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Human/Non-human Interface and the Affective Uncanny in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract
Postcolonial fiction depicting transnational human mobility across landscapes and cultural spaces often represents the variable "structure of feeling" in a human being with continuous 'de-' and 're-territorialization' (Grossberg 313) from the familiar space to the unfamiliar. Experiences of lived realities and relationships alter with time and space, simultaneously affecting human understanding of logic and thereby leaving a scope to interpret newer experiences on multiple levels such as the mysterious, uncanny, or the exotic. It is not just the fictional character/s in literary narratives but also the reader/s who feel affected by the relationality between the rational and the mysterious as emotional affect "arises in the midst of in-between-ness" (Seigworth and Gregg 1). The epistemic lens of affect theory has been used in this essay to explore the human/non-human relationships in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019). I would show how, in Ghosh's narrative, the human/non-human interface has been perceived by inventories of belonging and migration, and often represented with an interplay of the corporeal and the uncanny, mainly aiming at emotional affect sandwiched between anxiety and hope— both conditions of postcoloniality and ecological engagement. The representation of the human/non-human relationships in literary narratives depends heavily on imaginative correspondence, where the affective exceptional may find its easy place. Examining several episodes in the novel, I would discuss how the corporeality of a snake, spider, shipworm, or even a wildfire affects the incorporeal cognitive dimensions like trauma or anxiety in Dinanath— the central character, and reshapes his "structure of feeling."

Keywords
human/non-human interface, affect, uncanny, corporeal, sensorial

Introduction

One of the exclusive twenty-first-century cultural phenomena is the ever-increasing use of digital and computational technology and devices, where space for the imaginative and the emotional requires, quite naturally, a new reconfiguration. The visible emergence of the interdisciplinary research network of affect studies in the last two decades can be seen as a part of this process of cultural reconfiguration. While the application of digital and computational technology demonstrates the *relatedness* of corporeal organic matters with logical and mathematical precision, the critical lens of Affect theory "*accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness" (Seigworth and Gregg 2). In the 'Introduction' to *The Affect*

Theory Reader, entitled "An Inventory of Shimmers", Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg find Affect as "synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*," which "is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*" dealing emotionally with both the "ordinary and its extra-" (2; emphases original). If one reads the word "ordinary" as the corporeal and "its extra-" as the sensorial, affect could be located as non-representational accumulation/s of emotion in the "in-between" space. The interplay of different emotions in everyday life and also in exceptional situations, affects the behavioral pattern of human beings and their relationship with the non-human in diverse ways without any particular concern for maintaining the relationality between the rational and the mysterious, between the familiar and the unintelligible. However, affective relations with the landscape and the non-human entities of the planet are not simply cultural, but "always political for they scale humanity to the world, draw us intimately to place and time and change so that we might sense our own vulnerability as susceptible parts of the greater whole" (Berberich, Campbell and Hudson 16).

In an interview with Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, the eminent cultural sociologist Lawrence Grossberg contextualizes his notion of 'affect': "Everyday life is not simply the material relationships; it is *a structure of feeling*, and that is where I want to locate affect" (313; my emphasis). Grossberg's idea of "a structure of feeling" includes all of the available varieties of "material, social, economic, cultural practices that form the relationality" of human existence— in sum, "a whole way of life" (313). To Grossberg, affect could be located within the continuous interplay of "de-territorialization" and a simultaneous "re-territorialization" of emotion, as emotion "is the ideological attempt to make sense of some affective productions" (316). Grossberg's idea of the affective uncanny is not rooted in the Nietzschean or the Deleuzian space of affect, neither reflects Brian Massumi's propositions which are essentially ontological by nature, but could well find a relation with the empirical psychoanalytic space one may notice in Freud's earlier writings and in his idea of the uncanny. The affective uncanny works outside the normative and the lived experiences of the individual human being, may s/he be a fictional character or the reader of the narrative. Experiences of lived realities and relationships alter with time and space, simultaneously affecting the human understanding of logic and ideology and thereby leaving scope to interpret newer experiences on multiple levels of meaning such as the mysterious, uncanny, or the exotic. For example, a rationalist may feel an emotional "de-territorialization" while looking at some paintings of a mermaid or a snake-goddess, as such creatures fall outside the usual range of normative

familiarity or scientific explanation. But simultaneously, if the rationalist does not rule out the idea of the marvelous or the supra-corporeal as non-existent *in principle*, s/he may feel emotionally re-territorialized. A sense of marvel obliquely connects someone with alternative values and ideas, thereby producing affect. However, to consider the workings of affect in "a whole way of life," amid all diverse relationality of human existence, one should be inclusive and tolerant to alternative versions of experience even beyond the corporeal.

