Recognising the homely in an unheimlich world : rationality and the uncanny ecosphere

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2021

Lingesh, D. (2021). Recognising the homely in an unheimlich world : rationality and the uncanny ecosphere. Master's thesis, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/148515>

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/148515>

<https://doi.org/10.32657/10356/148515>

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SINGAPORE

**Recognising the Homely in an Unheimlich World:
Rationality and the Uncanny Ecosphere**

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2021

Recognising the Homely in an Unheimlich World: Rationality and the Uncanny Ecosphere

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A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation for Associate Professor Sim Wai Chew whose guidance, support and encouragement has been invaluable throughout my MA candidature and has made this adventure an inspiring experience for me.

I would also like to thank NTU for granting me the opportunity to freely explore ecocritical literature and the NTU library for providing researchers with the resources they needed despite the challenges we faced during the Covid-19 pandemic.

DEDICATION

For my grandfather.

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SUMMARY

This thesis investigates how the uncanny facilitates an individual's return to the Real truths of the ecological world and to an affective and authentic self, by forcing them to recognise the problematic nature of their faith in widely accepted rational and scientific 'realities', which are often deliberately manipulated or augmented to conceal what is truthfully Real. I argue that this process of recognition and homecoming is evident in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) and two of Amitav Ghosh's novels, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019). Through the development of a more *ecologically-minded strain of reason*, these novels prove that a reconnection to the wider nonhuman ecosphere helps individuals surmount humanity's increasingly ubiquitous sense of loneliness, thus furthering their recognition of place and purpose. I also suggest that romance is a literary tool that not only seizes the reader's attention but also allows us to appreciate how isolated urbanites are simply lonely souls seeking lost connections to the Real. It does this as an extension of the uncanny, and in the mode of what I have dubbed as the *romantic uncanny*.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

*“There's a world of difference between truth and facts.
Facts can obscure the truth.”
Maya Angelou*

In his upcoming theoretical work, ‘The Humanities in the Age of Loneliness’, Robert Newman reintroduces Edward O. Wilson’s notion of the ‘Eremocene’ or the ‘Age of Loneliness’, which refers “to both the rapid decline of biodiversity on our planet, and the fact that humans, while increasing their proportion of and dominance over the Earth’s population, suffer a consequent isolation, commanding the Earth while eradicating its complexity, diversity, and natural beauty” (Newman 2019). We must educe, nevertheless, that it is not the earth that has lost its natural diversity but humanity which has misplaced its ability to recognise these divergent nonhuman forms. Humanity’s mounting preoccupation with a hypostatized version of what it considers widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’, has caused our isolation from ourselves, others, and the nonhuman. I argue that uncanny experiences, which induce in characters the feeling of complete helplessness, disorientation and even disillusionment, allow these strictly ‘rational’ beings to recognise what they have lost touch with and to rediscover their place within the nonhuman ecosphere. This recognition in turn generates action which works toward developing new modes of thinking and living which promise greater consideration for the external environment.

In this introduction, I will explain my thesis as well as introduce my selected primary texts. I will then begin my theoretical outline with a general overview to define our current climate crisis, the environment and what Val Plumwood calls humanity’s ‘irrational rationality’. I will then link Plumwood’s ideas to an analysis of Freud’s uncanny by first analysing four of Freud’s main

theories of the uncanny. I will also provide a review of other theorists who have enriched Freud's theory of the uncanny in an ecocritical context, namely Timothy Morton and Pramod K. Nayar. With Morton in particular, I will explain how his work led me to my understanding of the *romantic uncanny* and how this rarely explored variant of the uncanny has a surprisingly significant impact on character development. In the second, third and fourth chapters of my thesis I will then use the aforementioned concepts and theorists to analyse each of my primary texts to expose how the discomfiting and inexplicable uncanny unveils the Real. This process encourages the various characters in these texts to develop a more holistic *ecologically-minded strain of reason* which allows them to recognise their place within the nonhuman ecosphere, thus prompting positive change and personal development.

1.1 THESIS AND OVERVIEW OF PRIMARY TEXTS

This thesis investigates how the uncanny facilitates a return to the Real by inducing in various characters discomfiting feelings which buffet their internalised faith in widely accepted rational and scientific 'facts' which seem irrefutable. Let me emphasise here that I do not refer to the Real in terms of Lacan's ideas of the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic, but use it simply to differentiate between the widely accepted rational and scientific 'reality' that humanity has been taught to internalise and the Real truths of the external world that require, what Plumwood calls, "higher order forms of rationality" (Plumwood 18) to fully recognise. Building on Plumwood, I argue that humanity must instead develop a more holistic *ecologically-minded strain of reason* which facilitates their recognition of the Real truths of the ecological world around them. I also contend that it is the uncanny which reveals the Real – that which is fundamental, authentic and indisputable truth – which thereby exposes our widely accepted rational and scientific 'reality' as constructed and manipulatable by those in power. The uncanny hence prompts the characters in

my chosen primary texts to reject the familiar rational and scientific ‘realities’ they have been conditioned to trust and instead, through a process of defamiliarization and disillusionment, recognise the Real truths of the world around them which allow them to reassess themselves and the ‘facts’ of their place. This process of homecoming is evident in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007) and Amitav Ghosh’s novels, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019).

I endeavour to prove how the uncanny in these texts serves to expose the problematic nature of the widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’ that imaginatively binds humanity while simultaneously reproducing discriminatory hierarchies and obscuring truth. I have deliberately placed this version of ‘reality’ in quotation marks throughout my thesis to emphasise its status as an imaginary concept, for the simple fact that although based in science, there is a tendency to misrepresent or inflate the seemingly irrefutable ‘facts’ which buttress this version of ‘reality’ in order to influence society’s beliefs and decisions. Instead, humanity’s endeavour to recognise the Real around them, through their exposure to the uncanny, coaxes individuals who were once lonely and isolated into action, as they establish a new place for themselves often alongside their loved ones. I will also be considering Ghosh’s non-fictional work, *The Great Derangement* (2016), to analyse how his views of ecocritical fiction and the uncanny have impacted the way his writing has morphed (from *The Hungry Tide* to *Gun Island* – 15 years later) to cater to a society that has become increasingly blinkered by the comforts and pleasures that a widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’ affords.

The hope of a return to the Real through a recognition of our primeval and authentic self, however, can never be immediately apparent or observable. Retracing to a time before the ‘Age of Loneliness’, more specifically to a time before the 17th and 18th century when the ideals of Enlightenment began to dominate social thought and behaviour, demands that humanity open and

re-expose itself to nonhuman presences and uncanny occurrences that may not necessarily seem cogent or explicable. The prevalent internalisation of widely accepted rational and scientific ‘realities’, however, regrettably work to fortify the imaginary binaries that place nature as ‘other’ and negatively defined against humanity. In truth, it is these very volatile ideological and imaginary binaries that must be ruptured in order for humanity to recognise the neglected and overlooked Real. The uncanny therefore “brings to light”, as Freud would put it, Real truths that widely accepted rational and scientific ‘realities’ have influenced and manipulated humanity into deliberately disregarding. It is, hence, not that the Real is concealed, but that humanity has been trained to ignore and willingly overlook the Real in favour of an imaginary and undeniably constructed ‘reality’ it presumes it can regulate.

This ‘derangement’, as Ghosh would put it, facilitates the manufacturing of an increasingly ubiquitous delusion of human independence and autonomy over the wider nonhuman ecosphere. The extent to which human beings have convinced themselves of their supremacy and complete sovereign control over their existence, thereby denying any sort of recognition of dependence or symbiosis with the nonhuman ecosphere, is almost comical. It is for this reason that the uncanny terrifies us; it demands that we recognise the truth of our insignificance within a wider nonhuman sphere that is beyond our so-called ‘fact’-based rational reckoning. As Amitav Ghosh suggests in his non-fictional work, *The Great Derangement (TGD)*, these strange and incomprehensible encounters that have been habitually ignored are in fact not coincidences at all and should not be so quickly dismissed. Instead, “their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognise something we had turned away from” (Ghosh *TGD*, 30). In imposing a forced recognition of something that we have lost, the uncanny “suggests – indeed proves – that non-human forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought” (Ghosh *TGD*, 31), for

instance through the appearance of ghosts, our acuity for non-human voices, nightmarish dreams and, of course, enigmatic coincidences in literary fiction.

My investigation thus endeavours to uncover and analyse how the uncanny is employed by my chosen authors to transform lonely, isolated urbanite characters into beings who can recognise their place within the diverse web of interconnections that binds the human and nonhuman world. It encourages the development of a kind of *ecologically-minded strain of reason* – or, as Val Plumwood proposes in *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002), “higher order forms of rationality” that are “ecologically sensitive” (Plumwood 18) in order to challenge the neoliberal, neo-colonial and capitalistic Enlightenment-based rationality that has inconceivably augmented our current climate crisis. These seemingly ‘irrational’ modes of thinking and living push these characters into action, as upon recognising their true place in the world, they begin to think more deeply about the future and how they must change and open their minds to what may seem incomprehensible in order to secure a sustainable environment for their loved ones.

1.2 A DIFFERENT KIND OF RATIONALITY: OUR CURRENT CLIMATE CRISIS

Climate change, or more accurately, our current climate crisis, emerged neither in isolation nor independently. Great damage has been inflicted on the natural and cultural systems that Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee defines in *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel* (2010) as “the complex (and often conflict-ridden) web, field or system composed of the relationships between human and non-human agents” (Mukherjee 5) that make up the environment. Dipesh Chakrabarty likewise suggests in *The Climate of History: Four Theses* (2009) that the understanding of the human’s role within the ecosphere must evolve as “the human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent that he or she has been. Humans now wield a geological force” (Chakrabarty 206). The human being has thus

become so immensely powerful, that even lonely – ironically, partly due to the invention of communicative technologies – (s)he can alter the most basic physical processes of the earth at unprecedented rates, including the atmosphere, seasonal temperatures and even oceanic currents. This type of ‘geological force’ and ecological supremacy bestows upon humanity a misleading and deceptive confidence in our amazing power over and independence from the external environment.

It is these pervasive imagined ‘realities’ – which humanity has been conditioned to accept as ‘real’ and unquestionable – that permit human beings to think of themselves as noncompliant, exceptional, autonomous beings who are beyond the Real. I argue that this delusion can only be dismantled when, through a discomfiting *sense* of the inexplicable uncanny, humanity is forced to recognise the Real it has been taught to overlook. The widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’ that has facilitated the engineering of these extensively internalised unreal beliefs became exponentially ubiquitous during the Age of Enlightenment. This is not to say, however, that being a product of the Enlightenment resulted in individuals being completely cut off from recognising the sublime nature of natural world around them. Alexander von Humboldt, for instance, a German naturalist and explorer, was able to appreciate the ineffable qualities of the natural world that seemed to confound science and defy representation. In her book, *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World* (2015), Andrea Wulf writes that Humboldt had once written to Goethe in 1810, arguing that “Nature must be experienced through feeling”. Humboldt insisted “that those who wanted to describe the world by simply classifying plants, animals and rocks ‘will never get close to it’” (Wulf, Chapter 2), suggesting that there was some awareness, even during the Enlightenment itself, that a ‘feeling’ or a *sense* of nature facilitates our recognition and understanding of an ecological world that extends beyond what we can immediately hold and

perceive.

Nevertheless, as this strain of Enlightened rational and scientific belief was touted by the colonial West as humanity's course toward complete domination not only over themselves, but over natural resources and peoples, to emulate these ideals, local populations in colonised territories became increasingly irreverent of the ecological systems that sustained them in the interest of capitalistic progress, as later shown in my analysis of Sarah Joseph's novel, *A Gift in Green* (2011). As Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa suggest in *The Postcolonial Enlightenment* (2009), the Enlightenment is a doctrine of progress that "legitimizes imperial conquest under the guise of the civilizing mission" (Carey 8). It celebrates scientised rationalities that "[disqualify] other belief systems as irrational or superstitious" (Carey 8). The non-western 'savage' or 'primitive' is consequently stripped of his agency and forced to become a homogenised, strictly cogent being in order to join western modernity and continue its culturally desirable legacy of capitalistic accumulation or risk being rudely kicked aside. It is here that the ecologically dependent colonial subject begins to lose his connection to the earth and the nonhuman in his attempt to reach a seemingly progressive 'Enlightened' state. By rejecting the myths that once tied him to the land, the colonial subject instead isolates himself while concurrently developing a predilection for widely accepted rational and scientific 'realities' that can seemingly substantiate even the inexplicable uncanny. Having lost deference for his surroundings, this newly rational man is even willing to destroy the very forests, rivers, lands, and swamps that munificently sustained his ancestors, ruthlessly severing all connections to his motherland and unintentionally propelling himself deeper into the lonely Eremocene. Instead, in order to reconnect to the Real that imagined 'realities' and capitalistic desires have taught us to overlook, I argue that we must instead actively develop a different strain of reason and understanding in order to recognise what modern man has

taught us to disregard.

1.3 PLUMWOOD'S '(IR)RATIONAL RATIONALITY'

Val Plumwood popularised the notion of an alternative form of rationality and reason in her book, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002). She contends that “rationalist rationality is irrational ... [Instead,] we need to seek out higher forms of reason that can reflect critically on these failures and develop new forms. These will be ecologically sensitive forms of rationality that judge what currently passes for reason by the standards of ecological success or failure, among other things” (Plumwood 18). In other words, only when the strains of rationality we have derived from the antiquated ideals of the Enlightenment are questioned, by an *ecologically-minded strain of reason*, that true change can occur. This strain of thought takes into consideration the Real that we have overlooked by incorporating a balance of both scientific reason and a *sense* or feeling of the natural world and is more accepting of other modes of thinking and communication that include the nonhuman, thereby rejecting any form of human exceptionalism, universal truth or even binaries that we imagine are set in stone. As Plumwood suggests, the “reason/emotion dualism divorces prudence from ethics, codes the former as rational, and sees the opposing sphere of ethical and ecological concern as dispensable, mere subjective sentiment” (Plumwood 9). Instead, an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* would be more tolerant of the uncanny occurrences and defamiliarizing emotions that promise the construction of a more compassionate and sustainably symbiotic relationship with the Real, thus allowing humanity to recognise the truth of its dependence on the ecological nonhuman world.

Plumwood is also right when she states that “remoteness has major implications for ecologically rational social structure” (Plumwood 74). Her ideas link well with Newman’s theory of the Eremocene which, almost prophetically, warns about the consequences of fostering a culture

of nativist isolationism. Both agree that the increasing distance or ‘remoteness’ that humanity has from the Real manufacturers an untrue ‘reality’ or belief in human exceptionalism and ecological independence. Plumwood stresses in her book that “remoteness is a rationality feature preventing contemporary liberal capitalist societies, apparently the most promising candidates for ecologically rational societies, from dealing effectively with ecological problems” (Plumwood 74). In other words, rather ironically, the very capitalist societies that promise that our consumeristic lifestyle can still be an ecologically sustainable way of life, in truth are self-serving and care little for the *common good* of protecting and conserving the planet because they actively distance themselves from the consequences of their decisions. Instead, “small-scale communities that are designed specifically around recognition of their ecological relationships can best counter the adverse contemporary effects of remoteness on correctiveness and ecological decision-making” (Plumwood 74). This we see predominantly in Ghosh’s novel, *The Hungry Tide*, where the local fishermen who live on the land and water are observably the most attuned to the ecological world around them, compared to the trained scientist, Piya, who visits and studies the Indian Sundarbans intimately but still only understands nature superficially with an outsider’s eye.

1.4 AN ILLUSTRATION: SARAH JOSEPH’S *A GIFT IN GREEN*

The notion of alternative forms of reason and the importance of keeping in close touch with the Real is clearly featured in, Malayali author, Sarah Joseph’s novel *A Gift in Green* (2011) which I will be using to define and further explain my argument. In line with my thesis, the novel illustrates how the fictional Indian population loses touch with the Real when modernity comes barrelling into their village, bringing with it an enticing unreal and imagined ‘reality’ that the locals are helpless against. The local people’s interest in mirroring modern city life inadvertently distances and isolates them from the Real and themselves, to the point that they become

unrecognisable aliens in a land they called home for generations.

Written originally in Malayalam and later translated into English, Joseph's novel is one of the more obscure texts written by a South Asian female environmentalist. Segmented by the tales told by seven visiting storytellers, the novel's plot begins immediately with the introduction of the ecological conflict that insidiously pervades the fictional village of Aathi, as "the tent people had encroached and misappropriated the land to the low-lying western part of Aathi, where the shrine of Thampuran stood" (Joseph Chapter 1). These 'tent people' had arrived unannounced from the city and illicitly bought over the land that had belonged to the village locals for decades in a bid to redevelop and monetise its freely available resources. Despite having been born in Aathi, Kumaran, the leader of the 'tent people' and the novel's main antagonist, yearns to live an enlightened, modern life. Selling his forebears' land, he relocates to the city to make his fortune, becoming a symbol of the class mobility that modernity and democratic capitalism pledge to bestow. Thirty-six years later, however, he still finds his newfound wealth and social prestige lacking. He develops a distorted sense of filial piety towards his homeland and returns suddenly with an 'army' of developers and "the full backing of the government, determined to transform Aathi into a paradise" (Joseph Chapter 7). His efforts, however, do not take the ecological environment that has nourished the locals for generations into consideration as he ruthlessly obliterates the land and mangrove swamps to 'improve' them. The local government and administrators also blinker themselves from acknowledging the ecological aftermath of their decisions on the locals. They readily disregard the *common good* of the people as long as privately funded 'improvements' serve a national *greater good*. This paradoxical hypocrisy – of determining who measures and apportions the common/greater good – is evident in my chosen primary texts as well, particularly in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.

Realising that nothing has changed since his departure, Kumaran's first ruling is to "renovate" Thampuram's shrine, transforming it into what he considers a place of worship that is worthy of a cosmopolitan city. A magician who accompanies the 'tent people' steps forward to ply his trade on the gathered locals.

Before they could blink, a stunning spectacle materialised before their eyes: a roof of gold, gold covered walls, steps veneered in gold, a gold lamp in the lamp hut. ... The magician bowed to them. 'This is what Kumaran wants. Don't think this is magic. It's real. Now watch again...'

Head-loads of gold ingots were brought ... Kumaran said, 'See that the work begins tomorrow. The roof must be of beaten gold, the walls panelled with gold, the steps gold veneered, the lamp hut of burnished gold. If more gold is required, I shall take care of it.'

(Joseph Chapter 9)

The diction that Kumaran uses is almost identical to what was used by Joseph in her omniscient description of the magician's vision. This intentional repetitive similarity aims to convince the viewing public of the 'realness' of the imagined 'reality' that the magician conceives, giving birth to cultural desires that make these dreams a future possibility. The deceptive vision that the magician creates is deliberately paralleled against the rousing physical presence of the masses of gold that Kumaran brings, blurring the boundaries between imagination and the corporeal world and putting the locals in a blinded "spellbound" state which encourages them to "[develop] a liking for the strange and unfamiliar bustle that Kumaran's arrival had introduced to Aathi" (Joseph Chapter 9). The locals are now more willing than ever to collaborate with the 'tent people' – who are complete strangers – to bring these imagined cultural desires into 'reality'. Many of the impressionable young local villagers hence come to fervently believe and trust wholeheartedly in

the utopic narrative that the magician and Kumaran collaborate to produce, even lending their own labour to bring these desires to life in their new ‘reality’.

