locus of decay and entropy—a "kind of negative energy within systems which tends towards breakdown and disorganization" (Barry 2017, 167). Similarly, the History House, now transformed into a five-star hotel for tourists, "could no longer be approached from the river. It had turned its back on Ayemenem" (Roy 1997, 91). This imagery symbolizes the human indifference toward the natural environment within a neoliberal, consumerist framework, highlighting the moral and ecological consequences of exploitation. Notably, the History House functions as an unstable signifier of "Big Things," initially representing history and socio-political power during Velutha's murder and later coming to signify the forces of capitalism and globalization.

Furthermore, the twins' emotional relationship to the environment is indicated by their "solastalgia"; a term coined by philosopher Glenn Albrecht to describe "the sense of [localized] psychic distress caused by environmental change**"** (167). This is revealing in context of the connection made between the twins' emotional relationship to the river in the novel. Robert MacFarlane (2018), in his article "Generation Anthropocene," explains, "solastalgia speaks of a modern uncanny, in which a familiar place is rendered unrecognisable by climate change or corporate action" – which is just what happens to the Meenachal river. Although Barry defines solastalgia in opposition to "nostalgia," the twins suffer from both phenomena. As hybrid postcolonial subjects, their incestuous encounter can be read as an attempt to hark back to their origins, back before Ammu and Velutha's death. Both the twins search for their mother's features in each other before their sexual encounter. However, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1998) warns, "a nostalgia for lost origins can be detrimental to the exploration of social realities within the critique of imperialism" (87), meaning that this origin is irretrievable. This is evidenced in *The God of Small Things* by the twins' failed attempt to reach the impossible destination, that is, lost origins, through incest. This failure is indicated through language marked by a dejected tone – "what they [the twins] shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief" (Roy 1997, 229) – in contrast to the tender tone that is used to narrate Ammu and Velutha's sexual encounter in the chapter that, again, immediately follows.

Environmental issues are also often taken up *in practice* by the marginalized. For instance, there are many Dalit participants in movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andalan, in which Roy herself is active. It is a protest against large scale, state-sanctioned dam building along the Narmada Valley resulting in ravaged ecosystems, decimated homes, and dispossessed marginalized people. An echo of this can thus be noted in the scene depicting environmental degradation where the "barrage" built across the polluted river results in "more rice-for the price of a river" (Roy 1997, 90). In this context, it is noteworthy that Velutha, also a Dalit, evidently had a strong symbiotic relationship with the river before its degradation and his death: "As he rose from the dark river…she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish… How the wood he fashioned had fashioned him…each thing he made had molded him" (Roy 1997, 232). Equally important, Mirja Lobnik (2018), in her article "Sounding Ecologies in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*," interprets these lines as such: "the reciprocal belonging turns Velutha into a member, rather than an owner" of the natural environment. "As a result, the human body no longer positions itself in opposition or, even more crucially, as superior to the natural environment but seamlessly blends into it. Moreover, by assigning the physical world a role in Velutha's identity formation [through the reciprocity] …Roy expands the conception of intersubjectivity beyond the human and redistributes agency among human and nonhuman actors" (Lobnik 2018, 129)

Simultaneously, Poyner (2023) states that "Velutha is both oppressed subaltern *and* prototypical eco-warrior of a new planetary order" and, as such, she reads the motif "he left no footprints in the sand" as conveying a dual meaning that "can be read across centrifugal scales, from individual…to "global" (62). On the individual scale, it refers to his lack of agency as subaltern, but, on the global scale, it refers to his (positive) lack of carbon footprints. Indeed,

despite contributing the least to climate change, it is usually the marginalized who suffer worst from it – as is evidenced by environmental racism and the dumping of toxic waste on poorer countries, or even the recent floods in Bangladesh that ravaged rural areas. Nevertheless, by casting Velutha as both "prototypical eco-warrior" and "oppressed subaltern," alongside dissolving the scalar disjuncture at the heart of the climate crisis, the novel imagines "a universal approach without the myth of a global identity" (Chakrabarty 2009, 49).