While exploring the relationship of human emotions and feelings with literary narratives, Sara Ahmed, in her volume entitled *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, observes that literary texts have an innate emotionality to affect the reader and even the society at large. The element of emotionality in literary narratives works at the contact zone between the individual (the author/ the reader/ or even the character) and the social, as ideologically charged expressions and figures of speech (like metaphors or metonymies) in the narrative make the plot moving by generating affect. By ideologically charged expressions, one should consider not only the organization of subjects for producing emotional affect, but also a kind of inclusive passion for the diverse relationality of human existence affecting the "structure of feeling." In the 'Introduction' of his book *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories*, Patrick Colm Hogan sounds pretty insightful, as he sets an equation between the narrative, its emotionality and affect, and observes that the "passion *for* plots is bound up with the passion *of* plots, the ways in which stories manifest feelings on the part of authors and characters, as well as the passion *from* plots, the ways stories provoke feelings in readers or listeners" (1; my emphasis). Hogan also uses an umbrella term— "emotion systems" in place of just "emotion" or "feeling," to emphasize the multiplicity of affect "through mutual enhancement and through mutual inhibition" (6). As literary narratives are mainly structured around supposedly lived experiences across time and space and guided by a collectivity of emotions, affect could be located in the multiple modalities of human existence— "atmospheres, landscapes, expectations, institutions, states of acclimation or endurance or pleasure or being stuck or moving on" (Stewart 340).

However, it is pretty evident that in this age of globalization, lots of the twenty-first century postcolonial literary narratives tend to represent stories that are less regional or local. Issues like transnational migration and mobility, experiences of different cultural spaces across the familiar ethno-cultural space, even transformations of human and animal behaviors and environmental changes on a global scale are frequent subjects of literary narratives at present.

In this context, the equation between literary narratives, emotion, and affect also undergoes specific changes— one of them being the acceptance of the fact that emotion and affect are not antithetical to reason. Denial or suppression of emotion for the sake of reason is no more a welcome and urgent approach today, and it is being taken for granted that without emotion, human behavior tends to be irrational and often immoral. Growing emotive means being affected by motivation and ideology, and as "emotions are evolved mechanisms that approximate survival functions" (Hogan 238), one should not consider emotional mechanism as less important to human ability of scientific reasoning. Moreover, it is not only literary narratives that house cultural practices, myths, the marvelous, the mysterious, the intuitive, the predictable, the unexplainable, or the imaginative, but these are constituents of human life as a whole. As human behavior is governed by the corporeality of the surrounding environment and situations, so it is shaped by the sensorial or emotional mechanism. Affect could be located in the interactive space between the corporeal and the sensorial attachments with the non-human entities around, and the element of uncanny may be seen as an alarming subjectivity in the reality of human life. In Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019), the affective uncanny works at multiple levels— from the personal to the societal, from the sacred to the ecological, and from the limitation of scientific reasoning to the prevalence of local knowledge, in order to reflect upon an emancipatory postcoloniality beyond any spatio-temporal boundary.

Human/Non-human Interface and *Gun Island*:

"Ecology must stop being associated with the image of a small nature-loving minority or with qualified specialists" (2000 52) — observes Félix Guattari in *The Three Ecologies*, as he claims to broaden the scope of ecological engagement in an intensely subjective manner on three levels—the social, the mental, and the environmental. In another volume, entitled *Chaosmosis*, Guattari elaborates upon his "ecosophic" project of inclusive ecology as he talks about the human responsibility for the planet: "a sense of responsibility, not only for its own survival but equally for *the future of all life on the planet, for animal and vegetable species, likewise for incorporeal species*…at the heart of the cosmos" (1995 119-120; my emphasis). The equity of "all life on the planet," of all "animal and vegetable species" in "the cosmos" should be naturally distributed as the planet earth is itself a complex assemblage of human and nonhuman relations and affective intersections. As I focus on the human/non-human interface in this section of the essay, I imply a psycho-physical encounter of the human and non-human

agencies, as the corporeal physicality of both the "human and nonhuman, are perhaps the most salient sites at which affect and ecocriticism come together" (Bladow and Ladino 3). The postcoloniality of this affective ecocriticism comes out of the power relationship between the subjects and the positioning of the socio-cultural agencies in the fictional world of Ghosh's *Gun Island*.