These enhancement efforts, however, bring about ecological consequences that the locals could never have foreseen. The elders of Aathi observe woefully how

earth, stones, garbage and waste were dumped with cruel unconcern into the enclosures where rice and fish had been farmed alternatively, every six months. ‘How many generations had to toil to create these paddy fields! The sweat of how many generations has gone into giving the soil its life-sustaining fertility! ... Oh, the pain of being forced to destroy it all with our own hands.’. (Joseph Chapter 23)

The crippling guilt that the elders feel for having lacked the ability to restrain the younger generation from contributing to the encroachment of modern desires comes across strongly here as they lament the destruction of not only the land but the way of life that had sustainably safeguarded both the people and the ground. In this case, the ‘alternative’ pattern of farming and rearing is imperative to comprehending the symbiosis that the villagers had established with the land as while rice cultivation would have stripped the earth of its nutrients, the subsequent farming of fish would have restored the land, promising its longevity. However, the ruthless exploitation of the terrain without regard for its maintenance – tragically bolstered by the locals themselves who willingly accept payment for their labour from the ‘tent people’ – results in a disastrous process of defamiliarization and unhomeliness. “Now we wander about like aliens – aliens, oh our Thampuran, in our own land and paddy fields” (Joseph Chapter 26) declares Markose, one of the locals. The village dwellers who can no longer recognise themselves or their motherland experience the uncanny as they become strangers in a land that used to be so familiar. It is at this point that they begin to have some semblance of understanding, as they realise how their

unfounded faith in Kumaran's promised imaginary utopia hastened their ballooning disregard for Real interactions they used to have with the land and each other.

Kumaran renders his desires to redevelop Aathi as philanthropic and in the interest of improving the collective *common good* of the people, just like how transnational corporations often trumpet their foreign investments in the Global South as purely altruistic. In truth, however, his actions disproportionately bolster not only the greater *national good* but, hypocritically, also his personal wealth. His directives and the havoc they wreck are a symbolic microcosm of the neo-colonial practices of the modern world. As Mukherjee theorises in *Postcolonial Environments* (2010),

the 'post' in postcolonial marks not an end of colonialism, but an end of a particular mode of colonialism which then shifts gears and evolves to another stage ... The signature move of this neo-colonial system is systematically to uncouple power from responsibility, to remove or reduce all forms of redress, and to promote the emasculation of all national states and their capacities or even willingness to provide protection to their citizens (Mukherjee 6).

Neo-colonialism hence actively reproduces the isolation of the individual who becomes merely a cog in an uncaring mechanical system that disregards and exploits the poorest workers in favour of attaining richer consumeristic pleasures. Individual victims are thereby left to fend for themselves in the aftermath of the destruction that profit-driven transnational companies, progress-driven governments and even powerful individuals indiscriminately inflict either by exploiting loopholes within lenient legislations or imposing harsher ones on the voiceless subaltern native. All this is done in the name of a greater *national good* which veils and downplays the severity of the resultant environmental impacts on local inhabitants.

Even in Joseph's Aathi, the villagers are left alone and unaided to deal with the repercussions of Kumaran's 'charity'. Most find no other solution but a mass exodus, becoming ecological refugees forced to flee from a fractured and inhabitable land. In Joseph's Chapter 38, aptly titled '*Exodus*', the locals realise one thing for sure:

the very foundation of life had become shaky. Like the canals, channels and wells of Aathi became indistinguishable from one another when overrun by a river in spate, their minds were overwhelmed, submerged, drowned. Every household was busy preparing for its imminent departure from Aathi burdened by the anxiety this bred (Joseph Chapter 38).

The ecological devastation of the land – including the river's frequent overflowing due to an increasing amount of refuse and silt discharge from excavation and land reclamation projects – is rationalised, most often as the inevitable collateral damage required for the attainment of a national *greater good*. This type of 'irrational' rationalisation is also observable in Ghosh's *Gun Island*, when fishermen are forced to abandon their inherited livelihood in favour of employment that serves capitalistic desires. For instance, Horen, a deft fisherman who is introduced in *The Hungry Tide*, is forced to establish a tour company in *Gun Island* when the dying rivers can no longer sustain his family. His decision is purely rational and forced upon him not only by the changing climate but mutating governmental legislations that serve a capitalistic national *greater good* while overlooking the *common good* of the locals.

This strain of rationality, or *irrationality* as Plumwood would suggest, is one of the crucial pillars that upholds and validates the constructed imagined 'reality' that pervades our consciousness and directs our desires. The uncanny hence becomes a tool that returns humanity to the Real it has overlooked by forcing beings into experiencing an anxiety that dispels their fallacies and opens their minds to accepting alternative narratives that incorporate the nonhuman. As

Timothy Morton asserts when theorising about the ecocritical uncanny in *The Ecological Thought* (2010),

Environmental rhetoric is too often strongly affirmative, extraverted, and masculine; it privileges speech over writing; and it stimulates immediacy (feigning one-to-one correspondences between language and reality). It's sunny, straightforward, ableist, holistic, hearty and "healthy". Where does this leave negativity, introversion, femininity, writing, mediation, ambiguity, darkness, irony, fragmentation, and sickness? (Morton 16)

What Morton means here is that – like with Plumwood's desire for humanity to realise that what we assume is rational is, in truth, severely irrational – humanity must be nimble enough to recognise that what we have been conditioned to accept as Other or dissimilar, and hence less than ourselves, in truth has the capacity to influence our thoughts and lives. This is particularly apparent when the nonhuman invades our thoughts, as Ghosh suggests, through the dreams, hallucinations or waking nightmares that we consider uncanny. Ghosh writes in *The Great Derangement* that

the uncanny and improbable events that are beating at our doors seem to have stirred a sense of recognition, an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts which share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctly our own: the capacities of will, thought and consciousness. ... [these] unseen presences actually played a part in shaping our discussions without our being aware of it (Ghosh *TGD*, 30-31).

These demeaned and yet undeniably critical and complex modes of communication bring us closer to the Real we have overlooked. They reject the strictly rational straightforward path we have conditioned ourselves never to stray from and instead offer us the chance to skip down a winding yellow brick road – that we have so far stubbornly relegated to the realm of unreal fantasy and

madness – in order to recognise and reconsider our place within the nonhuman ecosphere.

Rod Giblett similarly suggests that the uncanny is “without the boundaries of mere reason. ... That is not to imply that the uncanny is irrational; it is pre-rational and post-rational, before and after reason historically and chronologically, and ex-rational, outside and after reason conceptually and experientially” (Giblett 4). In other words, by reassessing what we consider rational and recognising and re-incorporating the nonhuman world into our lives, humanity can hinder the culture of remoteness and loneliness that exploitative capitalistic accumulation perpetuates, encouraging new connections, narratives and even modes of communication between two currently separated worlds. I argue that it is in this increasingly complex level of reality that the uncanny comes to forefront, exposing the Real that we have overlooked. It exposes the imagined ‘reality’ that we do live in, producing an uncomfortable anxiety which reveals the deceptive nature of the cultural narratives and desires we have internalised and prompts timely questions regarding humanity’s systematised belief in what it assumes is ‘real’. It thereby calls for the establishment of a more comprehensive *ecologically-minded strain of reason*, founded on the suspension of all certainties of being. Interestingly, it also becomes apparent in my three chosen primary texts, that it is those who are disabled or cast aside from society who are most capable of developing an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* which prevents their sightless surrendering to a constructed widely accepted sense of ‘reality’. It is those who are forced to view life from an alternate perspective who are best able to understand these alternative narratives and voices.

1.5 UNRAVELLING FREUD’S UNCANNY

I will now explain four of Freud’s most prominent theories of the uncanny and explain how it functions as a tool that defamiliarizes what humanity considers widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’ in order to reveal and ‘bring to light’ the overlooked Real. I will then delve

deeper into how Freud's theories have been expanded on in an ecocritical context, most prominently by Timothy Morton in his book *The Ecological Thought* (2010). Morton's work also led me to considering the concept of romantic desire and fulfilment when it comes to analysing the impact that the uncanny has on our altered perspectives. I will elaborate on what I mean by the *romantic uncanny* later in the introduction with reference to Morton's work. I will also later explain, in chapter 3, Pramod K. Nayar's perspective of the ecological uncanny, more specifically with reference to Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*.

Freud popularised the uncanny, with his seminal essay, "The Uncanny" in 1919 (translated by James Strachey in 1925). He raises four main concepts of the uncanny which I will briefly outline.

- (1) The uncanny "leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar".
- (2) "What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*".
- (3) The "uncanny effect of epileptic seizures and the manifestations of insanity" as well as the intellectual uncertainty of "automatic, mechanical processes" at work.
- (4) The uncanny in the "constant recurrence of similar situations".

The first and most established theory of the uncanny is that it "is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Freud 1919,1-2; Freud 1955, 220). What is "known of old and long familiar" (Freud 1955, 220) then comes to light signalling the return of the repressed. According to Rod Giblett's new book, *Environmental Humanities and the Uncanny* (2019), "The return to the repressed is a return not only to the individual's own repressed, but also to the culture's repressed" (Giblett 17) as the uncanny, especially the monstrous uncanny, is closely associated with the colonial unconscious. "This is that an uncanny effect is often produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and

reality,” Freud writes, “such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality” (Freud 1919, 15; Freud 1955, 244-245). This ‘effacement’ or transgression of the boundaries between irrational/rational, Real/‘reality’ and truth/fact, compels even the most reasonable individuals to confront new (or resurfaced) truths that they may never have considered plausible. In other words, they *sense* and thereby come to recognise the overlooked Real.

It is here that also I wish to emphasise other “vehicles and vectors”, as Giblet identifies them, of the uncanny which I will continue to pick out in my chosen texts. There are multiple instances when the discomforting uncanny induces a failure of language; when characters’ words are cut off and sentences are left hanging, indicating a breakdown of rational thought and hence, an inability to describe or represent what appears to be beyond logical and rational comprehension. Nicholas Royle asserts, in his book *The Uncanny* (2003), that “above all, the uncanny is intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world” (Royle 2). Delving deeper, I argue that it is, more specifically, the *failure* to conceive, represent and communicate the uncanny using language that highlights its effect, proving how it is widely accepted rational and scientific rationality – and the resultant imagined ‘reality’ it (re)produces – that has inhibited our capacity to recognise beyond what we have been conditioned to accept as ‘rational’ and ‘real’. This is observable most prominently in Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, when Kanai, a strictly rational urbanite finds himself helplessly trapped in the sticky mud of a nearby island. He experiences the uncanny when he feels the earth unexpectedly come to life, stealing away his control and reducing him to a blubbing child incapable of words. This is just one example of humanity’s presumed ecological supremacy which must be challenged by the uncanny in order to push individuals into recognising the Real truths of their relationship with

ecological world around them. The uncanny thus facilitates a process of *derealisation* which stimulates disorientating feelings that bring eventual insight into the fallacies that uphold a widely accepted rational and scientific version of ‘reality’. Recognising the Real hence demands the acknowledgement of other narratives, including those shrouded within the nonhuman sphere, that have been overlooked and deliberately silenced by humanity’s unending hunger for capitalism and convenience. These alternative narratives must ‘come to light’ for humanity to recognise what widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’ has obscured.

Coupled with the failure to communicate uncanny encounters, comes the helpless need to rationalise in order to regain control over what seems inexplicable. Human beings who have been conditioned by the principles of the Enlightenment to prioritise logical, rational, and scientific thought have lost the ability, perhaps even the willingness, to recognise other modes of thinking or communication. As Terry Castle asserts in *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (1995),

the eighteenth century in a sense “invented the uncanny”: that the very psychic and cultural transformations that led to the subsequent glorification of the period as an age of reason or enlightenment—the aggressively rationalist imperatives of the epoch—also produced, like a kind of toxic side effect, a new human experience of strangeness, anxiety, bafflement, and intellectual impasse (Castle 8).

It is rationality then that becomes humanity’s bane, prohibiting modern man from accepting other modes of thinking while he continues to divert himself with culturally induced cravings and conveniences that are amplified by capitalism’s endless reach. To elaborate, this failure to communicate what is beyond their immediate common-sense reality occurs in Freud’s disturbing experience recounting his reading of L.J. Moberly’s short story, “The Inexplicable” (1917),

featured in *The Strand Magazine*. The plot follows a couple who moves into a new home, only to find themselves faced with inexplicable strangeness rather than the homeliness and peaceful domesticity they expected. Hugh, the female protagonist's husband, suddenly feels something slither between his legs. However, rather than striving to recognise this strangeness as the monstrous uncanny, Hugh struggles to rationalise the uncanny occurrence. He says shakily to Amy, ““Nonsense, my dear, stuff and nonsense ... You mustn't let –’ ... ‘Something slid between my feet’ ... ‘I was almost down. The cat shall –’ He said no more. A frozen horror must have paralyzed his speech, as it prevented me from uttering a syllable” (*The Strand* 579). Indeed, the need to rationalise the uncommunicable recurs at multiple moments of Moberly's text, be it to blame the house's clogged drainage system for the strange smells, to fault the cat for slithering between their legs or even to relegate to chance or “merely some association of ideas” (*The Strand* 577) the uncanny occurrences that confound them – especially when these inexplicable uncertainties seem to have absolutely no human stimulus. We even notice here the failure of language to convey what cannot be imaginatively symbolised. This idea links to my own thesis as the uncanny thus “brings to light” the Real and obscured truths that have been obscured by what society considers ‘absolute’ and, particularly during the time of the Enlightenment, rationally undeniable. It is through the uncanny's capacity to expose overlooked truths that there is hope for humanity to recognise what has been lost or obscured. In the case of Moberly's story, the repressed colonial other resurfaces to haunt the beneficiaries of colonial exploitation in the homes that were built off the former's toil and pain.

Leading on to the second theory of the uncanny, Freud asserts that what is uncanny, *unheimlich*, unfamiliar and unhomely, is also simultaneously and contradictorily *heimlich*, familiar and homely (Freud 1919, 4; Freud 1955, 245). What Freud means here is that understanding what

is *heimlich*, homely or familiar, will also be what is strange and concealed from the self. The revelation or recognition of what is private and disguised – of what is hidden, and, more specifically, hidden not only from others, but also from ourselves – is how we experience the uncanny. Likewise, as Nicholas Royle asserts in *The Uncanny*, “The uncanny is a crisis of the proper ... It is a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was ‘part of nature’: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world. ... It can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home” (Royle 1). This theory will lead me to further developing the notion of the *romantic uncanny* later in my thesis.

Thirdly, drawing on Ernest Jentsch’s views in “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” (1906), Freud corroborates that there is “doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate” (Jentsch 11). According to Jentsch, physical uncertainties lead to “intellectual [un]certainties” (Jentsch 15) that induce the uncanny when we are unable to discern if a body has autonomous control over itself, particularly since humanity prides itself on its imagined control over its external environment. In “Ambient Technologies, Uncanny Signs” (1999), Christopher Johnson further develops Jentsch and Freud’s theory of the uncanny automaton to include modern technologies and artificial intelligence. Johnson quotes Norbert Wiener, who reasoned in *The Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (1950) that “some [communication machines] have the uncanny ability to stimulate human behaviour, and thereby to throw light on the possible nature of human behaviour” (qtd in Johnson 117). In other words, “these new technologies approximate, or promise to approximate, the process of human intellection, [bringing] to light the automatic and programmatic at the different levels of organisation of the ‘human’” (Johnson 125), and hence

revealing how the human being may in truth be dispossessed and lack the autonomous free will and rational self-control so fervently acclaimed as Enlightenment's gift to humanity. It is this same anxiety – of the absence of free will and self-control – that terrifies the couple in Moberly's story when they are haunted by slithering otherworldly things that evidently lack human stimulus.

According to Jentsch and Freud, this lack of autonomous control over the physical body is also revealed in the “uncanny effect of epileptic seizures and the manifestations of insanity because these excite in the spectator the feeling that automatic, mechanical processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearance of animation” (Freud 1919, 5; Freud 1955, 226). Both thinkers delve into disability, both mental and physical, as a vector of the uncanny which produces in observers the impression of both fascination and fear in what was at first familiar, but quickly becomes strange and unhomely particularly when seizures ravage the body, snatching autonomous control away from the individual. For instance, in Moberly's story, Jack Wilding, a secondary character who comes to visit the new couple in their home, is involuntarily immobilised by his helplessness when he loses control over his bodily reaction to the uncanny. The couple's home seems to forcibly remind him of his experience in the colonies. ““You hear it? And the stench is here too! Good God!’ he exclaims unsteadily, ‘If I thought I should ever have to cross that swamp again I should go mad!’” (The Strand 576). Albeit not as extreme as the effects of a full-blown seizure, the association of the uncanny with debilitating bouts of irrationality or madness serve to emphasise how the inexplicable is invariably relegated to a sphere beyond the scientific/rational, where insanity, trances and even hypnosis may instead be to blame. This concept of the uncanny is vividly observable in Ghosh's most recent novel, *Gun Island*, when an uncanny encounter causes a snake bite that disables Tutul, one of the novel's secondary characters. The incident subsequently induces seizures which allow him, to have futuristic visions, commune with ghosts and even hear

voices that belong to the nonhuman ecosphere.

Lastly, the uncanny is revealed in the “constant recurrence of similar situations” which “awaken an uncanny feeling, which recalls that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams” (Freud 1919, 9-10; Freud 1955, 236-237). Freud exemplifies this vector of the uncanny with a personal example of an afternoon walk he took in a provincial town in Italy:

Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses... but after having wandered about for a while without being directed, I suddenly found myself back in the same street ... I hurried away once more, but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths in the same place. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny. (Freud 1919, 11; Freud 1955, 237)

Freud’s lack of control over his body imbues this incident with a sense of helplessness, loss and even a sense of desolate loneliness as he navigates the unending vastness of the urban city. He alone is perplexed, as though under the influence of something “fateful and unescapable where otherwise we should have only spoke of ‘chance’” (Freud 1919, 11; Freud 1955, 237). Chance hence becomes an ironically repetitive methodological technique used to explain away uncanny occurrences and distressing feelings which force individuals to confront the Real and come to terms with truths, not only about the nonhuman world around them but about themselves. Individuals then begin to find even themselves strange, leading to feelings of alienation and desolate loneliness which, as Wilson suggests, is a pervasive consequence of the ‘Eremocene’. This desire for rational explanations in the face of the uncanny is also vividly observable in Ghosh’s *Gun Island*, when Piya, a marine biologist, uses chance and coincidence to logically explain occurrences that are inexplicable to her, particularly when she receives a warning about a dolphin beaching incident way before it occurs.

It is these tenets of the uncanny that I will be analysing in my chosen texts to prove how uncanny occurrences should not be explained away by the obstinately rational. Instead, these seemingly inexplicable phenomena should be recognised for that what they are – another means of communication with and understanding the nonhuman ecosphere, and thereby coming to terms with the Real that humanity has overlooked for far too long.

1.6 WIDENING THE SCOPE: TRACING THE UNCANNY IN ECOCRITICAL THOUGHT

Other theorists have also attempted to link the uncanny to ecocritical studies. Leaning strongly on notions of place, space and scale while drawing on Freud's concept of the uncanny and its play of familiarity and difference, Timothy Morton's uncanny, as described in *The Ecological Thought*, comprises his theory of the 'strange stranger' which dwells "at the limit of our imagining" (Morton 17) and is "involved in a shifting zone of aesthetic seeming and illusion" (Morton 18) as it habitually transgresses the boundaries between reality and imagination. It fosters the idea that humanity should be accepting of the "intrinsically strange" (Morton 41).