Additionally, Poyner (2023) "argue[s] that the novel refracts human agency through non-human agency of which it is always already an integral part (humans *as part of* nature)" (61) which is evocative of Chakrabarty's call to imagine humans as a species or "as part of nature." Throughout the novel, Velutha is attended by associations to the environment of which he is evidently a part, never in a disparaging or overbearing sense, but always in perfect harmony. These associations appear to be largely built through olfactory, gustatory and tactile imagery. For instance, in the lines that follow, the river and Velutha seem to share an intimate affinity that is affected through the olfactory and gustatory rather than through the visual, which has been a privileged sensory perception since the Enlightenment: "She smelled the river on him. His Particular Paravan[2] smell that so disgusted Baby Kochamma. Ammu put out her tongue and tasted it" (Roy 1997, 233). Undermining traditional ocularcentrism, these lines engage the other senses to subvert the notion of untouchability and instill an environmental sensibility. Thus, they at once stage a blatant defiance against both caste constraints, and anthropocentric attitudes responsible for constructing the chasm between the human and the nonhuman.

The novel as a form, insofar as the direction it has taken since modernism, proves particularly resistant to the depiction of climatic events, according to Ghosh. "Throughout history these branches [poetry, prose, etc.] have responded to war, ecological calamity and crises of many sorts: why, then, should climate change prove so peculiarly resistant to their practices?" Ghosh asks in his book *The Great Derangement*. He suggests climate change's anthropogenic quality as one reason, since that might lend an accusatory tone to the novel. More importantly, it is its perceived improbability because "within the pages of a novel an event that is only slightly improbable in real life – say, an unexpected encounter with a long-lost childhood friend – may seem wildly unlikely: the writer will have to work hard to make it appear persuasive" (Ghosh 2016, 31). Additionally, unlike the epic that spans eons and epochs, it is the novel's classic tendency to hyperfocus on a specific geographical area and timeframe – in order to build "a sense of place" – that becomes its undoing when confronted with the project of depicting climate crises. Climate crises are, in contrast, part of a much broader "natural history" that exceeds the novel's scope in terms of time and space. Ghosh adds that, despite being a novelist preoccupied with climate change, he himself is victim to the "peculiar forms of resistance that climate change presents to what is now regarded as serious fiction", as opposed to "inferior" genres like science fiction.

[2] The Paravans are a sea people placed outside the Hindu-caste system and deemed "untouchable" because of their trade. They have been involved in fishing and boat building since ancient times, but the devout, educated Hindu regarded such activities with disdain.

To further exemplify the divide between "serious" fiction and climate change, Ghosh states that although Arundhati Roy is a "fine prose stylist" and "passionate…about climate change…all her writings on these subjects are in various forms of non-fiction" (11). In contrast, I would like to argue that Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, pushes the boundaries of depicting nonhuman agency and the effects of climate change. For example, what sets forth the fatal events of the night of "Terror" is what the newspapers in the novel call a "cyclonic disturbance" (Roy 1997, 181). "Perhaps it was the rain that drove Vellya Paapen [Velutha's father, who himself relays the news of his son's illicit affair to Ammu's mother, Mammachi] to the kitchen door [of Mammachi]. To a superstitious man, the relentlessness of that *unseasonal* downpour could have seemed like an omen from an angry god. To a drunk superstitious man, it could have seemed like the beginning of the end of the world. Which, in a way, it was" (181; emphasis added). Therefore, this unusual December rain catalyzed the calamitous events that led to three deaths, a shattered family, and the ensuing spiritual lifelessness of two twins. For all its "improbability," these events are seamlessly weaved together in the fabric of Roy's fiction. Interestingly, by force of habit, the reader might easily slip into misreading this scene by making the anthropocentric inference that the sudden tempestuous weather is a reflection of the main characters' mood and plight this night, thereby consigning the natural environment once again to the backdrop. Roy, however, takes care to clarify that it is, instead, the nonhuman agency of nature in the form of an "unseasonal downpour" that "drove" Vellya Paapen and catalyzed the whole series of events. This is one of the many ways in which Roy replaces the traditional chasm between the human world and the natural world instead with a sense of inseparability that is central to an imagining of the Anthropocene. Although *The God of Small Things* does not surpass the confines of a specific geographical location, which Ghosh perceives as a limitation of the novel, this specific location – that is Ayemenem – comes to life under Roy's pen. Consider, for example, the portrayal of the natural environment during the approach of the police, heightened with teeming life:

> Brown millipedes slept in the soles of their [the police's] steel-tipped, Touchable boots. Rough grass left their legskin raw, crisscrossed with cuts…They trudged past…Purple herons with pitiless eyes. Deafening, their wraark wraark wraark…they walked past ancient trees cloaked in vines…Past a deepblue beetle balanced on an unbending blade of grass. Past giant spider webs that had withstood the rain and spread like whispered gossip from tree to tree. (215)

Then, the millipedes are again present after the brutal beating, "curled" into the sole of the policeman's boot, with which they crushed Velutha's "bone" and "teeth" (217) – as if they have borne witness to the whole atrocity.