The plot of Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* starts at Calcutta for sure, but considers the Sundarbans of India, Brooklyn and Los Angeles of the United States, and Venice of Italy as its settings, and upholds the issue of migration of both human beings and non-human creatures from their homes and accustomed environments to distant, unfamiliar places. The narrative of *Gun Island* revolves mainly around two central characters— Dinanath Datta, a Brooklyn-based Bengali Indian who is a dealer of "rare books and Asian antiquities," and Professoressa Giacinta Schiavon, an Italian Professor with remarkable expertise in the history of Venice. Climate crisis and its impact on the ecological order at specific locales— be it the Sundarbans, the sea beach of Los Angeles, or the Venetian lagoon, appear to reconfigure the demography and animal geography to an unprecedented degree. Climatic issues often appear in the plot to unsettle the nerve with anxiety, the primary emotion which plays a significant role in serious environmental engagement. *Gun Island* is not simply a narrative on climate crises, as Ghosh himself admits[1], but on the "uncanny" changes transforming the world in more complicated ways, one of those being the severe deterioration of the relationship between the humans and their fellow non-human creatures.

While considering the human/non-human interface, *Gun Island* shows an intimate connection with one of Ghosh's earlier novels, entitled *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Though both the novels share the setting of the Sundarbans partially, some major characters of *The Hungry Tide* reappear in *Gun Island*, and both share the issues of environmental degradation, climate change, and the anxiety associated with ecological derangement, the latter is *not* a sequel, as the author affirms in several post-publication interviews[2]. However, what makes these two novels reasonably different from one another is the issue of human and non-human mobility across the familiar territories. The ecological issue has been addressed in *The Hungry Tide* through the pollution and degradation of the river-water in the archipelago and its impact on the keystone zoological species like crabs, crocodiles, the cetacean population (the Gangetic dolphins), and even the tigers inhabiting the mangrove environment. But in that earlier novel, Ghosh has not shown any animal migration to unfamiliar biospheres due to environmental

degradation, which he does in *Gun Island*. Moreover, in his latest novel, Ghosh has included the more subtly pressing climate-crisis issues like wildfires, the rise of the sea level, increase in oceanic temperature, and the exceptional sight of bioluminescence.

The materiality of any particular biosphere and the human/non-human interactive responses in that biosphere are areas of interest to an environmentalist. However, as I cling to the phrase "human/non-human interface" in this essay, I consider the workings of human emotional mechanisms and responses towards the non-human zoological creatures sharing the same environmental space in the corporeal context of ecological derangement in the first place. Secondly, the term "non-human" in this article also includes some more environmental corporeality in the form of mighty natural phenomena like wildfires, cyclonic storms, or the rise of sea-level which are beyond human control. Thirdly and finally, the phrase "non-human" may be applied on a sensorial level during the interface between the human and the other-than-human agencies, as it sometimes extends to the border of the mysterious and uncanny coincidences, beyond human understanding and scientific explanation. In *Gun Island*, the reader may notice numerous examples of all these three types of "non-human" agencies encountering human response-mechanism and affecting the emotion of anxiety— a core emotion in the novel. The element of anxiety in the twenty-first century environmental consciousness is a corollary of fear. Anxiety is realized only when the fear of loss, devastation, or death affects human understanding and the "structure of feeling." Sometimes, any particular feeling of unease or any mysterious foreboding constitutes the sense of fear and may lead affectively to the emotion of anxiety. In *Gun Island*, there are multiple episodes that showcase the human/non-human interface, ultimately emphasizing the limitations of human understanding and the ability to control nature.

However, the narrative begins at Calcutta, with the protagonist Dinanath's movement to the Sundarbans to explore an ancient temple of the Hindu snake-goddess Manasa Devi, after knowing the legendary reference of a "Bonduki Sadagar" or Gun Merchant, who had built the shrine in the late seventeenth century in a remote island of the Sundarbans. The ancient folklore of the Gun Merchant— his being cursed by Manasa Devi, migration to Venice to save himself from the curse, eventual success in making much wealth, and a subsequent return to the Sundarbans to build this temple makes Dinanath deeply inquisitive, and he feels passionately drawn to unearth certain mysteries behind the legend. The situation makes room for his meeting with the two young Bengali youths named Tipu and Rafi along with some other characters like