I will be using Morton's ideas to develop my understanding of the *romantic uncanny*, another important tenet of the uncanny that has not been analysed by Freud, Morton or Nayar. Morton explains that,

as anyone who has a long-term partner can attest, the strangest person is the one you wake up with every morning. Far from gradually erasing strangeness, intimacy heightens it. The more we know them, the stranger they become. Intimacy itself is strange ... We ignore the mesh because we're so familiar with it. Our familiarity forms the basis of the threatening intimacy that we too often push to the backs of our minds (Morton 41).

In other words, looking too closely at the interconnected ecological 'mesh' of the nonhuman sphere – as is the practice of 'enlightened' scientific thought, through the use of both the telescope and the microscope, to dissect, categorise and systematise – only widens the mounting gap of

understanding that human beings have with the nonhuman ecological sphere. It is ironically, by looking closer, dissecting, and creating binaries with ‘rational’ eyes, as Plumwood suggests, that we have established a proliferating sense of ‘remoteness’ that inhibits our ability to address ecological issues. As she suggests, we must instead develop a more holistic *ecologically-minded strain of reason* in order to recognise the Real.

Morton begins his analysis of the uncanny by demonstrating what he means by ‘ecological awareness’ with Pixar’s 2008 animated film, *WALL·E*. Morton associates ecological thought with the uncanny, when he writes that “ecological thought is also difficult because it *brings to light* aspects of our existence that have remained unconscious for a long time; we don’t like to recall them” (Morton 9, italics mine). It suggests the idea that modern man has blinded himself – ironically by his desire to look closer, scrutinise and dissect – to Real truths that have been suppressed by a widely accepted rational and scientific version of ‘reality’. Instead, Morton asserts, “the essence of the local isn’t familiarity but the uncanny, the strangely familiar and familiarly strange” (Morton 50).

The film begins several hundred years in the future, after the earth had been completely obliterated by our current climate crisis and ruthless resource exploitation. Only a brown and rusty earth remains, with no human being in sight. We are first introduced to WALL·E as he embarks on his daily burden as a garbage-compacting robot, piling cubes of collected trash into towering skyscrapers that deliberately mirror those built and later abandoned by man centuries ago. As he works, rather enjoyably it would seem, he listens to a recorded audio track from the film *Hello Dolly*. WALL·E also searches for remnants of human culture, picking up a Rubik’s Cube and even a ‘spork’ which he adorably fails to assign to either of his strictly ordered cups of hoarded forks and spoons, placing it instead in the middle of the shelf (Picture 1; WALL·E 07.20). Even

WALL·E, a robotic automaton albeit with a strangely human-like expressiveness, emulates the human tendency to dissect and organise, rejecting what is ‘other’ and dooming it to a life of desolate loneliness.

Picture 1: WALL·E 07.20 - 07.23

This tendency to hoard and sentimentalise, however, it not what WALL·E was designed and programmed to do, indicating a fault in his software. Nevertheless, as Morton suggests, “WALL·E happily shows that the ‘broken’ software, the mental disorder of the little robot, is the viral code that reboots the Earth ... isn’t his obsessive compulsion, so much like a manifestation of grief[?]” (Morton 2). What Morton means here, is that WALL·E’s disability ironically becomes humanity’s saviour. His ability to perceive differently, to understand what humanity found incommunicable and to recognise obscured truths, gives humankind the hope that it can return to the planet they once abandoned to revive both the nonhuman and themselves. The empowerment that disability inadvertently confers is exhibited in several of the characters in my chosen texts as well. These character’s disabilities – albeit uncanny and distressing to those closest to them – grant them the ability to discern hidden truths and thus expose the overlooked Real.

THE ROMANTIC UNCANNY

Morton’s reference to WALL·E is what led me to considering the role that romance could play within the uncanny and how this relationship could be observed in my selected primary texts. Even the most enlightened beings yearn to tie themselves to the *sense* of daily familiarity that society has conditioned them to believe is ideal and necessary for happiness, as seen in how almost

every movie, television series, novel and even comic consistently features some kind of romantic storyline. The familiarity of consummated love and the utopic belief that ‘love conquers all’ is culturally conditioned in toddlers from the very moment they are introduced to their first nursery rhymes, fairy tales and eventually even Disney cartoons. These adults then spend their whole lives searching for their ideal ‘prince’ or ‘princess’ who, of course, does not exist and is only an idealised and imagined archetype. The familiarity that individuals desire in putting down roots, laying bricks and forming a family can easily become strange when characters are disillusioned upon realising that their perceptions about the beloved were based on cultural delusions. This plays in with Freud’s second theory, that “what is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*” (Freud 1919, 4: Freud 1955, 245), as romantic feelings that are intimately wedded with the fervent desire for homeliness, hearth and even children, can quickly become unfamiliar when buried truths come to light.

The desire for romantic fulfilment is even present in *WALL·E*, and it was being reminded of this film through Morton’s work that I began to consider the notion of the *romantic uncanny*. The fact that WALL·E constructed for himself a home, complete with shelves, decor and even a television set – when all he really needs is a few hours of solar energy – is telling of the culturally conditioned human desire for homely domesticity, which is uncannily refracted by the automaton’s unconscious emulation of the remnants of human culture that he uncovers as he gathers humanity’s trash. Just after he organises his hoarded treasures, WALL·E turns towards the television screen, which plays a scene from the movie musical *Hello Dolly* where the two protagonists are holding hands (Picture 2; *WALL·E* 07.51). The robot then reaches towards his mounted console to press down on a record button before clasping his own hands together (Picture 3; *WALL·E* 07.59) in an attempt to emulate what the film has conditioned him to believe is true love, homely perfection and the solution to his loneliness as the last functioning automaton on earth.

Picture 2: WALL-E 07.51

Picture 3: WALL-E 07.59

It made me question why a children's cartoon about a garbage-compacting robot with the intention of raising awareness about the dangers of ecological mismanagement would need to include a romantic storyline. Was it so that WALL·E would seem even more human-like and hence make the audience more uncomfortable with the uncanniness of an automaton yearning for love like a human? Or perhaps that having a romantic storyline was the only way to capture the audience's attention? What other role could romance play in forcing the audience to reconsider themselves and their place within the ecological nonhuman sphere? It was this unexplored correlation that I wished to explore further in my chosen texts.

The desired familiarity that romance, homely domesticity and settledness invoke, arguably alleviates the isolation that an increasingly chaotic modernity imposes. Deborah Lutz has come the closest to analysing what could be the *romantic uncanny* in her book, *The Dangerous Lover* (2006). She introduces the "erotic uncanny", which is "to feel the creepy uncanniness of finding the familiar at the heart of terrifying strangeness ... the full dreadfulness of this feeling comes from the fact that what is disturbing is located 'inside' us, it 'belongs' to us, individually, and we have been responsible for both producing and concealing it" (Lutz 32-33). She explains further that, "what would appear to be nearest, in its familiarity, homeliness, or *heimlichkeit*, and the most easily accessible and handy, lies furthest away from what is authentically most our own" (Lutz 21). Lutz even quotes Maurice Blanchot, who similarly asserts in *The Infinite Conversation* (1993), that we must "recognize that [this distance] not because it is too removed. On the contrary, it is so

close that we are prohibited from taking any distance from it—it is foreign in its very proximity” (Blanchot 45). In other words – as I mentioned earlier in my explanation linking scientific rationality, the Enlightenment and Plumwood’s ‘irrationality’ – drawing nearer and examining closer only causes what is familiar to withdraw, paradoxically nudging humanity further away from the Real.

The chaos and wearisome monotony that modernity and capitalism (re)produce induce a sense of unease and loneliness as we descend deeper into the Eremocene and become more detached from the Real. An individual’s authentic self is hence misplaced, sequestered, and kept secret even from himself, producing individuals, predominantly urbanities, who falsely assume their inherent familiarity. Extrapolating from these Lutz’s theory and bouncing off Freud’s four main concepts of the uncanny, I propose that experiencing the *romantic uncanny* forces a similar process of recognition of the Real that should not be underestimated. Surmounting the desolate loneliness that capitalism imposes, romantic desires for homeliness and mutual understanding promote a recognition of our authentic selves when shocking experiences disillusion individuals and compel them to grasp the hollow falsity of the widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’ they inhabit. This is especially when the objects of love – the beloveds – are untruly idealised in the eyes of their lovers, as in the case of Piya and Fokir in Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*. Recognising the truth of the beloved’s identity through the uncanny can be an incredibly lonely and alienating experience. Nevertheless, with these new insights comes the realisation of the urbanite lover’s true place and purpose within the nonhuman ecological sphere.

With these theoretical foundations in place, I will now analyse my three primary texts. I will keep in mind Plumwood’s notion of ‘irrational rationality’ and remoteness, as well as Freud’s four theories of the uncanny to expose how a discomforting sense of the uncanny works to ‘bring

to light' the obscured Real. Additionally, I will demonstrate the importance of developing a more holistic *ecologically-minded strain of reason* and also show how romance and the *romantic uncanny* are tools employed by my chosen authors to transform lonely, isolated urbanite characters into beings who can recognise their place within the diverse web of interconnections that binds the human and nonhuman world.

2.1 INTRODUCING *ANIMAL'S PEOPLE*

Union Carbide, may
God forgive you

[illegible]

Reflecting on his experience as a copywriter, Sinha penned an article, titled “‘The Last word’: how copywriters can change the world” in 2011 for The SOFII Foundation. He writes:

I learned how the insurance and banking systems work, as well as about human rights, our plundered environment and the scandal of places like Bhopal. Through my work I learned about the deep interconnectedness of these things. Society is a web of myriad causes and effects. Tugging at a thread on this side of the web can twitch apparently unrelated strands on the far side. Quite by accident I discovered that the copywriter has real power in the world. (Sinha “The Last Word”)

Sinha realised through his professional work as an agent of capitalism and unwitting transmitter of cultural desires, that in corroborating with the whims of corporations that publicise their goods and services as part and parcel of the necessary comforts and conveniences associated with the great American Dream, there will undoubtedly be some ‘on the far side’ – on the outer edges of society because they are deliberately excluded from the centre – who are abandoned to face the brunt of capitalism’s relentless demands with little hope of recompense. Sinha understood that even indirectly, the stirring words and meticulously selected illustrations he spliced together produced an emotive response from consumers that unequivocally resulted in disproportionate penalties on the most impoverished and unprotected in third-world nations, not to mention on the environments in these increasingly dilapidated countries. Realising the ‘deep interconnectedness’ – the ‘mesh’ as Morton would say – that exists between disparate peoples and the environment Sinha instead sought to invest his time and effort into raising global awareness to both the hidden vulnerabilities that profit-driven corporations would rather keep under veil as well as the understanding that individuals can be unknowingly complicit in ravaging ecosystems and local populations.

The notion of seamless global interconnectivity between the human and nonhuman ecosphere is observable in many academic works and is one of ecocriticism's most crucial pillars. Drawing on Gayatri Spivak's theory of 'planetary', Ursula Heise suggests in *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* (2008), that humanity must "shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systematic sense of planet" which include "nonlocal types of knowledge and concern" (Heise 56) that facilitate a holistic understanding of global connectedness. This 'eco-cosmopolitanism', Heise asserts, is "an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary 'imagined communities' of both human and non-humankinds" (Heise 61). We must be vigilant, however, to avoid recreating imaginary binaries or either/or dilemmas between the local and global. A contention raised by critics in response to Heise involves the costs of paying exclusive attention to the bigger global picture. We must not overlook the differentiated ecological impact that legislations and environmental policies can have on the local level as well, particularly on third-world countries – this is exactly what Sinha realised during his years as a copywriter. Timothy Clark similarly suggests in *The Value of Ecocriticism* (2019), that "one cannot only act locally ... any action affects the whole world, however minutely ... for what may seem coherent, self-contained, consistent or virtuous at one scale may be very different at another" (Clark 39-40). In other words, the legislations, policies, and conservation projects that may appear environmentally friendly and socially progressive, turn out to be so only from a global, neoliberal perspective, while helpless local victims suffer the consequences of these decisions without any redress.

The conflicting dynamic between neocolonial capitalistic desires that tout progress, class mobility and greater access to creature comforts, and the unpredictable magnitude of its resultant impacts on the environment was observed by Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier in their

book, *Varieties of Environmentalism: Essays North and South* (1997). They theorise that

[to] put it in more explicitly ecological terms, these conflicts pit ‘ecosystem people’ - that is, those communities which depend very heavily on the natural resources of their own locality - against ‘omnivores’, individuals and groups with the social power to capture, transform and use natural resources from a much wider catchment area; sometimes, indeed, the whole world (Guha 12).

In other words, to meet the culturally driven demands of an elite few, local populations and the environments they so fervently depend on are recklessly and relentlessly pulverised in the name of progress and profit as in the case of Joseph’s *Gift in Green* and, of course, Sinha’s *Animal’s People*. Wealthy corporations which appear altruistic in their desire to invest in the Global South, by providing employment contracts, constructing infrastructure, and offering training to workers, are more often than not only there to unscrupulously capitalise and exploit cheaply and freely available local resources. As Guha surmises, “while private industry has thus gained privileged access to natural resources, the burden of environmental degradation has fallen heavily on the rural poor” (Guha 16). Granting ‘privileged access to natural resources’ is particularly damaging as these foreign transnational corporations are backed by local governments which deliberately and obstinately blinker themselves into prioritising only the national *greater good*, conveniently neglecting the *common good* that could be achieved by addressing their citizen’s cries for justice and basic human rights.

What Joseph’s *Gift in Green* lacks, however, is the attempt by the local population to act collectively in order to topple the hegemonic state and neocolonial international mechanisms that exploit their resources. Rather than uniting, the people of Aathi clash between themselves, making any attempt at legal recompense tedious and at times, even ineffective. On the other hand, the

poisoned victims and the generations of impaired children who were born in the days and years after the night of the explosion in *Animal's People* are united in their collective awareness of who their real enemy is. Never once are they deluded or misled by the alluring boons of capitalism, unlike the young locals in Joseph's *Gift in Green* who eagerly sacrifice their bodies, toiling tirelessly to actualise Kumaran's promised modern utopia.

The multigenerational victims in *Animal's People* remain steadfast in their battle against Union Carbide no matter the cost. The leader of the Khaufpur's rebellion, Zafar, even goes to the extreme extent of holding a hunger strike in an effort to expedite the 'Kampani's' (Company's) decision to provide legal and financial recompense to the victims. There is even a moment when Animal realises, during a scuffle between the observers of the hunger strike and the police, that it is truly those who have nothing to lose who are the most fearsome of combatants. He reflects, "These things I'm saying I did not believe before, now I do, the power of nothing is unleashed, as Zafar feared it is already out of control, it will destroy what it touches because it is fuelled not just by anger but despair" (Sinha 310). Guha and Martínez-Alier dub this variety of protest as an 'environmentalism of the poor', which "might be understood as the resistance offered by ecosystem people to the process of resource capture by omnivores" (Guha 12).

It is exactly this calamitous reality that Indra Sinha hoped to convey to the elite idling comfortably at society's centre with *Animal's People*. Sinha's novel was shortlisted for the 2007 Booker Prize and won the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Europe and South Asia, successfully garnering the attention that he hoped would raise global awareness to a disaster that has been deliberately downplayed by the local and international bodies responsible. The novel is based on the Bhopal Chemical disaster which occurred on the night of 2 to 3 December 1984 when a massive gas leak released close to 27 tons of the deadly gas, methyl isocyanate (MIC), from

Union Carbide's Bhopal pesticide factory, causing not only a copious number immediate deaths but also initiating a gradually unfurling process of ecological contamination that continues to grief Bhopal's citizens even today.

In discussing the fallout from the disaster, disability and the struggle of coping with unaccustomed and newly strange physical realities comes to the fore in Sinha's novel. Thinking theoretically, there must first be a distinction between impairment and disability where, as Mark Sherry suggests in "(Post)colonising Disability" (2007), "impairment is defined as a form of biological, cognitive, sensory or psychiatric difference ... within a medical context", while "disability is the negative social reaction to those differences" (Sherry 10). A 'disability' is hence "not necessarily a medicalised identity – it could simply be an identity that is based on identifying as someone who navigates the world in atypical ways" (Sherry 10). Expanding on Julia Kristeva's formulation of the 'abject', in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), as "what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4), Rob Nixon suggests in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) that the

picaro is the abject from which the body and the body politic cannot part. Stigmatized as aberrant and filthy, the picaro embodies everything the socially remote privileged classes, with their ornate rhetoric and social etiquette, seek to contain, repress, and eject. But the picaro keeps resurfacing as a discomfiting reminder of the limits to the social barriers and the studied amnesia that elite society strives to uphold (Nixon 55).

This well-defines Animal, the foul-mouthed and yet endearing protagonist, who despite being born able-bodied, is left impaired after being exposed to methyl isocyanate on the night of the disaster. His physically ravaged state, however, does not limit his abilities. In fact, rather paradoxically, it

seems as though it is his very disability that grants him the extraordinary ability to conceive an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* that empathetically incorporates both the human and nonhuman ecosphere through alternative modes of thinking and communication. Animal's uncanny ability to hear the voices of the dead, the undead and even the whisperings of the nonhuman ecosphere grant him access to Real truths that the able-bodied seem simply unable to fathom. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge Animal's status as an unreliable narrator who suffers from the trauma of the Bhopal disaster in order to avoid mysticising his disability as something supernatural. Ato Quayson introduces the idea of the 'systemic uncanny' in his book, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007). He asserts that this feeling "[in] the face of persistent physical and social violence, [is] either triggered by acute political chaos or the general collapse of the social order, a process of internalization of these perceived disorders takes place. In such instances, the self is presumed to be constantly under threat, whether this threat ever materializes or not. The internalized translation of disorder does not, however, remain merely internalized, but gets cathected into inchoate senses of guilt, inexplicable terror, or a general sense of disquiet that may or may not be consciously traceable to a direct source" (Quayson 142). We must hence acknowledge that it could very well be the guilt, terror, or simply disquieting trauma that the victims experience, that manifests itself as these uncanny abilities.

Animal dictates his story through a series of tape recordings to an audience he assumes comprises predominantly of western listeners. He denotes these elite voyeurs as 'Eyes' and does not censor the story he wishes to convey suggesting an attempt by Sinha to grant victims of the disaster an impartial and unmediated spokesperson to convey the reality of their experience. Rather paradoxically, however, Sinha's novel's paratext consists of an Editor's Note which is instead blatantly indicative of external intervention. The fictional translator declares:

This story was recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by a nineteen-year-old boy in the Indian city of Khaufpur. True to the agreement between the boy and the journalist who befriended him, the story is told entirely in the boy's words as recorded on the tapes. Apart from translating to English, nothing has been changed (Sinha, no page).

As many critics have noted, Khaufpur – meaning 'Terror Town' in Urdu (Snell 2) – is the name of the fictional town that Sinha concocted as a metaphorical replacement for Bhopal. Nevertheless, the fictionality of the town in Sinha's novel does not displace or downplay the very real and traumatic experiences of the victims. Rob Nixon rightly surmises that "we can recognize Khaufpur as both specific and nonspecific, a fictional stand-in for Bhopal, but also a synecdoche for a web of poisoned communities spread out across the global South". Nixon even quotes Sinha, who said in an interview that "The book could have been set anywhere where the chemical industry has destroyed people's lives ... I had considered calling the city Receio and setting it in Brazil. It could just as easily have been set in Central or South America, West Africa or the Philippines" (Nixon 48). Animal's voice hence offers a window to listeners/readers who are courageous enough to swallow the discomfort that recognition and disillusionment induce, to peep out and see for themselves the Real impact that their decisions, purchasing preferences and desires can have on neglected Global South.