Poyner (2023) writes that the "two apparently distinct subject positions [that Velutha embodies by being both subaltern and eco-warrior] are indelibly intertwined" (63). I would like to add to this by highlighting the fact that, because it catalyzed his brutal murder, the "unseasonal downpour's" effect is most harshly felt by Velutha the eco-warrior. This is representative of

marginalized people being battered with the sharpest edge of climate change despite engaging in environmentalist movements and "leaving no [carbon] footprints."

I would like to stretch my argument further by suggesting that *The God of Small Things* reveals how the colonial attitude toward the subaltern is analogous to the human attitude toward the environment in this age of the Anthropocene fueled by capitalism, globalization, and neo-colonialism. The portrayal of the inner feelings of the police when they brutally, yet impersonally, beat Velutha is especially illuminating in this regard: they acted on

> *civilization's fear of nature*, men's fear of women [whom the literary tradition has also linked with nature], power's fear of powerlessness…[it] was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions…of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy…Complete monopoly…This was an era *imprinting* itself on those who lived in it…If they hurt Velutha more than they intended to, it was only because any kinship, any connection between themselves and him, any implication that if nothing else, at least *biologically* he was a fellow creature – had been severed long ago…They had no instrument to calibrate how much punishment he could take. (Roy 1997 218; emphasis added)

Firstly, the phrase "an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it" comprises of diction that is evocative of our Anthropocenic era in which humankind has imprinted itself on other lifeforms on earth through their anthropogenic actions. All this while the passage maintains a sensitivity to the position of marginalized people like Velutha, who are victims rather than imprinters of such a world order. Secondly, after decolonization, the colonial elite were left in power, and they upheld the colonizer's practices and attitudes. For instance, Roy writes "that the constitution of free India 'ratified colonial policy…" (qtd. in Loomba 2005, 254). Hence, the policemen's fear of Velutha, a subaltern threatening the hegemonic social order, is imbued by notoriously colonial attitudes such as "power's fear of powerlessness," "human nature's pursuit of ascendancy," the necessary severance of "kinship" [as has also been portrayed in Joseph Conrad's (1899) *Heart of Darkness*, wherein an insistent fear of kinship between Europe and its dark other imbues the narrative], and acting with "efficiency" (Roy 1997, 218) – that infamous colonial policy. One of the policemen is even given the epithet "Efficiency" (215). Additionally, Lobnik (2016) explicates: "Roy's aural poetics replaces discourses that render the environment comprehensible as mere object or resource with an expansive ontology of *kinship* between human and nonhuman worlds" (129; emphasis added). It is, I argue, the same severed rope of kinship that allows the Policemen, as enforcers of the neo-colonial world order, to destroy the environment and Velutha "with economy, not frenzy" (218). Comparing their "fear" of Velutha to the strikingly similar fear felt by the policeman Senanayak upon being confronted by the ravaged Dopdi – in Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" – would strike an interesting intertextual conversation. For context, Dopdi is a Santal[3] female insurgent of the Naxalbari uprising, whose brutal rape is ordered by Senanayak upon her arrest. But that is beyond the scope of this paper.

[3] Santals are an indigenous people in the Indian subcontinent.

Velutha is perpetually stuck in the realm of "*zoē*" – which, according to Giorgio Agamben's (1998) formulation in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, is bare, non-agentic, non-politicized life – the same category to which nature has been condemned. Just as the policemen cannot "calibrate how much punishment he c[an] take," as though it is infinite, colonialist policies have also historically held a view of the earth as an inexhaustible reservoir of resources, a blank slate devoid of culture and ecology, ready for infinite human plunder. "Indeed, focusing on these four issues – the environment, indigeneity, colonial legacies and global capital – can help us understand that global capitalism today has both retained and refined the dynamics of plunder and colonialism that marked its inception" (Loomba 2005, 255).