Piyali Roy the cetologist, Nilima Bose the social activist, and Horen Naskor, a local boatman— all three known to the readers of Ghosh, as they had an earlier appearance in *The Hungry Tide*. The first major incident of the human/non-human interface takes place in Chapter 4, subtitled 'The Shrine,' after Dinanath reaches the temple with Tipu and Horen and collects some information about the temple and the legend of the Gun Merchant from Rafi, the local youth inhabiting a room adjacent to the temple. Rafi tells him about a resident cobra "which has been there many years" (76) inside the temple of Manasa. Dinanath, "a rational, secular, scientifically minded person" (35) initially refutes Rafi's statement in disbelief, only to witness the unusual presence of the serpent a few minutes later: "it was no ordinary cobra but a king cobra— a hamadryad— of a size such that its upraised head was level with mine" (77). The uncanny presence of the cobra paralyzes Dinanath: "I stood frozen, as if welded to the ground— yet, although it was well within reach of me, I am convinced, to this day, that the cobra would not have harmed anybody" (77). The question may arise why Dinanath is so emotionally charged that he feels "convinced, to this day, that the cobra would not have harmed anybody"? The answer lies in Dinanath's ethno-religious identity and cultural background: as this is the temple of Manasa Devi, the Hindu snake goddess, he considers the snake to be a guardian spirit. This is how concurrent emotions affect Dinanath— his physical numbness by the sight of the cobra and his confidence in staying safe at the same time.

The entry of the Italian Professor Giacinta Schiavon, with her unique expertise in the history of Venice, adds a 'global' dimension to the narrative and helps Dinanath solve many riddles in the legend of the Gun Merchant. It is Professor Giacinta alias Cinta who snaps at Dinanath as he claims that he does not "believe in the supernatural…a whole lot of superstitious mumbo-jumbo": "So to say that you don't believe in the "supernatural" is a contradiction in terms— because it means that you also don't believe in the "natural." *Neither can exist without the other*" (35; my emphasis). This is probably one of the most powerful messages that Ghosh wants to deliver in his novel. However, Cinta justifies her argument by referring to events of witch-hunting and spirit-possessions in some parts of present-day France and Italy as simple facts of ordinary life, which Dinanath finds tough to accept, as Europe is "the wellspring of scientific rationality" (35) to him. It is the character of Cinta, by whom Ghosh annexes the snake and Goddess Manasa's legend with tarantula— the venomous spider of southern Italy and tarantism. Cinta refers to the twentieth-century anthropologist and folklorist Ernesto de Martino and tells Dinanath that "there are many well-documented instances of things that

cannot be explained by so-called "natural" causes" (37). This is exactly what stands as the source of the affective uncanny in the matrix of human/non-human coexistence on earth. Every form of human or non-human behavior may not be visible to human logic or subject to explanation or causation, but that does not imply their absence. All such issues are beyond the scale of human understanding, constituting the more extensive web of existence which Guattari calls the "ecosophic" understanding of the world.

The snake-bite of the king cobra at the shrine of Goddess Manasa in the Sundarbans, as depicted in chapter 4 of *Gun Island*, is logically acceptable as the swampy mangrove forest is one of the "natural" habitats of cobras. However, the death of Gisa's dog by snake-bite at the sea beach in Los Angeles in chapter 9, is beyond scientific environmental understanding as the presence of the "yellow-bellied sea snakes" (133) mostly living in warmer waters in the south of America is not a common sight in the north. It may appear miraculous to many, though such recent changes in nature have their relationship with the issue of the planetary climate crisis: "their distribution was changing with the warming of the oceans, and they are migrating northwards" (134). Animal migration, a major theme addressed by Ghosh in *Gun Island*, should be considered more than a local issue and is now premised "on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole" (Heise 2008 10). Ghosh's eco-literary vision moves beyond any regional postcoloniality, as in his non-fiction entitled *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh warns his readers about "serious disruptions of *the global climate*" (216; my emphasis) and humanity's urgent need to "rediscover their *kinship with other beings*" (217; my emphasis). Though "the mass mortality events" of the keystone animal species in the Sundarbans— the sights of the beachings of Gangetic river dolphins, "shoals of dead fish" or "the decline of crab populations" (178) make his fictional characters anxious about the future of the mangrove biosphere and the life of the people of the Sundarbans, it is the humanity's "kinship with other beings" that can save the "global climate" as well prevent the deterioration of the man-animal relationship. The key image of the folkloric snake-goddess Manasa in *Gun Island*, as Dinanath realizes, is not just an Indian regional deity or "goddess," but "'a voice-carrier' between two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication": "Without her meditation, there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression" (152-153). The indigenous folkloric deity Manasa thus becomes simultaneously regional and universal, familiar and strange, both

a “goddess” and a “voice-carrier” and therefore, modulates the levels of affective uncanny embedded in the narrative of *Gun Island*.

