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Nonhuman agency in the Anthropocene: a comparative ecocritical analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* and Emilio Salgari's *I misteri della jungla nera*

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"May all sentient beings be free from needless suffering."

– Richard Powers, *Bewilderment*

To my friends and family, for their unwavering support.

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INTRODUCTION

Our times are increasingly defined by the environmental disasters that anthropogenic climate change is causing. As humans have become a geological force capable of shifting the trajectory of the Earth system, scientists have called for the official recognition of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Now one of the most pressing political issues, the climate crisis is but one manifestation of the planetary crisis (Ghosh 2021, 158), which also regards social inequalities, global economic disparities, the migration crisis, and unbalanced distribution of geopolitical power. In this context of deep planetary transformations, both the sciences and the humanities have retraced humanity's history in search of the causes of climate change and have attempted to provide theoretical underpinnings for the understanding of the temporal and spatial scale of the Anthropocene. Given that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh 2016, 9), literature is one of the possible tools for its representation and conceptualisation. Also, given its power to "effect changes in the real world" (150), literature can be the right venue to raise awareness on the climatic disruptions of our present times and to call for collective action. For this reason, this thesis aims at providing close-textual analyses of Indian writer Amitav Ghosh's latest novel, *Gun Island* (2019) – set between the Sundarbans mangrove forest in West Bengal and Venice and explicitly addressing the planetary crisis –, and *I misteri della jungla nera* (1895), an adventure novel by Italian writer Emilio Salgari, set in the Sundarbans and mentioned by Ghosh himself in *Gun Island*.

The first chapter of this thesis provides a theoretical background to the Anthropocene. First, a scientific definition of the Anthropocene is given, together with the most agreed-upon hypotheses about its onset date and

major drivers. Then, given that the Anthropocene affects humanity in all its cultural, political, and social undertakings, the second section of the chapter is devoted to the reconceptualization of the human and nonhuman, of history and the environment and to their relevance to our present and future times. Here, Amitav Ghosh's own theoretical stance as expressed in *The Great Derangement* and *The Nutmeg's Curse* is summarised and briefly compared to the theories of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Donna Haraway.

The second chapter engages more directly with *Gun Island*. Namely, a close-textual, ecocritical analysis of the novel is presented. First, its temporalities and spatialities are scrutinised to demonstrate Ghosh's ability to portray conjunctions in time and place that the Anthropocene renders manifest. Afterwards, the protagonist's emotional and affective reaction to the presence of the more-than-human is studied to bring to light human attitudes towards the uncanniness of the nonhuman. Lastly, the presence of the nonhuman voice in Ghosh's *Gun Island* and *Jungle Nama* (2021) is examined to address the restorative role that storytelling practices can and must play at the time of the Great Derangement.

Chapter three provides a close-textual analysis of Salgari's *I misteri della jungla nera*, informed both by works of criticism on Salgari's fictional world and by Ghosh's essays on fiction and the climate crisis. First, the depiction of the environment of the Sundarbans is analysed to shed light on the Orientalist representation of the botanical and zoological nonhuman and on the role of Salgari's textual sources. Then, Salgari's own imaginative portrayal of acting nonhuman animals is examined to demonstrate that the liminality of the adventure novel allows for the portrayal of some nonhuman agency. Namely, a few words on the mixed genre of the adventure novel, wavering between romance and realism, will be written to illustrate the genre's possibilities for the depiction of nonhuman forces.

Lastly, some conclusions will be drawn from the analyses of the novels: despite literature's own involvement in the Great Derangement, the novel has the power and responsibility to restore nonhuman agency and cast light on the climate crisis.

1. TROUBLING TIMES

Though human beings have always transformed their environment, they now have become a geological force capable of changing the course of the Earth's geological trajectory into a new epoch – the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Chakrabarty 2021). This chapter aims at providing an overview of the current debate on the present ecological crisis. First, a definition of the Anthropocene is given within stratigraphy and Earth system science. Far from being a mere scientific and scholarly matter, the Anthropocene affects humanity in all its undertakings and must hence be addressed jointly by scientists and thinkers of the humanities, as it is they who are mostly concerned with its cultural and political ramifications, and who attempt to provide imaginative, cultural, and political solutions to the planetary crisis. Thus, the second section of this chapter is devoted to the reconceptualization of the human and nonhuman, of history and the environment and to their relevance to our present and future times. Only through a paradigm shift in the human imagination can humankind veritably comprehend the scale of the planetary crisis and perhaps even remedy some of the major drivers of climate change.