At the heart of the climate crisis lies a culturally embedded attitude toward the environment that can be traced back to European colonialism and, thus, argued to have been succeeded by the capitalism of today. This is an attitude of a deranged disregard for environmental dangers, and Ghosh recognizes it in the very existence of affluent cities such as Mumbai and New York. "These cities," "These cities," Ghosh notes, "all brought into being by processes of colonization, are now among those that are most directly threatened by climate change". "A certain precariousness was…etched upon them from the start by reason of their colonial origins" – in the sense that they only became urban centers in the seventeenth century: the first time in history when "colonial cities began to rise on seafronts around the world" (Ghosh 2016, 50). Ghosh observes that, on the contrary, "through much of human history, people regarded the ocean with great wariness" (Ghosh 2016, 49). He also writes of the people from Nicobars who "had merely followed the example of the European colonists" (48) and had subsequently been struck by the 2004 tsunami. "In settling where they had [on the seafront] they had silently expressed their belief that highly improbable events belong not in the real world but in fantasy" (46). The crux of the matter is that the seafront settlement in "Nicobars was but a microcosmic expression of a pattern of settlement that is now dominant around the world: proximity to the water is a sign of affluence and education; a seafront location is a status symbol; and ocean view greatly increases the value of real estate. A colonial vision of the world, in which proximity to the water represents power and security, mastery and conquest, has now been incorporated into the very foundations of middle-class patterns of living across the globe" (49). Keeping in mind that the policemen staged an imposition of a particularly colonial world order while murdering Velutha, the significance of the water politics of his beloved Meenachal river becomes amplified – the beginning of its death, the result of capitalism's conquest, coincides with the death of Velutha at the hands of "history's henchmen."

Bapsi Sidhwa's (1991) *Cracking India* too proves resourceful for an ecocritical study. It is a novel about Partition, during which the "Earth bleeds." A strong sense of a tie between the people of India and the earth permeates the narrative. Despite imminent danger posed by the Sikh mobs who were approaching to kill all those who had not left the village, the villagers stayed put because "to uproot themselves from the soil of their ancestors had seemed to them akin to tearing themselves, like ancient trees, from the earth" (Sidhwa 1991, 217). Interestingly, the women of the village encounter a very different, gendered fate as they are, in the spirit of *jauhar*, to burn themselves alive "rather than surrender their honor to the invading hordes besieging their ancestral fortresses." (298). Sidhwa makes clear that this is reflective of a historical sorrow. They are,

nonetheless, raped. Spivak, in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" interprets the practice of *jauhar* as such – "female self-immolation in the face of it [conquering male armies] is a legitimation of rape as 'natural' and works, in the long run, in the interest of unique genital possession of the female. The group rape perpetrated by conquerors is a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition" (Spivak 1988, 99). Bearing in mind that Ania Loomba (2005), in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism,* has also explored the classic "woman/land analogy" (84) – wherein woman and land are both portrayed as passive, unpeopled sites waiting to yield their treasures to the colonizer – the portrayal of women in colonial and postcolonial literature seems significant in analyzing colonialism's relationship to the environment. For example, the woman/land analogy as present in literary depictions of colonial attitudes is evident in John Donne's classic poem "To His Mistress Going to Bed" and even J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace.*

Finally, I would like to highlight how the Bengali novella *Life and Political Reality* by Shahidul Zahir (2007) also captures a reciprocal relationship between human and nonhuman lifeforms. The novella narrates a tale of the 1971 Bangladesh Independence War through a single collective consciousness that is stitched together by the third person collective – as in "*they* thought" and "*they* felt" – and wrapped in a unique narrative blend of traditional folklore and modern stream of consciousness. Six days before Independence, as Momena lies buried "under ash and clay" "with three tubes of papaya-leaf stems [that] connect[s] her nostrils and mouth to the air outside," the earth literally protects her from the "*razakars*"[4] who would eventually rape and kill her when she emerged from her hiding (Zahir 2007, 112). Significantly, she also initiates the novella's momentous insurgency while risking her life trying to protect the hibiscus tree from the *razakar*. "The rhetorical portrayal of the "earth's act of bearing witness" during the brutal beating of Velutha in *The God of Small Things* seems parallel to how the earth protects Momena before her brutal murder (Lobnik 2015, 127; Roy 1997, 218). Both are also subaltern figures killed by the law enforcement, or the "Big Gods," for threatening the legitimacy of the socio-political order.

On the other hand, the distinct sense of collective thinking embedded within the narrative fabric of Zahir's *Life and Political Reality* is promising in the sense of the collective thinking that is required to imagine ourselves as geologic agents. Moreover, the novella, with its portrayal of the intermingling of the human and nonhuman environment, embodies an instance of what Ghosh calls "the insistence with which the landscape of Bengal forces itself on the artists, writers and filmmakers of the region" (Ghosh 2016, 8). This is also evident in the critically acclaimed Bengali film *Jibon Theke Neya* ("Taken from Life"), directed by Zahir Raihan (1970) and centered too on the Independence war – the classic trope of the oneness of the people of Bengal and its landscape is notable in the film. Additionally, Ghosh has even discussed the "role of the river in shaping Bengali identity" at Dhaka Lit Fest 2023 in a session titled the same as his novel, *The Hungry Tide.* (Ghosh 2023).