As Jesse Oak Taylor suggests in "Powers of Zero: Aggregation, Negation, and the Dimensions of Scale in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*" (2013), "[in] staging the capacity for voice to transform a narrative from weakness to power, *Animal's People* not only models the process of empowerment but also hints at the work performed by fiction, specifically its role in re-framing and reconstituting the possible" (Taylor 178). It is hence through Animal's voice, the unfiltered profanity he intuitively spews, and the silenced nonhuman voices he brings to life that readers of

the novel can discern the true depth of Khaufpur's emotional and bodily struggles. As Heather Snell reinforces in "Assessing the Limitations of Laughter in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*" (2008), it is through this "strategy of self-abjection that Animal attempts to resist readerly co-optation" (Snell 4). Animal's lack of respect for borders, binaries, or social convention, forces his assumed readers to question their own assumptions, compelling them to participate in, and not just spectate above, the text.

Hence, rather than allowing the 'Eyes' to sensationalise and compile 'exotic' stories, Animal's confrontational nature, accentuated by his predilection for the profane, rejects his listeners' attempts to 'colonise' the Kaufpurian victim's collective suffering and trauma. This is especially apparent when Animal fiercely questions the western reader's role through the 'jarnalis' (journalist) who comes seeking his story, accusatorily exclaiming, "you were sitting there gazing at me ... as if your eyes were buttons and mine were buttonholes" (Sinha 4). The phallic image of the 'buttons' representing the 'colonising' west, ruthlessly consuming exotic stories, juxtaposes the 'buttonholes', which represent the empty void of the east, presumably waiting to be filled. Rather than allowing his story to be exploited, Animal declares, "actually, Jarnalis, I was trying not to show that I was laughing at you ... You were like all the others, come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there's so much pain in the world" (Sinha 4). Not to be taken at face value as just simplistic mocking, Animal's laughter instead indicates his refusal to be victimised. Laughter becomes a tool to regain the authority and subjectivity that the Jarnalis attempts to steal. It is perhaps to highlight the importance that laughter plays in allowing readers to appreciate the message of the novel, that Sinha includes in the Editor's Note that "Some tapes contain long sections in which there is no speech, only sounds such as bicycle bells, birds, snatches of music and in one case several minutes of sustained and inexplicable laughter" (Sinha,

no page). Sinha choice to use the word '*inexplicable*' to describe Animal's uncontrollable bouts of laughter, suggests a possible association with Freud's uncanny. Drawing on Freud's earlier work, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), written almost 15 years before his essay, "The Uncanny" (1919), Naomi Beeman suggests in "Uncanny Laughter: Reworking Freud's Theory of Jokes with E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'" (2010), that

The uncanny and the comic are not only two possible but mutually exclusive responses to the same material; the two effects may be closely wed in the experience of one person. Not only can what is comical or uncanny flip into the other in our experience: *we may even be unsure which of these effects we are sensing*. Both the comic and the uncanny 'displace' us" (Beeman 6, Beeman's emphasis).

Animal's laughter is hence deliberately inserted into the text to 'displace' readers from their assumed place by inducing a discomfiting sense of the comic uncanny, in the hope that these feelings will force readers to take a step back from their conventional lives and perspectives and instead develop more empathetic modes of thinking and living. As Zafar says to Animal nearing the end of the novel, "You have understood something worthwhile, my friend, in the end the only way to deal with tragedy is to laugh at it" (Sinha 301). This line also suggests laughter's role as a coping mechanism when dealing with the trauma faced by the most downtrodden in society.

Refusing any external mediation, Animal chooses to tape record his story in his own words, returning the gaze of the spectating 'Eyes'. He forces, as Sagarika Chattopadhyaya and Amarjeet Nayakb suggest in "Performing the Stare in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*" (2014),

a dislocation of the Western reader from its position of the colonizer to an audience that is compelled to understand Animal's disability, outside the affectations of predetermined cultural codes which is also a necessary imperative in the material representation of

disability than its prosthetic function as postcolonial metaphor (Chattopadhyay 34).

By not allowing his privileged audience to see, but only hear his voice, Animal rejects the west's colonising gaze which relegates the victim to the periphery. He instead wants the 'Eyes' to develop their own higher sense of hearing in order to break down the boundaries that exist between the seemingly superior wealthy nations and the exoticized Global South. Recollecting broodingly about the impairment that crippled him, Animal says to his audience bluntly: "my first memory is that fire ... when the smelting in my spine stopped the bones had twisted like a hairpin, the highest part of me was my arse" (Sinha 15). The opening pages of the novel invoke an intense hate for the able-bodied who stand upright and are thus only able to see from a constantly levelled standardised height. Animal says frankly to this homogenised audience, that "The world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level. Your eyes. Lift my head I'm staring into someone's crotch. Whole nother world it's, below the waist" (Sinha 2). What Animal means here is that the able-bodied are blinkered by steamrolled perspectives that are conditioned by time-honoured capitalistic desires. Instead, Animal's alternate perspective, forced upon him because of the nature of his impairment, grants him the unique opportunity to perceive life from a very different viewpoint. It is this alternative view that allows Animal to grasp the true reality of life, as being closer to the ground, both figuratively and literally, facilitates his development of an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* that encourages a deeper understanding of the Real connections that have been overlooked by those who stand upright. With this insight, Animal begins to reject anything that is able-bodied, snapping irritably that "In my mad times when the voices were shouting inside my head I'd be filled with rage against all things that go or even stand on two legs" (Sinha 2). It is here that Sinha first establishes the socially constructed binaries that categorise the able-bodied and the disabled which need to be systematically broken and transformed.

Along with his impairment, we also are introduced, from the very first recording of the text, to Animal's uncanny ability to hear voices suggesting how integral these otherworldly influences are to his identity as one of Bhopal's disabled victims. As Animal himself admits, the voices "started when I was small, after I had the fever that bent my back" (Sinha 55). Relatedly, Ghosh suggests in his later non-fictional work, *The Great Derangement*, that we have "become uncannily aware that conversations among ourselves have always had other participants ... it would seem that those unseen presences actually played a part in shaping our discussions without our being aware of it" (Ghosh *TGD*, 31). Nevertheless, recognising the existence of these voices becomes increasingly challenging in a world steamrolled by strictly rational and scientific perspectives which relegate anything beyond what is immediately and conveniently explainable as a kind of insanity. As Animal declares, however, in line with what Val Plumwood theorises about modern man's 'irrational rationality', "Well, I do see them, I do hear. To deny what you do see and believe in things you don't, that you should call crazy" (Sinha 11). With this alternative understanding, Animal fervently rejects the idea of belonging to any part of a human civilisation that would allow the Bhopal disaster and its resultant aftermath to ruin entire generations of his people. The first sentence of Animal's narration, "I used to be human once", eventually becomes "I no longer want to be human" (Sinha 1) towards the end of the recording, suggesting how Animal's rejection of humanity comes from a place not only of intense personal suffering but also from bearing witness, first-hand, to the collective agony of the people he considered his own. He has lost hope in any 'good' that humanity has to offer and instead willingly becomes an outlier, an uncanny other, straddling between the imaginary binaries that socially construct the human and non-human, normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural and even between hope and despair.

Returning to the historical context of the novel, the sudden and unexpected exposure to

MIC caused numerous immediate fatalities as well as multiple generations of secondary victims who still suffer from the consequent aftereffects of gas contamination on not only their bodies but the land and water sources that their survival depends on. Shockingly, there are no figures confirming the total number of deaths as different agencies estimate different numbers. According to the Bhopal Medical Appeal website, an incident summary article titled “The Gas Disaster” reports that

No one will ever know exactly how many thousands died that night. Carbide says 3,800. Municipal workers who picked up bodies with their own hands, loading them onto trucks for burial in mass graves or to be burned on mass pyres, reckon they shifted at least 15,000 bodies. Survivors, basing their estimates on the number of shrouds sold in the city, conservatively claim about 8,000 died in the first week.

These drastically varied discrepancies only further reveal the efforts taken by organisations in power to conceal the *true* toll of the disaster with unverified ‘*facts*’ to minimise reparation costs. A recent article by Independent, titled “Bhopal gas leak: 30 years later and after nearly 600,000 were poisoned, victims still wait for justice”, recognised the day, 30 years ago on 14 February 1989, when Union Carbide agreed to pay \$470 million to victims of the disaster. This amount, although seemingly significant at first sight, was in fact disturbingly insufficient as the compensatory funds were not calculated with the number of survivors in mind. The money was spread thin amongst the casualties and based on accounts on the ground, the journalist reported that survivors only received “25,000 rupees (£275) compensation in total, staggered over five years” (Withnall 2019). This meagre recompense was barely enough to cover their nutritional needs, let alone the necessary specialised medical care required to sustain their devastated bodies.

Union Carbide chose to erect the fertilizer-producing factory in Bhopal to exploit cheap

labour and lax governmental legislations which allowed for greater profit margins. Many who have studied the disaster, however, are in agreement that despite what legal representatives from Union Carbide (later Dow Chemical) might assert, the disaster was “no accident” but a “massacre” (Everest 156) that continues to inflict magnifying ecological damage by “poisoning groundwater supply ... and injuring upwards of half a million people in the decades since the explosion” (Carrigan 160). The consequences of Union Carbide’s negligence in forecasting the possible impacts its cost-cutting measures, extend beyond just that night. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon highlights how “In 2001, Union Carbide disappeared through that act of corporate necromancy known as the merger. Dow Chemical bought out Union Carbide, and so the name indelibly associated with disaster evaporated, further confounding the quest in Bhopal for environmental justice, compensation, remediation, and redress” (Nixon 63). Nixon’s analysis of Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* contributed to his theorisation of ‘slow violence’ which suggests “multiple speeds of environmental terror” (Nixon 61), as although the explosion resulted in an immediate initial few thousand deaths, the generational long-lasting consequences on those not yet fully grown or even born is phenomenal. For instance, within the slum known as ‘Nutmacker’ resides a mother who tragically, “with slow fingers, [is] pressing her breast, sending jets of milk spurting onto the earth” (Sinha 106). Although this mother may not have been a direct victim of the disaster, the pollution of the land on which food is grown and the contamination of water sources from which people drink, bathe and irrigate crops means that the survivors are unremittingly exposed to remnants of MIC that have seeped deep into the environment around them. The homelands that were once homely and familiar have now become uncannily hostile. This tragic reality is something that Rachel Carson foretold in her seminal ecological work, *Silent Spring* (1962). Investigating the long-term impact of aggressive industrial

pesticide use, she explains how “these chemicals are now stored in the bodies of the vast majority of human beings, regardless of age. They occur in the mother’s milk, and probably in the tissues of the unborn child” (Carson 16). The mother tells Animal, and Elli, the visiting white doctor who relocates to Bhopal to set up a clinic: “Our wells are full of poison. It’s in the soil, water, in our blood, it’s in our milk. Everything here is poisoned” (Sinha 107-108).

The impact of the disaster is not only physically damaging, but mentally traumatic as well, inducing mental blocks that permanently alter the way that individuals live their lives and perceive the world around them. Take for instance Animal’s guardian, Ma Franci, a French nun who had come to Bhopal before the disaster. The disaster robs Ma Franci of her ability to comprehend any language other than French. As Animal reveals to his listeners,

This poor woman, Ma Franci, lost all knowledge of Hindi. She’d gone to sleep knowing it as well as any Khaufpuri, but was woken in the middle of the night by a wind full of poison and prophesying angels. In that méla of death ... her mind was wiped clean of Hindi and of Inglis (English) too ... she forgot all languages except her childhood speech of France (Sinha 37).

It is this imperceptible, and yet inevitable, ‘slow violence’ that makes certain impairments indiscernible to both the naked eye and to those who deliberately blinker themselves from acknowledging the ecological and social ramifications that negligent transnational companies inflict on the poorest workers and environments.

Shockingly, or perhaps not so, in 1984, Union Carbide’s CEO, Warren Anderson, ignored multiple criminal warrants served by Indian courts, while the United States refused to extradite him to answer for his company’s negligence even after it was proven that lapses in security were due to cost-cutting measures (Taylor 178; Mukherjee 138-140). Upamanyu Mukherjee suggests in

Postcolonial Environments, that the disaster and subsequent lack of justice is a “portrait in miniature ... of neo-colonialism”. Defining the term, he writes, “the signature move of this neo-colonial system is systematically to uncouple power from responsibility, to remove or reduce all forms of redress, and to promote the emasculation of all nation states” (Mukherjee 6). Postcolonialism today, hence “marks not an end of colonialism, but an end to a particular mode of colonialism which then shifts gears and evolves [into] globalised ruling classes” (Mukherjee 5-6). This reality is particularly noticeable in how “Dow Chemical, which later purchased Union Carbide, claims to be absolved of obligation for remediation or reparations beyond the limited restitution already paid to some of the victims” (Carrigan 160). What we can draw from this is that in an age when capitalistic enterprises openly manipulate governments, it is the transnational company that now holds hegemonic, and perhaps even a kind of imperialistic, power resulting in the unequal distribution of toxicity and its debilitating costs on the Global South. It is how literary texts approach these stark realities that grants readers new insights and understandings. In *Animal’s People*, Sinha effectively uses his protagonists’ disability (and subsequent development of what seems like uncanny ‘superpowers’) to critique postcolonialism’s ruthless and unrelenting exploitation of the Global South.

Mark Sherry rightfully asserts in “(Post)colonialising Disability” (2007), that “Neither disability nor postcolonialism should be understood as simply a metaphor for the other experience; nor should they be rhetorically employed as a symbol of the oppression involved in a completely different experience” (Sherry 10). In other words, rather than treating disability as prosthetic metaphor for postcolonialism or ecocriticism, more must be done, particularly by literary texts, to overcome the “only nominal attention to local formations and understandings of disability” (Barker 219). The focus on lived experience, as Sagarika Chattopadhyay suggests in “Performing

the Stare in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*", hence "helps to position disability in a specific cultural context instead of generalising disability as a homogenised experience in a purely Eurocentric world" (Chattopadhyay 31) as many victims tormented by the gas leak are disabled not only physically but socially in being unable to access a decent living.

The danger of using "rhetorical connections" (Sherry 10) to represent either disability or postcolonialism is observable in what Elli's privileged white friend says to her before her departure to Bhopal. "Please don't think worse of me if I tell you the truth. Those poor people never had a chance. If it had not been the factory it would have been cholera, TB, exhaustion, hunger. They would have died anyways" (Sinha 153). This highly despondent assumption relegates the impoverished worker to the periphery for the seemingly simple 'fact' that they have no hope at a future. There is only despair. The poor's social situation hence recategorized into a different form of disability that grants the transnational company the power to ignore their suffering by assuming that other social factors could have affected their downfall. Soon after, this friend quickly dismisses the poor's misery entirely by revealing a 'secret'. He declares conspiratorially, "here's something the books don't tell you. On that night the moon was two-thirds full. It was shaped like a tear and as it appeared through the clouds of gas, it was the colour of blood" (Sinha 153). By using a romantic metaphor to describe that night, Elli's friend deliberately distracts her from the painful suffering and real lived experience of the people by using the image of an incomplete blood red teardrop-shaped moon to add a sense of mysterious eeriness that reduces the horrifying reality of their suffering to something that could have been extracted from the first line of a children's book. In response, Elli rightly, albeit rather belatedly, chastises herself by telling Animal, "you know what I should have said, Animal? ... Instead I sat there drinking his whisky listening to him reduce the terror of dying people to a moon in a second rate poem (Sinha 153). Elli here realises,

like many critics, that the Global South cannot be cast aside to the periphery of a Eurocentric world that continues to exoticize and fetishize neocolonial victims who are unlike themselves. Perhaps, Elli retaliates by not giving her friend a name, and thus relegating him to the periphery of her retelling. Clare Barker and Stuart Murray affirm in their article “Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism” (2010), that “in contexts of chronic poverty or indigenous dispossession ... and in communities experiencing mass disablement (due to war, disaster, or industrial accident) people with disabilities often constitute a numerical majority” (Barker 229). Binaries must hence be questioned as, firstly, there is no real difference between men (or women). And secondly, the seemingly ‘normal’ lived experience in postcolonial contexts might in fact be a disabled experience, “drastically altering the categorical and exclusionary implications of ‘normalcy’ and ‘non-normativity’” (Barker 229). The disabled neoliberal subject must therefore actively reject binaries and exoticizing metaphors in order to regain their agency as individuals. It is this that Sinha does brilliantly in *Animal’s People* by showcasing how Animal’s disability and lived experience, albeit traumatic, can be an enabling strength that brings him, his fellow comrades and his listeners, the ‘Eyes’, greater understanding about the complex web of interactions between neocolonialism and its local environmental impacts.

2.2 UNCANNY (DIS)ABILITIES

Although a cripple, bent over at the waist, Animal is not limited by his impairment. He embraces his disability and banks on his new-found, seemingly superhuman, strengths. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomas suggests in *Staring: How We Look* (2015), “we seldom even consider the advantages of blindness, such as being able to navigate without artificial light or engaging fully with other senses such as touch and smell” (Garland-Thomas 26). Mukherjee likewise writes in *Postcolonial Environments*, that “While the poison gas deprived others, such as the French nun,

Ms Franci of their linguistic ability, it seems to have made Animal, as Zafar notes, ‘especially able’”(Mukherjee 151).

As the leader of the rebellion protesting the Kampani’s negligence, Zafar takes Animal’s disability in stride, convincing Animal of his worth and potential to contribute to his people’s fight for justice.

‘I am an animal, I can’t do much...’

‘You’ve the gift of gab.’

‘An animal must use its mouth, no other tool does it have.’

‘How does it see?’

‘Uses its eyes.’

‘You can do that,’ says he. ‘How does it find food?’

‘Smells it out.’

‘We need a good sniffer.’ (Sinha 26)

Empowered, albeit through Zafar’s mediation, Animal becomes an oddly conspicuous spy for the rebellion. Ironically, it is his striking disability that obscures his illicit intentions as, seemingly unthreatening, his presence is ignored by society. Animal effectively employs this unexpected strength by scouring for any odd occurrences and even participating in meetings that protest corrupt government officials who continue to neglect victims.

The more prominent capability that Animal develops due to his disability, is the uncanny ability to hear the voices of not only the living around him, but ghosts, the unborn and even the external man-made and natural environment. He becomes a meditative translator, albeit perhaps a slightly unreliable one, with the capacity to understand multiple languages, both spoken and unspoken. Addressing the ‘Eyes’, he says self-reflexively, “since I was small I could hear people’s

thoughts even when their lips were shut, plus I'd get en passant comments from all types of things, animals, birds, trees, rocks giving the time of day ... Unusual meanings are making themselves known to me. Secrets are shouting themselves into my ear" (Sinha 8-11). It is these secrets that bestow Animal with perspectives that are unavailable to those who are able-bodied and view life from a standard height. This uncanny ability ties in with Freud's third notion of the uncanny, in how physical uncertainties lead to "intellectual [un]certainties" (Jentsch 15) that induce the uncanny when we are unable to discern if a body has autonomous control over itself, particularly since humanity prides itself on its imagined authority over its external environment. As Animal explains to his audience, "Like I've told you, Eyes, I've always caught the meanings of speech even when I could not understand a word, I had not just an ear but an eye for meanings" (Sinha 35). In this case, Animal has no control whatsoever over these special abilities as these voices and meanings '[shout] themselves' into his ear. These foreign thoughts, hence, flash within his mind, conferring him little choice in being mentally invaded and psychologically influenced by these uncontrollable and unruly nonhuman voices. Personally, it reminded me of the last two stanzas of William Wordsworth's poem, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (1807).