1.1 A New Geological Epoch

Almost all histories of the Anthropocene begin with this anecdote: in 1999, while at an Earth System science conference in New Mexico, chemist Paul Crutzen lamented the inappropriateness of referring to the present geological epoch as the "Holocene" ("recent whole", "entirely recent" – started 11,650 years BP), a term formally recognised by geologists and stratigraphers, i.e., scientists who reconstruct Earth history based on the evidence gathered from rock strata (Lewis and Maslin 2015, 171; Chakrabarty 2021, 157; Zalasiewicz et al. 2019):

> Stop using the word Holocene. We're not in the Holocene anymore. We are in the… the… the… the Anthropocene! (Chakrabarty 2021, 157)

However, Crutzen was not the first to propose the concept of a human epoch, as a number of nineteenth and twentieth century geologists and scientists had already argued in favour of naming the contemporary geological epoch either "Anthrocene", "Anthropozoic era" or "Noösphere" to lay emphasis on the role played by humans in the geologic history of the planet (Lewis and Maslin 2015, 173). Crutzen's fortuitous interjection was later elaborated in an article co-authored with Eugene Stoermer. Given the recent "expansion of mankind, both in numbers and per capita exploitation of Earth's resources" – and the concurrent increase in human population, cattle population, urbanisation, fossil fuel and biomass combustion, fresh water use, emission of greenhouse gases, and mechanised human predation of fish –, Crutzen ad Stoermer considered "Anthropocene" a befitting term to refer to the current epoch and to the anthropogenic modification of the Earth's geology and ecology (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, 17).

Since the publication of this seminal article, scientists have debated whether *Homo Sapiens* is indeed a "global geological force" capable of influencing the environment to such a scale as to warrant the exit from the Holocene and the entry into the Anthropocene (Steffen et al. 2011, 842–43). Relevantly, in a 2011 article co-authored with Crutzen and other Earth System scientists, Steffen surveyed the historical trends of the human-environment relationship from the times of our hominid ancestors to the present day, and eventually inferred that humans have always impacted on their environment. However, though able to modify their surroundings, preindustrial humans had never fully altered the ecosystems around them, as they "did not have the technological or organisational capability to match or dominate the great

forces of nature" so that their short-term impacts on their local ecologies rested within the "natural variability of the environment" (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007, 614–15). Since it is only with the combustion of fossil fuels and the ensuing rise of energy use in industrial societies that the CO_2 concentration in the atmosphere exponentially increased, Steffen and his collaborators suggest AD 1800 as a probable starting date for the Anthropocene epoch (Steffen et al. 2011, 845–49).

Similarly, Crutzen and Stoermer originally designated "the latter part of the 18th century" as a general date for the onset of the Anthropocene, as this periodisation accounted for the retrieval of data from glacial ice cores attesting a growth in the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases, while also relevantly coinciding with Watt's refinement of the steam engine in 1784 (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000, 17–18). Since then, achieving consensus on the starting date of the Anthropocene has been a complicated task, not least because of the two different meanings that the term "Anthropocene" has acquired within the scientific community. As Will Steffen explained in a recent interview, the first meaning – the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch after the Holocene – is ascribed to the field of geology and to the definition of the Geologic Time Scale. The second usage of the word pertains to Earth System science and implies that as a result of the activities of *Homo Sapiens*, the Earth System has changed its course and is now moving away from the relatively stable Holocene (Steffen and Morgan 2021, 1304–5).

While overlooking the technicalities of the debate on a chronostratigraphic definition of the Anthropocene and of its eventual golden spike – i.e., a geologic record that can indicate a change in a geologic time division –, providing a general timeframe for the Anthropocene serves the theoretical and temporal setting of this thesis and justifies the comparative analysis of such diverse works of fiction – namely, *Gun Island* and *I misteri della jungla nera*

– as both can be considered products of the same era of increasing anthropogenic modification of the environment. As a matter of fact, the Earth system scientists Steffen and Crutzen correlate the beginning of the Anthropocene to the apex of industrial development, hence between 1800 and 1850 (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007, 616–17).