Affective Uncanny and the Stories in *Gun Island*:

Before concentrating on the narratological dimensions of affect in *Gun Island*, my usage of the word “uncanny” in relation to both everyday reality and the writer’s creative imagination should be made clear. The Freudian notion of uncanny as repressed complex, or as something “which arises from superannuated modes of thought” implies a departure from the familiarity of everyday life or “a fictive reality invented by the writer” (Freud 157), and therefore, looks for a therapeutic solution of the anxiety of fear. The Freudian uncanny is essentially different from the sense of uncanny one may notice in fictional representation: “fiction affords possibilities for a sense of the uncanny that would not be available in real life” (Freud 157). The term uncanny in this essay attempts to cover a broader spectrum than the psycho-social identity of individuals and includes the diverse cultural imaginary of postcolonial modernity with all its uncertainties and tensions. Dylan Trigg, in his book *The Memory of Place*, observes the uncanny as “strange rather than shocking, weird rather than annihilating” (Trigg 28), and this interpretation appears more effective both in the narrative context of *Gun Island*, and in the global scenario of modern-day climate change and environmental engagement as it implies a dissociation from the orderly and the normative.

The first reference to affective uncanny in *Gun Island* centers round the folkloric Gun Merchant in the mythical story of goddess Manasa. The Gun Merchant is iconic of profit, wealth, and power, an archetypal trader figure,[3] who offends the indigenous deity Manasa “by refusing to become her devotee” and then flees “overseas to escape the goddess’s wrath, finally taking refuge in a land where there were no serpents” (16). Despite the absence of serpents in his land of refuge, he is bitten by “a tiny, poisonous creature” (17) and moves on again, boarding a ship that is attacked by pirates. The goddess Manasa appears and offers him a final chance to save himself by becoming her devotee. As the Gun Merchant gives in and swears to build a temple of Manasa in his native land, the goddess makes “a miracle: the ship was besieged by all manner of creatures, of the sea and sky, and while the pirates were fighting them off, the captives managed to take over the ship and seize their captors’ riches” (17). The “miracle” is no less than a ghastly spectacle of uncanny which relatively affects the listeners of the folklore not with fear, but with hope. The mythical “miracle” of goddess Manasa comes

full-circle as Ghosh showcases another "miraculous spectacle" in the final chapter of *Gun Island*: "the storm of birds circling above, like a whirling funnel, and the graceful shadows of the leviathans (dolphins and whales) in the glowing green water below" (282). As Manasa's miracle saved the Gun Merchant in the myth, the miraculous spectacle close to the coastline of Italy saves a boatload of refugees and allows them shelter in the land. The fictional character of Piya, an expert scientist by academic training, finds the "scientific explanation for everything that happened there": "It was just a series of migratory patterns intersecting in an unusual way" (284). As Dinanath asks Piya about the bioluminescence happening during the "miracolo," she responds with confident scientific reasoning: "That kind of bioluminescence is caused by dinoflagellates, and some species of dynos are known to migrate" (284). What appears as uncanny to many people witnessing the "miracolo," even to the admiral of the Italian Navy, is scientific to the expert, and Ghosh's choice of the scientist of Indian origin subtly challenges the European legacy of scientific rationality.

However, alongside the Indian folkloric story of goddess Manasa, Ghosh introduces in Part Two of *Gun Island*, the century-old popular Venetian myth of "il mostro"— the monster of the sea, a huge pupa like creature "that had its lair beneath the embankment" (226) of the Venetian lagoon. One evening in Venice, Cinta takes Dinanath with her to show him the shipworms inhabiting the wooden pilings under the pier of Fondamente Nove and demonstrates him the damage made by those creatures: "More and more of these are invading Venice, with the warming of the lagoon's water. They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities. It has become a big problem because Venice is built on wooden pilings. They are literally eating the foundations of the city." (230) An innocent reader may ask why these shipworms, feeding on the wooden pilings of the embankment like termites only, be called "il mostro," or the monster of the sea for centuries, as they have no power to swallow a human being or even other smaller marine creatures? In Ghosh's own words, the answer, as he describes it in *The Great Derangement*, is "traditional knowledge" (216). Centuries back, the Venetians realized that these shipworms are harmful to the wooden foundation of the city, and they have a monstrous potential to destroy the entire city someday in the future. This is how the emotion of anxiety had affected them and is still affecting the present Venetians with an apocalyptic fear of the uncanny. Postcolonial eco-literary narratives, as Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin observe, often play "a valuable role not just in imagining more sustainable alternatives to the current world order, but also in prefiguring what happens when that order collapses" (80). The

chilling consequences of the incident of Cinta's slipping down the breaking pier and shipworms pouring out of the broken logs in *Gun Island* can be considered a catastrophic collapse of the spatial order of Fondamente Nove.