I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the shew to me had brought:

For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the Daffodils.

Although Wordsworth spends time gazing, frolicking, and dancing with the Daffodils, he never

truly comprehends the ‘wealth’ they offer. Wordsworth’s choice of diction, in choosing the word ‘gaze’, strongly suggests the notion of an active observer, watching, scrutinizing, and perhaps even categorising the different physical behaviours that the personified Daffodils show off. This is particularly apparent in the two hyphens that Wordsworth includes, in the line ‘gazed—and gazed—’, to suggest the idea that the speaker has been examining the Daffodils quite intensely and intimately for an extended period of time. Yet, it is only much later, while reminiscing at alone home, that the speaker is able to fully appreciate, with his imaginative ‘inner eye’, the beauty and magnificence of the Daffodils and his external environment. Wordsworth then intentionally juxtaposes the third and fourth stanzas with a shift. By contrast, the speaker’s later realisations ‘flash’ within his mind, suggesting the idea of a passive reception of these ideas, like how Animal too has little control of the voices that he receives telepathically.

Just as Wordsworth’s speaker is powerless against the memories and imaginative processes of recognition that ‘flash’ within his mind, Animal’s special ability pressures him into embracing and, ultimately, sympathising with the lived experiences that lie hidden both within the dilapidated remains of the Kampani’s factory in which he lives as well as amongst the aggrieved ghosts that still roam about the wrecked city of Khaufpur. Significantly, there is no discernible limit or barrier to his ability to comprehend either human or nonhuman sphere. Both facets that comprise our environment are equally open to him, suggesting Sinha’s intention to convey to readers the need to transgress and surmount the imaginary binaries that currently fracture our external world. (As an aside, even Animal’s choice to reside within the factory contributes to his self-imposed constitution as an uncanny other as he deliberately positions himself as apart from humanity.) While living on the factory grounds – by himself at first, and later with Ma Franci – Animal alone stands witness to the horrors of that night that return to torment him. He tells the ‘Eyes’,

You should hear the ghosts the factory is full of them, when a big wind blows, their souls fly shrieking up and down the empty pipes. Some nights, there'd be nothing here, just the ghosts and me, a four-foot creature climbing in the trees and pipes. ... if this pipe had been mended, that wheel tightened, I might have had a mother and a father, I might still be a human being (Sinha 32).

What we see here is not only Animal's uncannily superhuman ability to serve as a translator and as a sort of representative for the forcibly muted nonhuman voices around him, but the fact that past events return once again to haunt victims, inducing disconcerting feelings of the uncanny. It is as though the ghosts of the disaster are helplessly forced to re-live and re-enact the spread of the gas that poisoned them on loop, suggesting the idea that the Khaufpurians will never be able to fully escape the night of the disaster, much in line with Nixon's notion of 'slow violence'.

2.3 UNCANNY REPETITIONS

This is yet another facet of the novel that contributes to its uncanny effect. Sinha deliberately introduces, at multiple points of the text, the idea that certain events return to repeat themselves, evoking an association with Freud's fourth theory, which suggests that the uncanny is revealed in the "constant recurrence of similar situations" which "awaken an uncanny feeling, which recalls that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams" (Freud 1919, 9-10; Freud 1955, 236-237). For example, in Animal's recording on Tape 5, Animal, Zafar and other members of the rebellion are gathered together at a tea house, eating and watching the news, when suddenly, they witness the horrific events of 9/11, when in an act of terrorism, two planes crashed into the World Trade Centre in the United States. At first, Animal is completely in awe at the sight of the explosion, convincing himself that it is all part of a scene from an American blockbuster. Even after Zafar explains exasperatedly that they events are genuine, the seemingly endless replay

of the collision on the television convinces Animal of its theatricality. He says, “Even after the second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth planes hit and all those buildings fall, Zafar maintains it is not a movie. Zafar has to be wrong. Stuff like that doesn’t happen in real life. Not in Amrika anyway. Here in Khaufpur it’s different. Here in Khaufpur we had that night” (Sinha 61). In the same way that the events of the disaster were downplayed by those in the West, the Khaufpurian people also misunderstand and spectacularise the events of 9/11 aggravating the misapprehensions that exist between the Global North and Global South.

This type of repetition, particularly of an incident that remains a sore spot for many Westerners, at the very beginning of Sinha’s novel prepares readers for other uncanny repetitions and reoccurrences of traumatic and catastrophic events which force them to take a step back and reevaluate what they have so far considered real and true. For instance, with repeated metaphor of burning chillies. The lethal burning experienced by the victims of ‘that night’ are re-enacted, albeit at a much smaller scale, at multiple moments of the text. As Animal reveals about a factory worker’s experience working with the factory’s lethal chemicals, “If by chance you got any on your hand, Aftaab said, the skin would blister. On that night he was at home off duty, when the stinging in the eyes began, the burning chillies, unlike most people he knew what to do” (Sinha 83-84). Even later in the text, Animal sees within his mind’s eye a vision of Ms Franci in the derelict factory that they have made their home: “There is a tang in the air, my eyes begin to sting. Why is Ma cooking so late at night? Why is she frying chillies? Coming nearer to the tower, I begin to cough, the chillies are catching in my eyes, my throat, each breath feels like fire” (Sinha 339). What Animal realises later, was that this vision may in fact have been real. He could have been seeing things telepathically through Ma’s eyes or at least been able to infiltrate her thoughts. Assuming that she had been preparing the chillies for a specific reason, Animal deduces that the

disguised woman who had been “clad from head to toe in a black burqa” (Sinha 360) and infiltrated the place where the negotiations between the Kampani and the Khaufpuri government were taking place was Ma Franci (although the identity of this individual is never confirmed in the text). It was presumably she who forcibly subjected the officials to a taste of their own medicine (or in this case, poison), by circulating the potent concoction through the room’s ventilation system:

The shameful meeting began in a room with a big table, the four Amerikans were on one side, the politicians on the other. They had begun their arguing and haggling when without warning their eyes began to sting. An evil burning sensation began in their noses and throats, a little like the smoke of burning chillies ... These Kampani heroes, these politicians, they were shitting themselves, they thought they were dying, they thought they’d been attacked with the same gas that leaked on that night (Sinha 360).

Intriguingly, another type of repetition occurs when Animal notices that even on ‘this night’ the moon appears exactly how Elli’s racist White friend said it did in 1984: “Like a tear, they said the moon was on that night, and is again on this night of tears” (Sinha 327). It is these three inexplicable repetitions that induce a sense of helplessness in readers, forcing them to reconsider their vantage point and become more tolerant of the strangeness that permeates the nonhuman ecosphere.

It is also at this point that I find myself disagreeing with Mukherjee’s analysis of Ms Franci’s disability as only injurious (Mukherjee 151). Instead, like Animal’s new-found superhuman powers, Ms Franci too develops uncanny abilities that empower her. Here too, however, we must acknowledge that these abilities could very well be a response to trauma as Ato Quayson suggests with his idea of the ‘systemic uncanny’. Ma Franci’s premonitions of the imminent Apokalis (apocalypse) arises from an innate understanding of the otherworldly ‘angels’

that she communes with: “On this night of all nights, to die will be a blessing. Animal, the angels are here, thousands and thousands of them, they’ve come to make an end of this sinning, sorrowful world, tonight it will go up in flames, it will burn and shrivel into ashes and become dust” (Sinha 328). It is Ma Franci who thereby serves as a forbearer of the uncanny repetition of ‘that night’ that has yet to occur. She asserts, seemingly incoherently, at multiple moments of the text, that “Terror will return to this city. It began here, here it will end” (Sinha 64). What we discover, however, is that Ma Fanci is never truly mad, irrational, or helpless. She simply functions on a different wavelength. The foresight her disability imbues her with enables her to foreshadow the fire that erupts on the factory grounds during a riot with the police. Animal recollects the terrified reactions of his people to the disaster’s re-emergence and becomes convinced that ‘that night’ has indeed come again: “‘Run run,’ the voices cry, ‘the gas has come.’ ... ‘That night has come again!’” (Sinha 339). It is in experiencing the uncanny repetition of the disaster – first intentionally, by the disguised woman who disrupts the Kampani’s negotiations with burning chillies, and secondly, with the accidental fire that erupts on the factory grounds – that readers are able to grasp the magnitude of the disaster and the reality of its never-ending impact. This is particularly since, even in death, traumatised victims – both the angelic, ghostly kind as well as the vengeful living kind – continue to haunt living by subjecting them into re-enacting the trauma of ‘that night’.

It seems to be only the disabled who can develop this new ‘sixth’ sense to communicate with the world they have lost. Another example of a disabled victim who develops uncanny abilities, is when Nisha’s impaired father, Somraj, tells Animal of his ability to hear music in the things around him. A famous singer in his youth, “that night took away his wife and baby son and fucked up his lungs” (Sinha 33). It is even in the creaking of bicycle wheels and in squealing livestock that Somraj can hear the ‘notes’ or ‘raga’ that are universal to all official forms of music.

Sharing this higher sense of hearing, he tells Animal “but I understand that you too have a power of hearing, so you will understand” (Sinha 49). They come to recognise that it is by embracing this ‘sixth’ sense or at least a more *ecologically-minded* and open strain of reason that their disability imbues them with, that they can look past the official, grand narratives that neocolonial transnational companies exploit to obscure the Real. Somraj teaches Animal, saying earnestly,

Listen, how so many musics are running together ... whichever language they are in you catch the same meaning. At least I do. It’s like every good thing in the world is dying and the people of the world, they see but do not care ... When the songs clash, as you called it, sometimes out of that comes a new music, something completely fresh” (Sinha 215-216).

What Somraj means here is that ordinary sight and hearing are insufficient. It takes a higher order of ability – something developed out of necessity, grief, suffering and even loneliness – to be able to process and recognise the truths that humanity’s capitalistic materialism and internalised rationalism has muffled for so long. As Timothy Morton asserts in *The Ecological Thought*, “the uncanny and uncertainty are basic to the ecological thought. If we try to get rid of them, we conjure up Nature that rises up to judge, monitor, and discipline” (Morton 81). The voices that Animal is forced to bear witness to, the uncanny premonitions that Ma Fanci sees and the music that Somraj hears in the ‘ordinary’ around him, hence become examples of the strangely familiar that humanity has been taught to overlook and bury away. Yet, those whose lived experiences allow them to develop an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* are able reconnect to the human and nonhuman environments around them. Mukherjee supports this, by asserting in *Postcolonial Environments*, that Animal’s voices rightly “amalgamates human languages and imaginations and this, along with his non-human capabilities, makes him the mediator through whom the humans and non-humans of Sinha’s world realise their relationship” (Mukherjee 157). This is the realisation – or

recognition, as Ghosh would say – that facilitates the manufacturing of new modes of thinking and living that promise a more symbiotic and sympathetic relationship with our external world, thus diminishing the loneliness that pervades our internalised imagined realities and places us firmly within the Wilson’s ‘Eremocene’.

This process of recognition, of our place both within human society and the nonhuman ecosphere, that arises from the development of a more holistic *ecologically-minded strain of reason*, is particularly apparent in the penultimate recording, when in a drug-induced fantastical frenzy, Animal finds refuge in a forest adjacent to the slums. Breaking the binaries between city/nature and human/non-human, the forest allows animal to enter a safe non-human space which, as Allison Shelton suggests in “Environmental Relations in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*”, “is solidified as a neutral, non-hierarchical network connecting non-humans to humans, fantasy to reality, life to death” (Shelton 19). It is in this space that Animal is able to distinguish between the imagined ‘reality’ that humanity has constructed and the Real which has been deliberately obscured. Ironically, it is the Real that seems more like fantasy at this point, highlighting the truth of humanity’s ubiquitous internalisation of what is perceived as widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’. It takes a kind of irrational madness to be able to comprehend the Real, that rises, like Morton suggests, to ‘judge, monitor, and discipline’. Ghosh comments about this very prejudice in *The Great Derangement*, asserting that

fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not the kind that is taken seriously by literary journals: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. ... But the truth, as is now widely acknowledged, is that we have entered a time when the wild has become the norm: if certain literary forms are unable to negotiate these torrents, then they will have failed – and these

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” (Ghosh *TGD*, 7-8).

What Sinha desired to challenge in making Animal’s foray into the Real as unrealistic and fantastical as possible, was to showcase humanity’s obstinate attachment to widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’. It is perhaps, by instead integrating what seems irrational into our lives, that we may be able to attain a similar *ecologically-minded strain of reason* in order to relearn how to live sustainably with our external ecosphere, rather than living off it.

Animal finds himself helplessly distressed and alone in the forest after running away from being openly rejected by his first love, Nisha, as well as from his guilt over having poisoned his love rival, Zafar. In love with Zafar, who was on the brink of death after having participated in a hunger strike to expedite the Kampani’s decision to compensate victims, Nisha openly rejects Animal’s confession of love: ““Stop it! Animal, stop! I’ve told you before, I will never marry you!”” (Sinha 332). Animal here feels more alone than ever and blames his rejection on his unsightly impairment. Animal also feels incredibly remorseful for having deliberately poisoned Zafar in the hopes of decluttering his path towards Nisha’s affections. Animal narrates to the ‘Eyes’ his confession to the malnourished and fading Zafar: “So I tell him about the pills, how Faqri had assured me they were for one purpose, which was the derogation of his sexual urge, Nisha vis-à-vis” (Sinha 303). Animal even berates himself internally, thinking, “For love’s sake I made one stupid mistake don’t make me his fucking murderer” (Sinha 307). Even this incident can be analysed as a representative microcosm of the Kampani’s poisoning that Sinha deliberately includes in the text to exaggerate the uncanniness of repeated events. Animal poisons Zafar insidiously, over an extended length of time, by secretly crushing and adding the datura pills to the latter’s food for his own self-interest. Similarly, the Kampani’s thoughtless cost-cutting measures

led to a lack of safety checks which allowed the accumulation of risks that caused the explosion of lethal gas on 'that night'. Animal's distaste of himself, upon realising that he had succumbed to the very traits of human greed and selfishness that he had deliberately rejected by denoting himself as an 'Animal', stimulates an intense feeling of loneliness which is magnified by his helplessness when lost in the forest. Like Freud, who recollects feeling an overwhelming sense of powerlessness as he wanders directionless along the streets, Animal too encounters the same feeling of uncanniness as he wanders about the forest only to find the same trees around him.

What Animal comes to recognise, however, in his incapacitated state, is that he is not alone. As he writhes in pain, after having swallowed the remainder of the datura pills as a form of self-punishment, Animal sees the forest come to life and is at the mercy of nonhuman beings much older and more powerful than he.

A tear drips from the moon's eye and lands on a branch. Lines of light spread in all directions, racing from tree to tree, till all the trees of the forest have silver edges, their voices are nothing I've ever heard, like deep flutes filled with water. 'Show the animal, show him what he really is.' (Sinha 343)

The personified trees, animals and even the moon use their voices to re-teach Animal his place. We are here reminded of Somraj's ability to hear music and meaning in everything around him. Similarly, Animal too learns to recognise the different wavelengths that nonhuman beings communicate at, allowing him finally to realise that "The animals that were absent before now choose to show themselves" (Sinha 357). What we realise as readers, however, is not that the Animals are revealed, but that Animal has finally developed the capacity to recognise what rational-minded humanity has lost touch with. It is Animal's intimacy with the nonhuman within the bounds of the 'irrational' forest that reminds him of his true connection to the earth. He finally

acknowledges that the forest is the “deep time when there was no difference between anything when separation did not exist when all things were together, one and whole before humans set themselves apart and became clever and made cities and kampanies and factories” (Sinha 352). The lingual regression here, in Animal’s lack of punctuation and crumbling syntax, also suggests the merging of boundaries. Spoken language, the ultimate separator of the human/animal, is now poised at the edge of the unknown. Instead, it is the uncanny voices in Animal’s head – which require neither translation nor mediation – that come to the forefront, conveying the truth of the undeniable connection that humans have with the more-than-human world. Nature hence returns to those who are lonely and lost but willing to listen, reteaching us our place in the world.

2.4 THE ROMANTIC UNCANNY: ANJALI AS ANIMAL’S SAVIOUR

Animal’s need to ease his loneliness and find his place also comes in the form of his romantic desires. His lust becomes an integral part of his undeniably human nature that he finds challenging, and at times almost impossible, to detach himself from despite his attempts to categorise himself as an ‘animal’. The *romantic uncanny* is a rather inconspicuous aspect of the uncanny that has not been fully analysed by literary or academic critics. A virgin, Animal fervently wishes for his affections for Nisha, Somraj’s daughter, to be reciprocated. Unfortunately, his physical impairment and the fact that Nisha is infatuated with Zafar, the leader of the rebellion, quells his chances. Animal falls for Nisha because she was the first person who had ever acknowledged him for who he was, rather than noticing and pitying him for his disability. Animal tells the ‘Eyes’,

What was it about Nisha that made it impossible to say no? I think it was that from the first she took me exactly as I was. When she called me Jaanvar, Animal, it was a name, nothing more. She never seemed to notice that I was crippled, nor pretend that I wasn’t. She was

the only person I knew who treated me as completely normal (Sinha 22).

The *romantic uncanny* plays into the text with Animal's unconscious desire for 'homeliness', a cultural desire that has been gradually ingrained into human society over time. It comprises of not only hearth and home, but having a wife, children and even a securing a stable income by buying into the capitalism's ideals and indirectly backing the cyclical exploitation of workers around the world. It is for this cultural desire that when Animal proposes to Nisha, he does not just tell her that he loves her. Instead, he declares, "Marry me, Nisha, I'll never leave you. Babies, we'll have. I'll get educated, I'll find a job" (Sinha 332). Like the rest of humanity, Animal too has been swayed by societal expectations of what personal success looks like despite his intense distaste for human nature. To achieve society's measure of 'homeliness', he would voluntarily become yet another of capitalism's tools. We observe this social conditioning from very early on in the text. For example, readers are introduced in one of Animal's first few recordings to a moment when Zafar quotes Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1832) to Animal, declaring to him: "*It is a truth virtually acknowledged, that a single man in a position of good fortune, must be in want of a wife*" (Sinha 36, Sinha's italics). The didactic tone of the quote pressures the reader/listener into submission, bolstering their conviction that wives, families, and homely domesticity are indispensable to attaining emotional fulfilment. This intertextual reference not only bolsters the reader's (and Animal's) faith in Zafar's intellectual spectrum, but also highlights how some of these internalised ideas are based on archaic social norms and expectations which may not accurately reflect society today. It is even through a radio tuned to a love song, that goes 'Ek tu jo milaa, meeting you I meet the whole world, one flower in my heard the world's abloom' (Sinha 21), that humanity is constantly bombarded with the image of what domestic bliss and homeliness looks like, only exacerbating Animal's desperation to achieve the same ideal in order to ease the

loneliness that both modern life and his disability have produced.