[4] The term, generally used to refer to the collaborators of the Pakistani forces, has taken on a derogatory connotation in Bangladesh.

To conclude *The God of Small Things*, however, Roy "casts the environment as a sentient force" (Lobnik 2017, 131) in an age when humans have become a geologic force. First, she undermines the anthropocentric binary between nature and culture, and dismantles human superiority within this binary. Secondly, in analyzing what she calls Roy's "aural poetics," Lobnik (2017) has carefully noted the author's portrayal of the concrete sounds of the environment and her use of synesthesia for subverting the superiority of vision: "Roy employs sight's privileged status in dominant Western philosophical traditions, along with touch as a sense of direct contact, to orient the reader's attention toward hearing by turning both into sites of auditory encounters" (117). Lobnik identifies sound as "the missing link between matter and human perception – that which expands our connection with the environment" (116). I would like to add to this by underlining Roy's portrayal of silence as a method to think beyond the limitations of human speech and engage more deeply with the nonhuman environment. In doing so, she upturns the Aristotelean construct of speech as a marker of the privileged form of being that is humanity. Instead, the absence of speech conveys profound meaning throughout the novel, and the twins' identities are shaped by nature's lessons in silence: "Here [by the river] they studied Silence (like the children of the Fisher People), and learned the bright language of dragonflies. Here they learned to Wait. To Watch. To think thoughts and not voice them" (Roy 1997, 145). Therefore, just as how Mammachi molds a colonial instrument, the violin, to her purpose to make her individual voice heard, Roy molds the colonial authority of vision to cede its spotlight to sound, smell, and touch – and of speech, to silence. In the same spirit, postcolonial ecocritics must mold the colonial instrument that is the English language to dismantle age-old environmentally debilitating norms that have become embedded in dominant Western culture.

Nonetheless, we should be wary of reinforcing the nefarious connection so often made by colonizers and oppressors – that of identifying indigenous, black, and marginalized people with nature to mark their savageness and "inscrutability," as is done in Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. The novel is, in fact, explicitly alluded to several times throughout *The God of Small Things* to describe the History House, heavy with the history of colonial rubber plantation in Kerala. However, marginalized communities are important environmental activists in real life. Being excluded from consumerism, they are in a much better position for ecological sensibility.

All in all, the project of reassessing human and nonhuman agency, and reimagining their relationship in the age of the Anthropocene is well underway – as evidenced by the South Asian literary texts under discussion. To leap to a different time and space, Percy Bysshe Shelley once wrote "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." More than ever, the present climate crisis calls for writers to take up their pen and, through literature, fashion a more ecologically sensible world

References

Anand, Divya. "Inhabiting the Space of Literature: An Ecocritical Study of Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* and O.V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 12, no. 2 (2005): 95–108. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44086431.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Arons, Wendy. "We Should Be Talking about the Capitalocene." *TDR: The Drama Review* 67, no. 1 (2023): 35–40. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204322000697.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 4th ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222. https://doi.org/10.1086/596640.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Dhaka: Friends' Book Corner, 2018. Originally published 1899.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Haryana: Penguin Random House India, 2016.

Ghosh, Amitav. "The Hungry Tide." Lecture, Dhaka Lit Fest, AKSB Auditorium, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh, January 6, 2023.

Jibon Theke Neya. Directed by Zahir Raihan. Bangladesh, 1970.

Lobnik, Mirja. "Sounding Ecologies in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no. 1 (2016): 115–135. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26421837.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. 3rd ed. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2015.

Macfarlane, Robert. "Generation Anthropocene: How Humans Have Altered the Planet for Ever." *The Guardian*, February 22, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/01/generation-anthropocene-altered-planet-for-ever.

Morris, Rosalind C., ed. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Poyner, Jane. “Subalternity and Scale in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*.” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 51, no. 3 (2018): 53–69. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mos.2018.0030.

Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2017. Originally published 1997.

Sidhwa, Bapsi. *Cracking India*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2008. Originally published 1988.

Zahir, Shahidul. *Life and Political Reality*. Translated by V. Ramaswamy and Shahroza Nahrin. Gurugram: HarperCollins, 2022. Originally published 1987.