One of the remarkable narratological dimensions of Ghosh's *Gun Island* is the subtle spatio-temporal parallelism between stories, tropes, locales, and characters. The geo-spatial features of the Gangetic archipelago of Sundarbans have often been compared with the Venetian lagoon. As the center of ancient trade and merchandise, Venice has been compared with the Indian city of Varanasi. The Indian-origin expert cetologist and scientist Piya could be paralleled with Cinta, the Italian-origin charismatic professor, and authoritative historian. The Indian goddess Manasa— protector of the non-human animal species, and the mythical story behind building her shrine in a remote island of the Sundarbans in the seventeenth century may find its European counterpart in the legendary story of "the Black Madonna of La Salute" (223)— protector of people during the devastating plague in the mid-seventeenth century Italy, and the building of the church called Santa Maria Della Salute. However, the most compelling case of parallelism in Ghosh's *Gun Island* is probably between the two zoological species— the snake (in India mainly and also in North America recently due to the warming of the oceans) and the spider (in Italy), both venomous creatures and capable of producing powerful grip of affective uncanny.

In the course of the novel, Dinanath encounters spiders not anywhere in India or America, but only during his stay in Venice. The Indian legend of Manasa cuts across both seventeenth and twenty-first century spatio-temporalities of India and Italy like a connective fiber: the "tiny, poisonous creature" (17) which had bitten the Gun Merchant during his stay in the Gun Island, was nothing but a poisonous spider. After Dinanath's first encounter with "a large, long-legged spider" (169) in Venice, Rafi tells Dinanath "a little bit of the story, as [my] grandfather used to tell it": "the Gun Merchant desperately sick— he has been bitten by a poisonous spider" (171). The Indian indigenous story serves as the source of an unsettling uncanny that affects Dinanath during his second encounter with a spider at Cinta's apartment, as he admits that "I was having some kind of panic attack and forced myself to draw several deep breaths," even after knowing that the spiders are everywhere, and "just a part of the texture of the world, like flies and ants" (197). As Dinanath captures a photo of the spider in his mobile phone and sends it to Piya, she makes a consultation with one of her friends, Larry, "who studies spiders" (203). She then informs Dinanath of the scientific whereabouts of the species:

"The spider in that picture is a brown recluse, *Loxosceles reclusa*. Its bite can be very painful; its venom is more potent, by weight, than that of a rattlesnake; it breaks down the skin and eats into the flesh" (203). The comparison of the spider's venom with that of a rattlesnake makes Dinanath aware about the potent anxiety, and he feels "another panic attack creeping up" (204). He admits before Cinta that "the whole business with the spider was really unsettling" and he has been affected by an uncanny sensation: "a strange feeling, as though I'm not in control of what I'm doing" (213-214). As Dinanath boasts of the "perfectly natural, scientific explanation" of global warming and the consequent change of animal habitats behind the presence of the brown recluse spider in Venice, Cinta reminds him of the historical changes in human behavior and consumerism in the last hundred years:

> 'So you cannot say that this spider's presence here is "natural" or "scientific." It is here because of *our* history; because of things human beings have done. It is linked to you already – you have a prior connection with that spider, whether you like it or not.' (214; original emphasis)

Cinta's compelling annexation of the "natural", the "scientific", the historical and the emotional emphasizes an inclusive web of the biophysical world, the human knowledge system of looking at nature, the common ancestry of the human and the biota with every change in the ecosystem affecting human behavior, sustenance and survival. The references to "*our* history" and of "things human beings have done" connect Cinta's ideas with the historicity of the cultural production of nature, the proposition made by Raymond Williams in *Culture and Materialism*: "I intend an emphasis when I say that the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history" (Williams 67). As Cinta tells Dinanath that "the world of today presents all the symptoms of demonic possession" (216), she releases her angst and fury at the inescapably possessive techno-industrial modernity and the market society with its culture of consumerism, but she also talks about "a *risveglio*, a kind of awakening" (217; original emphasis) which may nourish the human "structure of feeling" with positive emotions of hope for an emotionally and ecologically balanced existence of all humanity and the biosphere.