At first, Animal's love for Nisha is lustful and seemingly uncontrollable. He says to the 'Eyes', "Eyes, did I just now say 'Forget sex?' What fucking hypocrisy! Sex was the one thing I could never forget, my second impossible wish. My first wish was to stand upright, but why did I want that if not because it led to the second?" (Sinha 75-76). He even goes to the extent of thinking, much later in the text, 'I want to do it with Nisha but I'd do it with Elli, to be honest I'd do it with anyone' (Sinha 233), suggesting his growing desperation, particularly as Nisha gets closer to Zafar. Quite deplorably, Animal even perches on a mango tree outside Nisha's window to secretly watch her changing while indulging in his private masturbatory pleasure. He validates this invasion, however, as his responsibility to protect and 'guard' Nisha's 'honour' and 'morality' (Sinha 115), again suggesting to readers his status as an unreliable narrator whose words and decisions are heavily burdened by the physical and mental trauma inflicted on him as a result of the disaster. As we might expect, Animal's growing affections for Nisha are never reciprocated and Animal instead finds himself with Anjali, a prostitute, who allows him to explore her body. It is this experience which changes his perspective on love and sex. Rather than seeing sex as essential to achieving 'homeliness', Animal realises through Anjani that sex is secondary. Recognising the buried historic bedrock between them disillusioned Animal, throwing him off balance and forcing him to take a step back in order to reorganise their shared truth.

'You can touch if you want,' she says, but I don't want to, I just want to look ... She shows me how the rose cave leads to a tunnel whose mouth at first was hidden, this is the way that leads to the womb, where life begins, where I began, where we all began. I try to imagine the womb and realise that it's an empty space, which means there's nothingness at the very source of creation ... in its depths is the whole of the past plus all that will be

(Sinha 243-244).

The uncanny here arises in Animal's unique perspective, arguably a direct repercussion of the routine emasculation he experiences due to his disability. He experiences helplessness in the form of an involuntary out-of-body experience that facilitates his reconnection with the nonhuman, by returning into a past that is undeniably familiar and yet has been repressed by widely accepted rational and scientific 'reality'. As Knittel suggests, "the omnipresence of traces of the past contributes an unsettling of our perception or understanding of the present we inhabit" (Knittel 57). It is precisely this uncanny omnipresence that facilitates the development of an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* that allows Animal to question the underlying assumptions of his relationship to the material world. He finally recognises the immensity and scale of the web of connections that humanity has ignored. Significantly, it is also only after this relearning and recognition of his place in the wider universe, that Animal loses any and all interest in sex or losing his virginity to Anjali. He realises that meaningless sex, void of any true emotional connection, only serves to further isolate his authentic self. The familiarity Animal yearns with his homely, albeit erotic, desires for Anjali are hence defamiliarised and he is left disillusioned. Paradoxically then, as Lutz suggests, "what is truly nearest to one is what is most unfamiliar, strange and angst producing. Moving closer authentically or with understanding causes what is familiar to withdraw" (Lutz 21). Animal's ability to distance himself hence facilitates his recognition of the Real. We see this learning in practice, when Animal tells the 'Eyes', "these days I've little heart to go up the trees. Already my life has changed" (Sinha 255). Animal's newfound sight facilitates his realisation that 'homeliness' is not sex. It is instead the love and companionship that a shared understanding affords that eases the solitude that many modern beings are forced to endure. At the very end of the novel, we see Animal give up his lust for Nisha by giving up his desire to become

‘human’ by undergoing reconstructive surgery in America. He instead embraces himself as he is and looks to establish long-term companionship with Anjali. He says, “Eyes, it was for my operation, but now that cash, plus a little persuasion from Farouq’s friends, will go to buy Anjali free and she will come to live with me” (Sinha 366).

Sinha’s *Animal’s People* is hence not only eye opening in terms of its effectiveness in exposing readers to the reality of brutal capitalism and the lack of recourse offered by neo-colonial transnational corporations, but also how the uncanny works to displace the reader from a place of comfort. It is only by being uncomfortable, that we are encouraged to evaluate our privileged place and understand and recognise what society has conditioned us to overlook. We must gather new modes of communication by developing our own sense of a more holistic *ecologically-minded strain of reason* which allows us to see the Real behind our imagined and constructed ‘reality’.

CHAPTER THREE

Strange Repetitions and Stranger Ghosts in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

I will now move on to discussing the uncanny in Amitav Ghosh's novels, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), in this and the following chapter. Although I will be separating my analysis of Ghosh's work, both novels should be read in close association with each other as *Gun Island* (GI) is a sequel which expands on a number the primary characters introduced in *The Hungry Tide* (THT). I will also be including several references to Ghosh's non-fictional work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), in which he formally introduces his ideas on the uncanny and its largely unexplored correlation to ecocritical fiction.

Both novels aim to reveal to readers how rational, modern, and conventional forms of knowledge can unintentionally blind individuals to Real truths about the ecological world around them. Ghosh's work endeavours to convince readers of the need for alternative sources of embodied knowing which take into consideration not only sentiment, but myth, inexplicable strangeness, shocking coincidences and the overwhelming power of the nonhuman that modern civilisations have struggled to subdue for selfish personal convenience and profit. The uncanny, hence, encourages transformations that convert stalwart urbanites into beings who possess a more *ecologically-minded strain of reason*. These 'resurrected' individuals are more willing to step back from widely accepted rational and scientific 'realities' and reconsider themselves, thus facilitating a recognition of their place which in turn, creates beings who are more optimistic about a shared future alongside the nonhuman. I will first address Ghosh's theoretical ideas before delving into a comparative analysis of the texts.

Amitav Ghosh may very well be one of Asia's most prolific modern writers and arguably one of the first Indian writers to venture into ecocritical concerns in Indian English fiction. Like Sinha, Ghosh also worked in mainstream media and was a journalist for several years before

turning to fiction. He writes about his experience as a journalist in his non-fictional work on climate change, *The Great Derangement (TGD)*, recollecting about how he had experienced the disorientating helplessness associated with the uncanny when unexpectedly caught in a hurricane as a part-time journalist while working on his MA at Delhi University (Ghosh, *TGD* 12). He reflects:

Only much later did I realise that the tornado's eye had passed directly over me. It seemed to me that there was something eerily apt about that metaphor: what had happened at that moment was strangely like a species of visual contact, of *beholding and being beheld*. And in that instant of contact something was planted deep in my mind, something irreducibly mysterious, something quite apart from the danger that I had been in and the destruction that I had witnessed; *something that was not a property of the thing itself but of the manner in which it had intersected with my life*" (Ghosh, *TGD* 14-15, my italics).

What is important here is Ghosh's ability to recognise his experience as uncanny and appreciate the strangeness that forces him to relook and rethink himself, rather than dismissing his encounter with the unprecedented tornado by rationalising it as mere chance or coincidence, as some of his characters do – particularly the marine biologist, Piya, in *Gun Island*. What Ghosh's hoped to convey through *TGD*, is that humanity would be very dense – deranged even – to relegate the Real that we see and feel to a simple moment of fluke. Instead, it is this very 'embodied knowing' that we must be attentive to. He writes that "Before the birth of the modern novel, whenever stories were told, fiction delighted in the unheard-of and the unlikely" (Ghosh, *TGD* 16). In other words, pre-modern fiction thrived on its extraordinary ability to bring to light the inexplicable, be it through magic, myth or even bizarre encounters that seem beyond human control. The 'modern novel', however, conceived under the watchful eye of the Enlightenment and midwived by widely

accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’, has resulted in literary offspring that tends to favour banal ordinary life, normalising the forceful “banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday” (Ghosh, *TGD* 17).

With *THT* and *GI*, Ghosh endeavours to open his reader’s eyes to alternative modes of understanding and communication that stem from what seems to be ‘(ir)rational’ and wildly uncontrollable. As Alessandro Vescovi suggests in his article, ‘The Uncanny and the Secular in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* and *The Hungry Tide*’ (2017), “Although scholars have favoured realistic and postcolonial readings of the novel, ‘uncanny’ is a keyword in *The Hungry Tide* and *The Great Derangement*, where it serves as a bridge between the rationalistic discourse of the essay and the non-rationalistic appraisal of [the] non-human” (Vescovi 216). What Vescovi hopes to convey here is very similar to my thesis. Humanity must develop the flexibility to adapt our rational ways of thinking in order to accommodate ‘non-rationalistic’ modes of thought and understanding that facilitate our recognition of the Real. Rajender Kaur similarly asserts in “‘Home Is Where the Oracella Are’: Toward a New Paradigm of Transcultural Ecocritical Engagement in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*” (2007), that the novel urges “an embrace of a new kind of transcultural engagement that bridges the local and global, *past and present*, *the scientific and mythic*, and that transcends the caste, class, and religious divides that have hitherto hampered visions of global solidarity” (Kaur 135, my emphasis). Most importantly, it is in the blending of “past and present” and “the scientific and mythic” that the uncanny comes to the forefront as urbanite characters, who are mechanically taught to relish the comforts bestowed by modernity, are forced to address the shockingly unfamiliar, inducing a sense of utter helplessness that eventually produces greater self-awareness and fosters an inclusiveness that embraces the exiled, the inexplicable and the nonhuman.

3.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THT dramatizes the 1977 siege of Morichjhapi, the site of a devastating conflict between Partition refugees from East Pakistan and the Indian government which forcefully resettled these ‘exiles’ to Madhya Pradesh, a landlocked state in central India (Ghosh *THT*, 26). Refusing this dictum, the people resettled themselves on an unoccupied island in the Sundarbans, creating an idealised, utopic society that worked cooperatively to ensure its, albeit short-lived, prosperity. The state, however, retaliated violently killing thousands in its effort to clear the land, as it decreed that the island was safeguarded by Project Tiger, a conservation effort spearheaded by Indira Gandhi in 1973. The refugees find themselves at a crossroads, between finding themselves content and safe within their makeshift homes on Morichjhapi and the reality that they are perceived by the state as homeless aliens trespassing on forbidden land.

These events are conveyed through deceased Nirmal’s diary entries, merging the past and the present in an inescapable way and giving life to the ‘ghostly’ dead. A former urbanite and recently retired school teacher, Nirmal hoped to rekindle his poetic dream and searched for a way to overcome his writer’s block. This remedy arose in the form of Kusum, a refugee who was threatened by the Indian state’s conservation project and later becomes his ‘muse’. Nirmal’s diary and past are uncannily brought into the present when two other urbanite characters coincidentally meet, reminding us of Freud’s first and most prominent theory of the uncanny, that it “leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud 1919,1-2; Freud 1955, 220), as these characters begin to realise how their lives are entwined with a forgotten and buried past. This induces a terrifying fear and uncertainty that also comes into play when events from the past begin to repeat themselves in the present, particularly with the hurricane that occurs not only at the conclusion of *THT*, but again in *GI* as well. As Freud theorises, the “constant recurrence of similar

situations”, “[awakens] an uncanny feeling, which recalls that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams” (Freud 1919, 9-10; Freud 1955, 236-237).

The primary plot of the novel follows Kanai, Nirmal’s nephew and a distinguished translator, who seems to be constantly in search of romantic involvements throughout the text, from his short affair with an Odissi dancer back in the city (Ghosh *THT*, 21) to falling for Piya. He admits that “It was pure desire that had quickened his mind then and he could feel the thrill of it even now – except now that desire was incarnated in the woman who was standing before him” (Ghosh *THT*, 269). A man of words, Kanai thinks of himself as rational, educated and of a standing that is way above the ‘unknowing’ and ‘ignorant’ locals of the Sundarbans. He is compelled to return to the Sundarbans by his aunt, the ever pragmatic and rational Nilima, to read through the documents and diary entries that his uncle, Nirmal, had left behind. It is on this journey that he meets Piya, a cosmopolitan marine biologist, who comes to the Sundarbans to research the river dolphins. The parallel time frames converge when Piya, Kanai and Fokir, Kusum’s now grown son, travel across the Sundarbans in search of dolphins. Their journey, however, uncovers much more than just that, as in their helplessness, the disillusioned and newly enfeebled urbanites begin to recognise and comprehend the Real that modern society has taught them to overlook.

3.2 UNCANNINESS OF THE NATURAL WORLD

The uncanny is prevalent throughout Ghosh’s text and is apparent from very setting of the novel. The mangrove swamplands of the Sundarbans prove to be uncanny even in its natural state of flux, throwing the unsuspecting traveller into moments of helplessness that cause a failure of language which prompts them into reconsidering themselves and their place. As Kanai travels towards the Sundarbans, he reads photocopied pages from Nirmal’s diary on the train, describing the nature of the river and the islands.

The rivers' channels are spread across the land like a fine-mesh net, creating a terrain where the boundaries between land and water are always mutating, always unpredictable. ... At no moment can human beings have any doubt of the terrain's hostility to their presence, of its cunning and resourcefulness, of its determination to destroy or expel them (Ghosh *THT*, 7-8).

We observe the uncanny in how the river takes on a life of its own, thwarting humanity's efforts to regulate it, be it through the construction of dams or breakwaters that attempt to redirect flow and stabilise the rise and fall of the tides. Evidently, "what is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*" (Freud 1919, 4; Freud 1955, 245) in how the natural environment rational human beings assume they have control over topographically through surveys and mapping, in truth is unknowable, unhomely and part of the indecipherable Real.

Analysing the relationship that the refugees have with the hostile and uncanny terrain, Pramod K. Nayar suggests in '*The Postcolonial Uncanny: The Politics of Dispossession in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide*' (2010), that the refugees in the Sundarbans

are "unhomely" not only in the sense that they are "out of place", without a place on the land or in history, but that the land itself is "unhomely", by virtue of being inhospitable ... the islands could never really be "home" because home implies stability, security and freedom from fear. It is in a *sense* of the home and homelessness in the now-land, now-water Sunderbans that the postcolonial uncanny emerges (Nayar 89, Nayar's emphasis).

The unpredictable and volatile landscape of the islands thwarts immediate recognition and is symbolic of the 'double perception' of a place as simultaneously *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. As Nayar elaborates, "The sight of a particular place or event invokes uncanny dread because the perceiver hesitates to classify, define and identity the ambiguity in the place or event" (Nayar 89).

In other words, the ‘intellectual uncertainty’ induced by a lack rational knowability stimulates a *sense* of the uncanny. The rational being’s immediate and spontaneous, and yet ironically trained, response to this helplessness is to regulate, explain and justify what is beyond their control. Nayar elaborates this by writing that “What Kanai and Piya *see*, without insight or deeper knowledge, in the land is uncanny” (Nayar 115, Nayar’s italics). What we discover through the novel, however, is that conventional sight and attempts at rationalisation are rather fruitless. In truth, it is the locals who are best at adapting to the uncanny landscape simply because they understand that the Real cannot be regulated.

Nayar contrasts widely accepted rational and scientific ‘realities’ with a more holistic embodied kind of knowledge by coining the term ‘indigenous canny’. To him in *THT*, “the uncanny results from the contest (and defeat) of the Westernized-technologized gaze of Kanai-Piya with/by Fokir’s indigenous canny ... [which] is driven by the local, folkloric, mystical and ungraspable forms of knowing” (Nayar 91). In other words, the rational and masculine gaze so familiar to modern man must be questioned and defamiliarized in order to facilitate the development of an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* which allows these obstinately rational urbanites to see the Real with new and distanced eyes. We are reminded of Morton’s thoughts regarding environmental theory which is currently too “affirmative, extraverted, and masculine”. Instead, we must consider he says: “Where [this leaves] negativity, introversion, femininity, writing, mediation, ambiguity, darkness, irony, fragmentation, and sickness?” (Morton 16). It is exactly this that Ghosh addresses in his novels. Laura A. White rightly argues in “Novel Vision: Seeing the Sunderbans through Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*” (2013), that “Ghosh illustrates that nonvisual ways of knowing can illuminate blind spots created by the dominance of overseeing” (White 522). Conventional sight, looking too closely and dissecting or scrutinising an

entity, be it human or nonhuman, can paradoxically distance us from ever recognising the Real aspects of its existence. In support of her claim, she quotes Ghosh's reply to an interview question, where he says that "people can achieve deep insights through other forms of knowing, through forms of knowing that we wouldn't even recognize. And I think in fact the novel is one of those forms of knowing" (White 514).

3.3 OTHER FORMS OF KNOWING: DEVELOPING AN *ECOLOGICALLY-MINDED STRAIN OF REASON*

An incident at the very beginning of the novel which emphasises the uncanny nature of the Sundarbans and the need for other 'forms of knowing', is when Piya first meets Kusum's now grown son, Fokir, although she is unaware of their familial relationship at the time. After obtaining permission from the Forest Department to embark on her river dolphin survey, thanks to a well-connected uncle, Piya finds herself on a government-sanctioned speedboat accompanied by the boat-owner and an armed Forest Department guard. She spots a fisherman some distance away who turns out to be Fokir, along with his young son, Tutul. Unfortunately, Fokir had been fishing in a "off-limits area" and this excites the guard and the boat-owner who begin to chase after the rowboat with a "predatory look" (Ghosh *THT*, 43) in their eyes. The crucial moment that stems from this confrontation is when Piya decides to reject the government's 'supervision' in favour of travelling with Fokir, whom she assumes is a "[source] of good tips and useful information" (Ghosh *THT*, 43). This proves true, as after showing Fokir the pictures of the dolphins, she finds that despite their language gap, she can communicate with him by *sensing* his responses through gestures and an effortless emotional sensitivity. Describing their interaction, Ghosh writes that "There was consideration in this gesture, an acknowledgement of her presence, that touched her: it seemed like the first normal human contact she had had since stepping on the launch. Despite

the strangeness of the circumstances, she was eager to see his response to the pictures” (Ghosh *THT*, 47). Readers realise from their very first encounter, the mingling of familiarity and strangeness which adds an element of the uncanny that enriches the budding, yet unspoken, romance between Piya and Fokir as she finds him comforting despite them having only just met. This same uncanniness recurs at the very end of the novel, when the pair are trapped within a hurricane and Fokir willingly sacrifices himself to save Piya, in what can be assumed is a recognition and silent exhibition of his love.

Piya’s trust in Fokir is cemented during this first exchange, when Piya precariously crosses between the speedboat and Fokir’s rowboat. The guard who comes “barrelling across the deck” tips her forward and “[s]uddenly, she was falling and the muddy brown water was rushing up to meet her” (Ghosh *THT*, 48). The fact that Ghosh takes a moment to emphasise the consistency of the water as ‘muddy’, suggests the importance of recognising the water’s ambiguous and hence, uncanny, state as part-land/part-water. As Rod Giblett suggests in his book *Environmental Humanities and the Uncanny* (2019), “The uncanny for Freud is a feeling or state of fascination and horror evoked by the ‘dark continent,’ whether it be of female sexuality, of the slums or the swamp, or its monstrous creatures, such as alligators or crocodiles” (Giblett 35). Giblett elaborates that it is in the swamps that we observe the slimy, muddy and unfamiliar concoction of water and sand which induces a *sense* of the uncanny that is clearly observable in *THT*. Remarkably, Fokir even saves Piya from being dragged into the uncanny waters by a crocodile which again emphasises not only the uncanniness of the terrain but of the monstrous creatures that have adapted to live and hunt both on land and water.

Piya is completely helpless as she tumbles, because the darkened muddy waters limit her movement and cut off her direct visual sense of the familiar world. She is thrown into a strangeness

that she cannot comprehend with conventional sight. Ghosh writes that,

It was the disorientation caused by the peculiar conditions of light in the silted water that made her panic. ... In her head there was a smell, or rather, a metallic savour she knew to be, not blood, but inhaled mud. ... Suddenly her head broke free and there was a lightness on her skin that she knew to be the touch of air (Ghosh *THT*, 54-55).

Evidently, it is only when she is yanked out of the water by Fokir that she feels ‘light’ once again. The double play on the word ‘lightness’ suggest firstly, the comprehensible brightness of the familiar after facing the ‘darkened world’ of the uncanny mud, and secondly, the relieving of her emotional and physical helplessness (or in other words, the regaining of her rational control) after being rescued. It highlights the uncertainty and ambiguity of the uncanny terrain and the urbanite’s intuitive response to this defamiliarizing strangeness.

Nayar also points out in his article the uncanniness of smell. He quotes Royle, who argues that smell “can in a split-second drop us out of the erstwhile familiarity of our present into the strange, painful and/or pleasurable, impossible country of the past” (Royle 140). This is distinctly observable at multiple moments of *THT* as it is after this incident that Piya becomes increasingly attuned to certain odours. It is the smell of the mud that completely overwhelms her, forcing her to take a step back to reconsider her assumed place as a superior being in control of her external world. It is from this point, I argue, that Piya begins to *sense* and see the Sundarbans and Fokir in a new light, bringing to light the Real that she had overlooked as a urbanite who has been taught to exert her control over the exploitable and mappable ecosphere. Nayar rightly points out that “another crucial sign of the uncanny” is when Piya picks up a “chequered cloth” on the boat. It had “stirred a faint sense of recognition but she could not recall where” (Ghosh *THT*, 85), that is until she recollects that her father had worn a similar ‘*gamchha*’ (Ghosh *THT*, 93) at home. Piya’s

childhood memories begin to resurface, merging her present experience with memories of the past. Nayar fails to pick out, however, the fact that Piya also begins to become acutely attuned to the smell of Fokir's sweat. Soon after Piya's initial recognition, Ghosh writes: "These lengths of cloth served many purposes, she knew, and when she put it to her nose she had the impression that she could smell along with the tartness of the sun and the metallic muddiness of the river, the salty scent of his sweat" (Ghosh *THT*, 86). Piya begins to take note of Fokir's particular scent at multiple moments of the texts, most emphatically at the moment of his martyrdom. I will return to this later in the chapter with an analysis of the *romantic uncanny*.

This same resurfacing of buried memory through smell occurs just a little later, when Fokir begins to prepare an evening meal on the boat. The smell of the Indian cooking spices was

harsh on her nose ... And yet, even as she recoiled from the smell, she could not tear her eyes from his flying fingers: it was as though she were a child again ... They were almost lost to her, those images of the past, and nowhere had she less expected to see them than on this boat. ... And then suddenly the phantoms came alive again, clawing at her throat and her eyes, attacking her as though she were an enemy who had crossed over undetected (Ghosh *THT*, 96-97).

The ghostly 'phantoms' that return to haunt Piya almost have a life of their own as she is helpless against their assault on her memory. She becomes an alien onto herself, an unrecognizable and unwelcomed 'enemy', infringing on what she assumed was familiar. These smells introduce Piya to the world of embodied knowledge and a more holistic *ecologically-minded strain of reason*, as she begins to understand that there are other ways of knowing, relating to and understanding the external world.

Another instance which the uncanny is used as a tool to re-educate and transform isolated

urbanite characters, is when Fokir and Kanai visit the island of Garjontola. Up till this point, Kanai had been dismissive of the local people's deep knowledge and connection to the Sundarbans as well as jealous of the seemingly romantic entanglement that Piya and Fokir had developed. He openly denigrates Fokir and believes him to be of a lower class and hence unworthy of Piya. However, when the pair find themselves on the island, roles are flipped as "from the respectful *apni* that [Fokir] had been using before, he had now switched to the same familiar *tui* Kanai had used in addressing him: it was as though in stepping onto the island, the authority of their positions had been reversed" (Ghosh *THT*, 325). Fokir's local knowledge of the land and its threats now take precedence, while Kanai's rationality ironically puts him in harm's way as it dulls his body's intrinsic ability to recognise fear. Fokir attempts to convey this fear by taking Kanai's hand and placing it on the back of his own neck, now bristling with "goosebumps" (Ghosh *THT*, 322), to convey his own involuntary and embodied response to seeing the tiger's footprint in the mud.

Despite this, however, the rational and secular Kanai is not ready to accept Fokir's warning. Angered, Kanai screams for Fokir to depart and is left deserted on the island, where he alone experiences the natural uncanny of the jungle. He envisions the uncanny earth "come alive ... reaching for his ankle" (Ghosh *THT*, 325) and soon is "swamped by a flood of pure sensation" (329) that causes him to lose his mastery over language and logic to the point that "it was as if his mind, in its panic, had emptied itself of language" (329). As Jana María Giles argues in "Can the Sublime Be Postcolonial? Aesthetics, Politics, and Environment in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*" (2014), "Language, far from being the conduit to pure reason, instead impedes understanding and must be supplemented through other means" (Giles 232). In other words, an embodied knowledge or *ecologically-minded strain of reason* that includes not only the *senses*, but myth, stories and the ghostly past, aims to reconstruct the limited rationality that humanity has

mechanically internalised.

For Kanai, it is as though the myths and legends that he had been taught in his youth have uncannily come alive, haunting him with their ghostly presence. As Nayar suggests, the “the myths of the place teach the metropolitan human the inadequacy of knowledge, while at the same time proposing an alternative belief system” (Nayar 100). It is exactly this alternative strain of thought, that these stalwart urbanites must develop in order to reconceive the overlooked Real. It is also here, like in *Animal’s People*, that Morton’s notion of the uncanny comes into play, as nature “rises up to judge, monitor, and discipline” (Morton 81) Kanai for his blinkered rationality. Kanai finally begins to understand how his secular and human-centred cosmopolitanism misleadingly isolates him from the nonhuman. This uncanny encounter does prove effective as Kanai willingly gives up his romantic infatuation with Piya and instead decides to reintegrate his isolated and rational self by publishing the stories and myths in Nirmal’s diary in the hope of disseminating the *ecologically-minded strain of reason* he has learned to others.

3.4 THE ROMANTIC UNCANNY: NIRMAL/KUSUM & FOKIR/PIYA

The parallel time frames between the Nirmal’s past and the present converge most distinctly when Piya, Kanai and Fokir debate over the sanctity of human life over that of a tiger. During their travel across the Sundarbans, they coincidentally come across an enraged village mob that had just trapped a tiger for killing their livestock. While Piya is horrified at the bloody massacre of the tiger, Fokir joins in the murderous fray helping to put down the ‘precious’ threatened animal. Fokir, with whom Piya thought she had a connection with because of their shared appreciation of the dolphins, is utterly confused and disillusioned by his ‘betrayal’. Kanai, however, explains, “But what did you expect, Piya? ... Did you think he was some kind of grass-roots ecologist? He’s not. He’s a fisherman - he kills animals for a living” (Ghosh *THT*, 297).

Rajender Kaur suggests that “for Fokir, a spiritual relationship with the environment goes hand in hand with the battle to survive, even if it means killing an animal which might be on the endangered species list of the World Wildlife Fund” (Kaur 131). In other words, we must consider different variations of hunger: the tiger’s hunger to survive, the villager’s hunger to remain alive and even Piya’s hunger to preserve the species she thinks are threatened. Conflicting ‘hungers’ only further threaten the land and the nonhuman as selfish and isolated desires do not allow for a holistic and comprehensible web that may promise symbiosis. At this point, Piya’s rationality still does not allow her to see what the tiger truly represents for the natives. With her isolated, outsider’s perspective she cannot grasp her own complicity in attempting to protect these man-eating animals without considering the number of people who are attacked and thus hunger to defend themselves. Through this experience, she eventually comes to recognise how her myopic views only serve to create deeper differences of value between the villager and the protected tiger. She eventually experiences a transformation that merges her hunger to save threatened species with that of the villagers’ hunger for a livelihood when she later returns to the Sundarbans at the end of the novel to set up a collaborative research fund with Nilima’s charity. As Giles reiterates, “Symbiosis enabled by mutual understanding brought about by sympathetic witnessing and cognition that draws on both rational science and embodied understanding thus seems to be the novel’s proposed solution to these interlaced political and environmental problems” (Giles 238).

The *romantic uncanny* comes into play during this confrontation as Piya’s infatuation with Fokir’s seamless connection to the river and his natural prowess are rudely dispelled. Piya’s first instinct when seeing the trapped tiger, is to believe that Fokir will defend it. “If you’re not going to do anything about this, then I will. And Fokir will – I know he will. Where is he?” she says furiously to Kanai. However, when she finally catches a glimpse of Fokir, he “was in the front

ranks of the crowd, helping a man sharpen a bamboo pole” (Ghosh *THT*, 294). It is at this moment of intimate understanding that strangeness comes to the forefront. Piya’s time alone with Fokir allowed her to imaginatively create a romanticised version of him that she assumed was familiar. However, rather ironically, it is only when she comes closer and nearer to the reality of who he truly is that she discovers that there is “nothing in common between” (Ghosh *THT*, 296) them. Maurice Blanchot describes this type of nearness as a proximity that retains its unknownness because one does not have the distance to see it, producing a feeling of strangeness. “It is so close” she argues, in *The Infinite Conversation* (1993), “that we are prohibited from taking any distance from it – it is foreign in its very proximity” (Blanchot 45). The *romantic uncanny*, hence, forces Piya to recognise how her infatuation with an idealised image of Fokir has blinded her to Real life in the south.

We also observe the uncanny recurrence of similar situations within the various romantic entanglements in the novel, particularly between Kusum/Horen and Piya/Fokir. The romance between Kusum/Horen is conveyed through Nirmal’s diary entries although the latter is not quite aware of what he sees. It is only in the present, when an older Horen, who had been a fisherman infatuated with Kusum from his youth, relates his experience with a similar hurricane that occurred during the conflict with the refugees on Morichjhapi in 1977 to a disgruntled and lovesick Kanai, that readers begin to realise the extent of the concealed love between Kusum/Horen. The increasing frequency of hurricane activity in the Sundarbans is in itself uncanny as Ghosh writes in *TGT*, “They are the mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms” (Ghosh *TGT*, 32). Nearing the end of the novel, Piya and Fokir are caught in yet another uncanny hurricane after Kanai departs from the expedition following his joltingly uncanny experience on Garjontola. Kanai still feels concern for Piya despite having given up his desire for

her and demands that Horen go in search of them. Horen, however, tells Kanai:

‘Maybe he (Fokir) doesn’t want to come back tonight.’ Horen looked in full in the eyes and his face creased into a slow, wide smile. ... ‘Kanai-babu,’ he said, ‘you’ve seen so many places and done so many things. Do you mean to tell me you don’t understand what it is for a man to be in love?’ ...

Kanai bridled at this. ‘Why should you say that, Horen-da? And why should I believe any such thing?’

‘Because you wouldn’t be the first,’ Horen said quietly. It was the same with your uncle (Nirmal), you know. ... I knew he was wooing her (Kusum) with his stories and tales – I had nothing to give her but my presence, but in the end it was me she chose’ (Ghosh *THT*, 362-363).

Readers realise at this moment that Kusum and Horen had consummated their relationship during the conflict on Morichjhapi unbeknownst to the oblivious Nirmal, who wrote in his diary: “I can hear their footsteps approaching, they seem, strangely, to be laughing as they come” (Ghosh *THT*, 277-278). What Nirmal doesn’t realise, however, is that Kusum, who he assumed had been leaving out of respect for his ability to write and record the conflict and the ghostly victims in his journal, in fact had been leading Horen away for a different and far more intimate purpose. She had said to Horen, “*Come, let’s go down to your boat. Let’s leave Saar alone*” (Ghosh *THT*, 248, Ghosh’s italics). What readers realise is that Kusum had decided to show her love for Horen during her last moments on the island, knowing full well that her life would be at risk by the ruthless government officials who would tear apart the island and everyone on it within the next few days. She tells Horen to take her son to safety but stays to protect the home that she built on Morichjhapi. Through Horen’s retelling, however, her ghostly presence comes to life and is sensed throughout the novel.

She even appears in Fokir's dreams, drawing him to return to her in the afterlife (Ghosh *THT*, 308; 319).

An uncannily similar sacrifice recurs at the end of the novel, when Fokir and Piya are trapped on Garjontola as a hurricane makes landfall. Rather than using romance to entice and draw readers further into the text, Ghosh rejects any familiar Hollywood-type consummation of their relationship and instead uses Fokir's untimely death to secure and cement Piya's transformation. Even the methods used to survive the hurricane are repeated from the past. Nirmal writes about Kusum's father (Fokir's grandfather) who had also been caught in storm before she was born, but survived: "*The wind raged like a fiend and tore apart his boat; his hands fell on a log and somehow he stayed afloat. Swept by the current, he came to Garjontola; climbing a tree, he tied himself with his gamchha. Attached to the trunk, he held on against the gale, will suddenly the wind stopped and a silence fell*" (Ghosh *THT*, 233, Ghosh's italics). Even Horen tells Kanai: "Look. It won't be easy, but Fokir knows what to do. If anyone has a chance, he does; his grandfather is said to have survived a terrible storm on Garjontola" (Ghosh *THT*, 368). Fokir echoes his grandfather's highly logical and intelligent actions to protect Piya during the storm, as after they had climbed up a tree, he had "made a sign to ask her for the rolled-up sari tied around her waist. She saw now that it was for – he was going to use it to tie them both to the tree trunk" (Ghosh *THT*, 378). By positing Piya against the tree trunk, Fokir sacrifices his exposed back to the violent winds and eventually succumbs to his injuries. Piya, nonetheless, recognises in this moment the unspoken love between them. She understands that "it was as if the storm has given them what life could not; it had fused them together and made them one" (Ghosh *THT*, 390). "She remembered how she had tried to find the words to remind him of how richly he was loved – and one again, as so often before, he had seemed to understand her, even without words" (Ghosh *THT*, 393). The recurrence of the hurricane

that is paralleled with Fokir's sacrifice induces the *romantic uncanny* as Piya begins to recognise her insignificance within the ecosphere she was taught to assume that she could pre-empt, map and understand. Ghosh writes that "Piya's mind went blank as disbelief yielded to recognition. ... Her fingers went numb in fear, and she would have lost her hold on the tree, if Fokir hadn't taken her hands in his own and held them against the trunk" (Ghosh *THT*, 383). It is the love in Fokir's sacrifice and her utter helplessness against the uncanny hurricane that prompts her to change her lifestyle and return to the Sundarbans to ensure that Fokir's sacrifice would not be in vain.

It is also at this critical moment that readers are reminded of Piya's unique attraction to Fokir's scent, as she notices that "Everywhere their bodies met, their skin was joined by a thin membrane of sweat" (Ghosh *THT*, 383). It is Fokir's scent that cements her love for him as it forcefully draws her mind to all the other times when she had admired Fokir's natural prowess, for instance, his "salty, sun-soaked smell" (Ghosh *THT*, 111) when he lay down next to her to sleep on their first night on the boat or when "again she found herself soaking in the salty smell of his skin" (Ghosh *THT*, 151) when he had yet again prevented her from falling into the thick mud when they visited a shine on Garjontola. As Royle theorises, smell does play an important part in defamiliarizing us from what we think is familiar. Piya begins to see with new eyes and is finally able to recognise the beauty of the ecological world about her, as she develops an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* through her experience and affection for Fokir. The *romantic uncanny* hence plays an incredible role in opening these obstinate urbanites to the Real around them. The *romantic uncanny* even induces a similar change in Kanai, as he tells Nilima that although he had lost Nirmal's diary in the chaos of the hurricane, "A lot if it is still in my head ... I'm going to try to put it back together" (Ghosh *THT*, 387). Nayar comments that this act "returns the repressed to the surface, a moment of rupture and violence in postcolonial history that will emerge from

silences” (Nayar 113). In other words, Kanai’s willingness to tell the stories and bring to life the silenced ghosts that his rational self was initially averse to highlights his transformation and newly found desire to ‘bring to light’ the Real that humanity has buried away.

Nayar also adds that “The uncanny plays itself out and demands of the Kanais and Piyas a radical displacement of their forms of seeing and knowing” (Nayar 115). Like Plumwood, Ghosh yearns for humanity to develop an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* that incorporates both embodied, emotive forms of knowledge alongside modern, rational and technological forms of knowing. We observe this coalition particularly in the aftermath of Fokir’s death, as the GPS system that Piya had been using to track the locations of the dolphins that Fokir had pointed out had been saved. Fokir’s ghost and his embodied knowledge come alive in the modern technology that preserves him. We observe an uncanny mixing of the “‘non-sense’ of Fokir’s mystic knowledge born of folklore and native intelligence and the ‘hard’ data (texts) of the computer” (Nayar 114), thereby bringing together the familiar and unfamiliar, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. As Ghosh reiterates in *TGT*: “In these stories a great deal hinges on the eyes; seeing is one of their central themes; not seeing is another” (Ghosh *TGT*, 29).

We must hence acquire new eyes and an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* in order not only to observe but recognise and understand the confluence between the inexplicable ‘non-sense’ of the natural world and the technological modern world. I will discuss this blending further in Ghosh’s sequel to *THT* in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Coming Full Circle in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

Fourteen years after his first publication of *THT*, Ghosh released a sequel to the novel, titled *Gun Island*, which follows not only an older Piya and now-grown Tutul (Fokir's son), but also an array of new characters which are carefully designed to bring across to readers Ghosh's ideas of the uncanny and the precarious state of our environment. While there are many literary reviews of the novel, academics have yet to analyse the novel in depth, to understand how Ghosh's views and writing have morphed and intensified over time. My thesis will now not only compare both these novels to observe how the major characters have aged and developed, but to analyse how Ghosh's ideas of the uncanny have changed, particularly with his added reliance on the *romantic uncanny* to cement his urbanite character's transformations into beings with an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* who can recognise the Real around them.

4.1 INTRODUCING THE NOVEL

The novel begins with the novel's protagonist, Deen, an antiquarian bookseller in his sixties, recollecting about how his life had been fatefully interspersed with the myth of 'Bondiku Sadagar' (translated as 'the Gun Merchant') and how he was drawn into bringing to light the buried past. As Ghosh emphasises throughout the novel, the circumstances that bring Deen to his discovery should not be so swiftly dismissed or rationalised as mere coincidence or chance. Instead, these encounters are nature's way of communicating with a human world that has become increasingly isolated from the Real. As Ghosh suggests in *TGD*, what these encounters suggest is "that non-human forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought ... [and play] a part in shaping our discussion without our being aware of it" (Ghosh *TGD*, 31). Although mythicised by the stories told across generations, in truth, the Gun Merchant was a very real maritime trader in seventeenth century Venice, who dealt in spices and people in places like the Sundarbans. Written in first-

person, Deen relates the bulk of the plot in his own words, unlike in *THT*, where Piya, Kanai and Fokir's experiences are conveyed to readers through an omniscient narrator and chapters that feature alternating viewpoints between the present and the past, in the form of Nirmal's diary entries.

Deen's narration begins with his first introduction to the Gun Merchant through Kanai, who happens to be a distant relation. They meet at a wedding reception and Deen immediately voices his distaste for the kind of man that Kanai has become in his old age. It seems that Kanai's transformation at the end of *THT* does not last, as Deen thinks to himself: "he had always been a glib, vain, precocious know-it-all who relied on his quick tongue and good looks to charm women and get ahead in the world" (Ghosh *GI*, 5). Kanai's return to the city seems to have undone the change he experienced within the uncanny terrain of the Sundarbans, as he once again becomes a blinkered urbanite infatuated by meaningless flings. The sequel does not even indicate if Kanai succeeded in publishing the stories in Nirmal's diary like he promised his aunt, Nilima. Kanai is deliberately condescending towards Deen and even embarrassingly labels him 'Mr Expert' because of his PhD in Bengali folklore, before telling him about a shrine in the Sundarbans dedicated to the legend of Bonduki Sadagar (Ghosh *GI*, 8). Kanai then introduces Deen to Piya, suggesting "Give her a call: I think you'll find it worth your while – Piya's an interesting woman" (Ghosh *GI*, 9).