The Interplay of the Emotional and the Ecological:

The word "emotion" has its etymological root in the Latin word *moveō* or *movēre* (to move), and therefore, it can be defined as something that has an affective or 'moving' effect. Moreover, the word could well find a relationship with "movement" or the activity of setting

in motion. In *Gun Island*, as most of the characters move from one place to another and simultaneously are moved by discoveries, marvels and miracles, they often notice a relationship between the corporeal reality and the sensorial uncanny with which they find an emotional engagement. Sometimes exceptional experiences or uncanny events affect the characters with newer enlightenment and mysterious emotional reactions foregrounding the importance of the sensorial— under the garb of the corporeality of our surrounding environments, which Cinta, in the second chapter of Ghosh's novel, finds as "more real than real life" (34). In an interview with the multimedia journalist and writer Bilal Qureshi at the Library of Congress National Book Festival in Washington, D.C. in October 2019, Ghosh acknowledges that his idea of the uncanny in *Gun Island* is close to the modern-day realities of life: "one of the weird things about our world is that we are in a world where the reality is uncanny." To Ghosh, the catastrophic weather events are so frequent these days that the creative imagination of a writer in serious engagement with environmental issues may foresee the uncanny, as happened in the case of the ninth chapter subtitled 'Los Angeles' in his novel *Gun Island*, as he tells Qureshi in the interview:

> "There is a chapter in my book, a scene that's set in Los Angeles, it's actually set in a museum, and there's this wildfire that suddenly breaks out, and coming towards the museum…this actually happened with the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, suddenly a wildfire was coming hurtling towards the museum. But you know, I wrote my chapter six months before this wildfire happened! …*It was so uncanny when I started reading about the actual fire*, I couldn't stop following it because I had seen it in my head! *This kind of uncanniness that surrounds us today, I think that is actually the fictional terrain that we have to enter*. If you are going to write about *the reality of our world, it's actually a changed reality, an uncanny reality*, and that exactly is where this enormous fictional terrain lies" (my emphases).

The emphasis on the "changed reality" as the "uncanny reality" is at the center of Ghosh's ecopoetics which affects the writer and his readers emotionally and shows the fountainhead of environmental awakening. What Ghosh does not mention in the interview is that he has subtitled the eighth chapter of *Gun Island* as "Wildfires," as this catastrophic weather event has earned serious attention in the recent past. In Ghosh's eco-literary vision, the emotional is intertwined with the ecological and could be perceived on both the corporeal level of reality and the sensorial level of feeling.

In *Gun Island*, the image of a snake is so crucial to Dinanath's imagination that he often feels preoccupied with eerie visions of a snake, even in places where the probability of the existence of an actual snake is most unlikely. In such instances, the sensorial affect overtakes the corporeal reality. For example, the eighth chapter of the novel describes Dinanath's journey by flight from Brooklyn to Los Angeles to attend a conference on the invitation of Cinta. Before the plane takes off, his inadvertent pressing of the mobile phone starts playing a particular music— Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's '*Allah Hoo*,' which as Dinanath notices, affects his fellow passengers thoroughly: "As my gaze rose, trembling…it encountered ranks of faces staring at me with expressions that ranged from bewilderment to terror" (116). This element of terror in his fellow passengers, quite unmistakably, arises from deep-rooted anxiety related to, maybe, the devastating memory of 9/11. This affects him with a sense of alienation, and Dinanath feels isolated in a fully boarded aircraft. However, while flying, Dinanath notices "dense masses of smoke" and "leaping waves of flame…lining the horizon with flickering tints of yellow and orange" (116) from his window seat. The incinerated landscape affects Dinanath profoundly: "Even more striking was the landscape that lay beneath our flight path— a charred, smouldering stretch of forested hillside that had already been laid waste by the fires" (116). As the aircraft was flying low enough, he catches sight of two birds flying and competing over a prey— a twisting animal in one's beak and Dinanath bursts into a scream, which eventually enhances the suspicion of others around him and security personnel appears to take him away to detain. This is how affect passes from one human being to another and creates an emotional crisis. After the plane lands, his documents verified with double attention and interrogation is over, the conversation of Dinanath with a security agent in the Los Angeles airport deserves attention:

> "What made you do that?"
>
> "Do what?"
>
> "The crew said that you kept screaming 'Snake! Snake!'. You should know that you can't do that on a plane."
>
> I moistened my lips, trying to think of something to say.
>
> "I'm sorry, sir," I said. "*I don't know what got into me*." (118-119; my emphasis)

Dinanath's utterance— "I don't know what got into me," is an excellent example of what Teresa Brennan, in her book *The Transmission of Affect*, considers as a situation when the atmosphere gets "into the individual" (Brennan 1). An identical idea has been proposed by Sara

Ahmed as the "outside in" model, generally observed in analyzing crowd psychology and the sociology of emotion (Ahmed 9). The reader finds Dinanath recollecting a similar condition of the "outside in" situation a little later in the novel: "in Brooklyn…I had been haunted by the feeling that *something that had been long lain dormant in the mud of the Sundarbans had entered me*" (128; my emphasis). This is the very point of affective bioregional attachment, which Dinanath feels he can never avoid. Despite his protracted physical displacement in America, he is emotionally emplaced in the cultural space of his country of origin.

Conclusion:

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* ends with the news of Cinta's passing away, as Gisa— Cinta's niece, informs Dinanath— "Cinta's gone" (287), and the readers, much like Dinanath, feel affected by the emotion of deep sorrow. However, here is Ghosh's tricky wordplay that may affect a Bengali or a Hindi-speaking Indian reader with a different kind of emotion. The pronunciation of the Italian Professor Giacinta's name is "Jah-chinta," which shows a close phonetic homonymy with the Bengali and Hindi words "Jah" (go away) and "chinta" (anxiety)— together constituting a phrase meaning "Go away anxiety"! Gisa's words— "Cinta's gone" may appear as a pun (after the effect of phonetic homonymy) to the Bengali or the Hindi-speaking Indian reader as "Anxiety is over"! Is anxiety really over? It is difficult to be free from anxiety in this era of climate change and environmental violence, as the culture of consumerism is heightening the human desire for more space and more freedom at the expense of either psychic security or the ecosphere. In *Affective Narratology*, Patrick Colm Hogan finds "ideology as an important factor in both emotion and narrative" (2), and it is the combination of the emotion of hope, the ideology of environmental justice, and the ethical values justifying the rights of all human and non-human creatures, that can pave the way for an optimistic future for the planet. Dinanath envisions the planet earth as "Sasagara Basumati"— "the ocean'd earth," with all hopefulness in the penultimate chapter of the novel: "I felt that I was surrounded by all that was best about our world— the wide open sea, the horizon, the bright moonlight, leaping dolphins, and also the outpouring of hope, goodness, love, charity and generosity that I could feel surging around me" (271). All these positively nourishing feelings— "hope, goodness, love, charity and generosity" energize Dinanath with affective emotions which Glenn A. Albrecht calls earth emotions: "Earth emotions are what make us human-in-nature" (2019 4). Dinanath becomes the iconic human-in-nature, who

believes in the inclusive symbiotic discourse of "Sasagara Basumati"— the Indian doctrine of harmonious ecosphere that holds every form of life in the world together.

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Notes

[1] In the book launch event of *Gun Island* in Delhi on 19 June 2019, Ghosh admits that the novel is not just about climate change, it's much more: "I wouldn't say it's climate change, it's not just that…it's something much more complicated, it's the reality that we live in, and the reality that we live in today is so fractured, is so sort of strange that there's something so uncanny about the way the world is changing." See the full interview here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5RbdChKMv4 (accessed 25 January 2021).

[2] In both the post-publication book launch events in Delhi and Kolkata, Ghosh claims that in no way, *Gun Island* should be seen as the sequel of *The Hungry Tide*, which he wrote fifteen years back in 2004. However, there are some conceptual connections between the two novels. The Delhi book launch event could be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5RbdChKMv4 (accessed 25 January 2021); For the Kolkata event, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lr41o6qNl1g (accessed 25 January 2021).

[3] In the medieval Bengali literature entitled *Manasamangal Kāvya* authored by Khemananda and in some other Bengali folkloric legends, one may notice such merchant figures that stand as powerful and ruthless men, mostly Shaivaites by religion and without any reverence for the "subaltern" deities like Manasa. Like the Gun Merchant in Ghosh's *Gun Island*, the most well-known of such traders is Chandradhar or Chand Sadagar. See *Manasamangal Kāvya* for details.

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