4.2 THE ROMANTIC UNCANNY: DEEN/PIYA

The *romantic uncanny* is especially noticeable in *GI*, as the reason for Deen's visit to Nilima and the shrine is none other than his hope for a romantic entanglement with Piya. This is very different from the more subtle romance between Piya/Fokir or Kusum/Horen in *THT*. Deen's first interaction with Piya over the phone the next morning "arrested" him and he was "suddenly very

curious about her”. He adds that “the excuses I had planned slipped from my mind” as he immediately makes arrangements to meet Piya and Nilima that very same morning despite his previous engagements as they “suddenly didn’t seem to matter” (Ghosh *GI*, 10-11). Deen even admits that “her smile made [him] reconsider the matter” (Ghosh *GI*, 20) of visiting the shrine. The familiarity that Deen desires by making moves to expediate an attachment with Piya sets up his transformation as he is helplessly pulled into a strangeness that he cannot rationalise with his scientific/academic mind. Piya also invokes the *romantic uncanny* as she brings to life the ghostly presence of Deen’s first love. Just after their first introduction, Deen says: “But then there was something about Piya: there was something about her that reminded me of Durga, my first, long-ago love. ... This frightened me, and added to my confusion” (Ghosh *GI*, 21). We clearly observe the helplessness and fear that Deen experiences as he is forced to ruminate over the traumatic memories of his brutally murdered lover, invoking an unsettling familiar strangeness whenever he looks at Piya and finds her oddly recognisable.

The ‘coincidental’ and inexplicable encounters and repetition of events that Deen experiences begin here, as he visits the shrine after being influenced by Piya’s uncanny familiarity. He is met by Moyna, Fokir’s widow, and their now-grown son, Tutul (who renames himself ‘Tipu’ after attending high school in America). The latter escorts Deen to the shrine on an aged Horen’s boat. Ghosh takes this opportunity to also inform readers of the ecological changes that have affected the Sundarbans due to our current climate crisis. As Sarah Nuttall suggests in her recently published article, “Pluvial Time/Wet Form” (2020),

If Ghosh’s earlier novel probed fictional form from the point of view of earth time, producing an elemental form in which the intricacies of place and ecology supersede the complexity of human character, his new novel—which includes some of the same characters a decade or

so on—figures an exodus of humans and animals from a drowning land (Nuttall 459).

Just like in *Gift In Green*, modern developments that serve greater *national good* in these muddy, watery areas have led to the mass ‘exodus’ of man and creature alike. Deen recollects what Tutul’s mother says in third-person perspective:

Sometimes, said Moyna, it seemed as though both the land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans. When people tried to dig wells, an arsenic-laced brew gushed out of the soil; when they tried to shore up embankments the tides rose higher and pulled them down again. Even fishermen could barely get by (Ghosh *GI*, 53).

What readers observe here is how nature recoils against humanity’s attempt to colonise and exploit the land and its resources to sustain a capitalistic lifestyle built on convenience and the selfish desire for immediate gratification. By poisoning the land and tearing down man-made structures, nature becomes uncanny in its ability to exert control not only over itself, but over humanity as well. It attempts to warn human kind of its imagined superiority over the elements, even if it takes wrecking itself in an act of sacrificial martyrdom. As Ghosh writes in *TGD*, “the complacency and confidence of the emergent bourgeois order appears as yet another of those uncanny instances in which the planet seems to have been toying with humanity, by allowing it to assume that it was free to shape its own destiny” (Ghosh *TGD*, 22). In both *THT* and *GI*, we observe how hurricanes are nature’s final threat, warning humanity to change its ways or face graver and more frequent calamities.

Ghosh also comments on the detrimental effect that tourism has had on the Sundarbans, making Horen a symbol of the difficult choice that fishermen must make to adapt to debilitated ecosystems. The boat that Horen escorts Deen and Tutul on features the banner ‘SUNNY SUNDARBANS TOURS, PROP. HOREN NASKAR’ (Ghosh *GI*, 57), suggesting how tourism

becomes a lifeline for many unfortunate fishermen whose fishing lines can no longer sustain their families. Readers wonder here, what Kusum, Horen's deceased great first love, would have to say about his decision to trade his inherited trade for a tour boat, considering that it was the desire to turn the Sundarbans into a tiger sanctuary, that tourists could possibly visit, that killed her. I wonder if she would understand and sympathise with his choice or be disappointed with his easy acquiescence to the government's and capitalism's desire to exploit, monetise and exoticize the land, thus making it increasingly unfamiliar to the wrongly alienated locals like herself.

Fascinatingly, Ghosh himself experienced a certain inexplicable uncanniness while writing the novel as fictional events that he imagined were repeating themselves and coming to life in the real world around him. JR Ramakrishnan transcribes an interview she had with Ghosh in her article “‘Gun Island’ Is a Surreal Novel About Climate Change and Migration”:

JRR (interviewer): And also perhaps that fiction might have predictive qualities?

Ghosh: It's something even *weirder* than that. It was *uncanny*. Things that were *unimaginable* happen around you. Just the other day, my friend sent me pictures of this massive hailstorm in Venice, which is another scene in the book. Another sent me pictures of tornadoes near Venice, which are very *unusual*. Another friend in Venice wrote to me and said he had to take his son to the hospital because he'd been bitten by a dangerous spider.

It's just *so weird* (Ramakrishnan 2019, emphasis mine).

He even talks about how when writing about forest fires in the novel, he was made aware of the raging California wildfires in 2018. Commenting on the unexplainable in another interview with HuffPost titled “Amitav Ghosh on ‘*Gun Island*’ And How to Make Sense of The World”, Ghosh reflects that

That's what we might call today as uncanny. That's an area that interests me more and

more. If you read writers who are documenting our world today, you will note that we are within that field of the uncanny. You can see the weird spins people put on events, the strange logic they employ, and you also see it in natural phenomena. One example I have cited several times is the scene in the book set in a Los Angeles museum as wildfire is advancing towards it. That actually happened last year during the California Fires but I had already written the scene long before. It's eerie because fact outpaces fiction and we no longer know which is which (Shankar 2019).

4.3 DISABILITY AND THE EXTRAORDINARY

Just like in *THT*, Ghosh also emphasises how the past and present are inseparable in how the events of the seventeenth century are interlinked with the present both in the South and in Venice. This is first observed when Deen visits the Gun Merchant's shrine and realises that the symbols drawn on the stone tell the story of the merchant's past and that this past is unmistakably linked to modern Venice. It is also here that another aspect of the uncanny comes into play as Tutul is bitten by a cobra that had lived in the 'dhaam' for many years. The debilitating seizures that Tutul develops owing to the snake's attack inexplicably grants him the ability to not only see ghosts but have premonitions of the future, very much like how Animal in Sinha's *Animal's People* develops more-than-human capabilities after being poisoned on the night of the Bhopal chemical disaster. "All at once his body began to twitch and shake, making spasmodic little motions, like those of a dreaming animal. ... 'I can't see them, I can only see their shadows and they're coming closer and closer'" (Ghosh *GI*, 88). Freud does suggest that disability contributes to a sense of the uncanny in how a lack of autonomous control over the physical body, exposes the "uncanny effect of epileptic seizures and the manifestations of insanity because these excite in the spectator the feeling that automatic, mechanical processes are at work, concealed beneath the ordinary appearance of

animation” (Freud 1919, 5; Freud 1955, 226). Both mental and physical disabilities can hence be considered vectors of the uncanny which produce in observers the impression of both fascination and fear in what was at first familiar, but quickly becomes strange and unhomely when seizures ravage the body, seizing autonomous control away from the individual.

Readers observe Deen’s inability to wrap his rational mind around the bite and the extraordinary more-than-human abilities it bestows upon Tutul. He convinces himself that his condition is purely scientific and medical: “Yes, of course, I said to myself, that’s all it is – a delirium – which often sets in after a shock. ‘That’s right,’ I said to Horen. ‘He’s talking a lot of rubbish’” (Ghosh *GI*, 90). The *romantic uncanny* overlaps here as well as Rafi, the boy on the island who preserves the shrine and helped to suck out the venom from Tutul’s wound, becomes Tutul’s lover. He seems to be the only one who wholeheartedly believes in Tutul’s more-than-human abilities and is not overly shocked when Tutul tells him that the “real name, given to him by his grandfather was Ilyas – like the character in the story” (Ghosh *GI*, 91). Despite them never having met before, Tutul even says to Rafi, “I feel I know you” (Ghosh *GI*, 87), suggesting a strange *sense* of familiarity, similar to what Piya felt when she first encountered Fokir on his rowboat. Meanwhile, Deen and Horen attempt to rationalise Tutul’s unfathomable knowledge:

‘There’s nothing strange about it,’ I said brusquely. ‘Tipu *must have* overheard us when we were talking about that story this morning. He must have heard us mention the name ‘Ilyas’ so it would have been on his mind. And it’s hardly surprising that Rafi’s grandfather gave him that name, is it, considering that he was the custodian of that shrine?’

‘Yes, of course, that must be it,’ said Horen, sounding rather relieved (Ghosh *GI*, 91).

This is only the first of numerous moments throughout the text, when Tutul is able to provide information beyond the rational human realm while the obstinately rational find ‘reasonable’

explanations for what they cannot comprehend.

Another incident concerns Piya, who receives an anonymous email warning her about an impending dolphin beaching incident. She believes, till the very end, that it must have been a whistle-blower from the refinery upriver (Ghosh *GI*, 196) who had classified knowledge about a chemical waste dump that could drive the dolphins into such a drastic escape from their watery home. Unbeknownst to her, however, the email had been sent by Tutul who, together with Rafi, had chosen to become migrant refugees. They had decided to pay their way West in hope of a better life, especially considering the homosexual nature of their relationship. Rafi and Tutul, unfortunately, are split apart. While Rafi successfully makes his way to Venice and ‘coincidentally’ meets Deen during an onsite construction accident, Tipu is trapped in Egypt but eventually manages to find his way onto a refugee boat headed for Venice.

Like Deen, who initially strictly considers himself a ‘rational, secular, scientifically minded person’ (Ghosh *GI*, 36), as a scientist herself, Piya’s rational mind has not changed much since *THT*. Her obstinate rationality is evermore jarring when juxtaposed against Deen who progressively becomes more willing to accept the uncanny influence of the nonhuman, as he develops an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* and embodied knowledge that facilitates his recognition the seemingly unfamiliar Real that surrounds him. Deen tells Piya that the people who predicted beaching incidents in the past “maybe ... had visions ... like Tupu did yesterday?” (Ghosh *GI*, 109). Piya who has not yet fully recognised the type of ‘embodied knowing’ that Fokir had displayed on multiple occasions during their time in the Sundarbans, immediately casts him a “sharp, scornful glance” and dismisses the incident as pure “coincidence” (Ghosh *GI*, 109). She even says, rather aggressively, ““Well what else could it be, Deen?” she said impatiently. ‘I hope you’re not going to tell me he had a vision, or that the dolphins spoke to him in his sleep or

something like that: that stuff is really not helpful” (Ghosh *GI*, 221). The ‘stuff’ that Piya refers to here so nonchalantly is precisely the embodied ‘irrational’ knowledge that humanity must reconnect itself with in order to transcend the widely accepted rational and scientific ‘reality’ that has closed our minds to recognising the Real. Dylan Trigg explains quite well the dichotomy here, in his book *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (2012). He argues that

We may not go that far, but a habitualized routine certainly suppresses the sensitivity toward our surroundings, both spatial and temporal. In a word, we become overly adjusted to our surroundings, in the process taking for granted the very facticity of those surroundings. At the same time, *being surprised by our surroundings*, especially when that environment was *previously overly familiar*, marks a breakage in our experience of time, such that place itself comes to the foreground (Trigg 7, my emphasis).

This surprise, and resultant helplessness, is exactly what the uncanny induces in Deen, facilitating his recognition of the Real around him. Deen realises, as he begins to see the world with new eyes, that

It would seem that the intellectual titans of the Enlightenment had no inkling of what was getting under way. Yet, strangely, all around the earth, ordinary people appear to have sensed the stirring of something important (Ghosh *GI*, 137).

It was as if some living thing had entered my body, something ancient that had long lain dormant in the mud. ... it was memory itself, except that it was not my own; it was much older than me, some submerged aspect of time that had been brought suddenly to life when I entered that shrine (Ghosh *GI*, 113).

Deen’s transformation, however, does not occur independently. Ghosh introduces to readers Cinta, an Italian professor whose academic knowledge allows for a belief in precognition and even

ghostly. To me, it seems that Cinta may serve as the true protagonist of *Gun Island*, as she stands for all the values that Ghosh endeavours to inculcate in Deen and Piya. She is the catalyst who also urges Deen to visit Venice, thus allowing him to realise for himself the Real connections that the myth of the Gun Merchant has in present day Venice. Deen even begins to see visions of the Gun Merchant as he wanders around the same streets that the merchant would have in the seventeenth century: “Warmed by the sun I began to daydream and suddenly the Gun Merchant seemed to appear before my eyes, tall, broad-shouldered, with a yellow turban, walking unhurriedly past on some errand. He glanced at me as he went by and his eyes were clear and untroubled” (Ghosh *GI*, 166). It is through this recognition of the uncanny overlapping of the present and the past that Deen develops an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* and begins to appreciate what he had been blind to for so long.

4.4 UNCANNY REPETITIONS AND INEXPLICABLE ‘COINCIDENCES’

The uncanny repetition of events occurs once again at the very end of the novel, when the rescue group, which includes Piya, Rafi and Cinta, are caught in a tornado as they try to make their way to Tutul on the ‘Blue Boat’. It is recognising the uncanniness of the sudden and unusual tornado that facilitates Deen’s realisation that “It was as if a voice were crying out from the past to remind the world that the limits of human reason and ability become apparent not in the long, slow duration of everyday time, but in the swift and terrible onslaught of fleeting instants of catastrophe” (Ghosh *GI*, 244). He realises finally this is one of the means in which the nonhuman has been trying to commune with humanity in order to warn them about the dangers of adhering to a blinkered rationality.

The traumatic fear that the hurricane induces in Piya proves overwhelming as it reminds of the tornado killed Fokir:

“Oh my God!” cried Piya. “It’s a tornado”

The fear in her voice startled me ... But then she did something even more unexpected: taking hold of my lapels she buried her face in my chest. Almost unconsciously I put an arm around her and hugged her closer (Ghosh *GI*, 272).

Although Piya finds it challenging to accept Deen’s newfound predilection for the uncanny, perhaps it is Deen’s very strangeness, his lack of familiarity, that Piya finds comfort in, again suggesting the notion of the *romantic uncanny*. Deen also experiences yet another moment of uncanny repetition as he once again envisions seeing the Gun Merchant’s ghostly presence when a tree had been knocked over by the hurricane and obstructed their van’s way forward. “A dimly visible figure had materialised out of the dust cloud like some unearthly apparition ... We saw now that it was a man, dressed in a flowing yellow robe; around his head was something that looked like an ochre-coloured turban; his face was brown” (Ghosh *GI*, 273). It is this ghostly presence, that only those who have developed an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* can perceive, that directs them along an alternative route, protecting and “looking after” (Ghosh *GI*, 274) them, as Cinta suggests. Even on the boat that the rescue team embarks to meet the ‘Blue Boat’ on the Venetian coast do uncanny repetitions occur, as both Rafi and Deen begin to see similarities between the merchant’s story and their own. Deen says, “It struck me now that the resemblances were not incidental ... Then as now, trafficking in human beings had been an immensely lucrative form of commerce” (Ghosh *GI*, 303). Rafi even says to Deen:

‘Remember what happened when the Merchant was trying to escape from Venice?’ he said.

‘You mean when his ship was attacked by pirates?’

‘Yes. It could have happened right here, couldn’t it?’ (Ghosh *GI*, 299).

Deen realises that through his attempts to bring the truth of the Gun Merchant’s myth to light, he

has been uncannily reliving and re-experiencing events of the past without even being fully aware of it. His willingness to allow the uncanny to influence his life has brought him great fulfilment, as finally, at the end of the novel, Piya invites him to stay with her. Deen's desire for companionship finally finds its resolution as he admits that "It was a struggle not to betray the joy that was building inside me" (Ghosh *GI*, 294). It is at this moment, when the *romantic uncanny* is fulfilled that Deen's transformation is complete: "I fell silent, overtaken by an overwhelming feeling of gratitude – towards the Gun Merchant, to his story, to Manasa Devi, and even to that king cobra: it was as if they had broken a spell of bewitchment and set me free" (Ghosh *GI*, 294).

Inexplicable uncanny 'coincidences' also occur on the boat as amazingly, not only are there hundreds of dolphins, but birds and even Bioluminescence in the water that escort and seemingly protect the boat. It is Rafi, endowed with the same embodied and local knowledge that Fokir had, who "was responsible for the first sighting" (Ghosh *GI*, 283) of the dolphins. Not only are there more species of dolphins in a single location than ever recorded before, but as a passenger comments, "they all seem to be travelling in the same direction as us! Is it strange, no?". Piya, nevertheless, is resolute in her faith to widely accepted rational and scientific 'realities', saying "It depends on what you mean by normal ... It changes from season to season" (Ghosh *GI*, 288). It is only later when the birds join the fray that Piya begins to falter:

'Birds,' she said. 'They're birds – hundreds of thousands of them. No. Millions. They *must be* migrating northwards – they're going to pass right over us.'

Rafi too had appeared beside us now. Gazing at the sky he said: 'It's just as it says in the story – the creatures of the sky and sea are rising up ...' (Ghosh *GI*, 306, italics mine).

We again see here the same diction, 'must be', that Deen once used to convince himself of the scientific reasons behind Tutul's visions. As we know, this type excuse which does not actually

seem rational in any way, is what led Deen to his transformation as he realises that not everything can be explained. Even Piya begins to doubt herself by saying: “I really don’t know. All I can say is that I’m grateful that it happened the way it did” (Ghosh *GI*, 310). Like Deen who also felt an immense gratefulness, Piya seems to have finally acknowledged the power of the forces that she had initially dismissed as merely chance or coincidence. This invariably alters the way she will perceive future incidents with her new set of eyes and cements her transformation into a being with a more *ecologically-minded strain of reason* as she begins a new life with Deen.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Modern man has undoubtedly become increasingly isolated from the Real around them because they have been deluded by an imagined ‘reality’ that generations of profit-minded individuals have blindly internalised. I argue that the uncanny serves as an instrument that facilitates a breaking away from the widely accepted rational and scientific ‘realities’ popularised by the Enlightenment and capitalistic desires. Instead, we must transcend these ideas to develop an *ecologically-minded strain of reason* that is more tolerant of an embodied kind of knowledge which promises the construction of a more compassionate and sustainably symbiotic relationship with the Real and thus allowing humanity to recognise the truth of its dependence on the ecological nonhuman world.

This thesis investigates how the uncanny facilitates a return to the Real truths of the ecological world and to an affective and authentic self, by forcing individuals to recognise the falsity of their imagined sense of ‘reality’. This process of homecoming is evident in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2007) and Amitav Ghosh’s novels, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019). The novels promise a reconnection to the wider nonhuman ecosphere, through the development of an *ecologically-minded strain of reason*, which endeavours to surmount humanity’s increasingly ubiquitous sense of loneliness, thus furthering our recognition of place and purpose. I also suggest that romance is a literary tool that not only seizes the reader’s attention but that, as an extension of the uncanny, the *romantic uncanny* demonstrates how isolated urbanites are simply lonely souls seeking lost connections to the Real.

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