Conversely, stratigraphers Lewis and Maslin identify a first potential GSSP marker date in 1610 – a low point of carbon dioxide concentration in the Law Dome ice core – hence hypothesise that the imprint left by the encounter of Old and New World human populations, that is a "homogenization of Earth's biota" may indeed mark the onset of the Anthropocene (Lewis and Maslin 2015, 175). Supposedly, European presence in the Americas led to a decimation of the human population caused by the exportation of European diseases, by famine, and war (175), which resulted in a decrease in farming activities and in fire use, with an ensuing rehabilitation of forest and grassland; this, in turn, contributed to a decline in atmospheric CO2. This "Orbis hypothesis", moreover, coincides with what the social sciences call the "beginning of the modern 'world system'" and global patterns of trade (175) and thus evokes colonialism, global commerce, and the use of coal as the main drivers of the Anthropocene (178). Finally, the years from 1940s to the present have seen an "explosion of human activity" after the end of the Second World War (Steffen and Morgan 2021, 1306), which has resulted in a rapid and extensive human transformation of the world's ecosystem, and of Earth System functioning itself (Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007, 617). Since "nearly three-quarters of the anthropogenically driven rise in CO2 concentration has occurred since 1950", and half of the total rise between the 1980s and 2007, environmental historian John McNeill coined the term "the Great Acceleration" to identify this stage of the Anthropocene (617-618).

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1.2 Temporality and the Nonhuman in the Anthropocene

Cognizant that the geological stance on the Anthropocene does not consider "what humanity is doing", but rather "the *traces* that humanity will leave behind […] in the rocks of the Earth" (Szerszynski 2012, 169), scholars of the humanities engage instead with the philosophical, imaginative, and political implications of the Anthropocene. From their reflections on the current crisis, questions concerning the concepts of 'human', 'nature', and 'planet' emerge. As previously mentioned, the generally accepted term to identify the current climate crisis – Anthropocene – confers to the human the ability to act as a geological force "capable of changing […] the climate system of the planet *as a whole*" (Chakrabarty 2021, 3). However, because of this increased agency of the human, recent scholarship has also argued that any serious consideration of the planetary crisis cannot overlook the role of and impact on nonhuman entities. In this section, Ghosh's own theoretical stance as expressed in *The Great Derangement* and *The Nutmeg's Curse* is summarised and briefly compared to the theories of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Donna Haraway.

Historical Considerations

In accordance with Lewis and Maslin's Orbis hypothesis, Amitav Ghosh traces both the history of anthropogenic climate change and humanity's blindness to its predicament back to the seventeenth century. As a matter of fact, Ghosh locates the current ecological crisis within the settler-colonial plantation and the terraforming practices originating in the seventeenth century. The science-fiction term *terraforming* is used by Ghosh, as by other scholars before him (e.g., Zalasiewicz, and Haraway), to name the human modification of the environment. However, he circumscribes the concept to the reengineering of large parcels of land that took place in colonial North America, where colonialists wanted the land to resemble European models

and to adapt to European ways of life (Ghosh 2021, 55). The history of industrialisation and capitalism, he argues in *The Nutmeg's Curse*, cannot be separated from the colonisation of the West and East Indies of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Relevantly, colonialism and capitalism were mutually implicated in the colonialist exploitation of human and nonhuman resources – valuable only for monetary gain – and in the related terraforming practices.

Similarly, Donna Haraway suggests that scholars consider the longer history of the current crisis and its historically situated complexities, including the "long-distance simplification of landscapes" and the "relocation" and "alienation" of "plants, animals, microbes, [and] people" that took place all over the world when the plantation transformed both humans and nonhumans into "alienated resources" (Haraway et al. 2016, 555–57). Thus, she argues that the Anthropocene is not the right "tool, story, or epoch to think with" (Haraway 2016, 49) and proposes instead "Plantationocene" to better evoke the "dynamics through which plants and animals are abstracted in order to become resources that be used for investment" that were at place long before the mid-eighteenth century – period usually associated with both the Anthropocene and Capitalocene (Haraway et al. 2016, 555-557). Indeed, Ghosh himself maintains that behind colonial terraforming practices lies a conception of Nature and of inhabited territories as wilderness to be conquered (Ghosh 2021, 76) and as a "resource" to be exploited (73) in the name of man's insatiable greed.

Drawing on Lovelock's conception of the Earth as Gaia, Ghosh calls for a re-discovered vitalist Earth – "monstrous Gaia" – a living entity whose agency intertwines with the history of humans (73-91) and which is no longer an inert, machine-like resource waiting to be exploited by humankind (87). Since the current climate crisis – which is but one manifestation of a broader

planetary crisis rooted in the historical dynamics of global power (158) – is the "Earth's response to the globalisation of the ecological transformations that were set in motion by the European colonization of much of the world" (167), that is, Gaia's breaking free of the constraint of terraforming, in order to understand, conceptualise and confront the present crisis, we need to acknowledge and overcome the brutalisation of Nature (189). Namely, just like non-Western populations, Nature too has been considered a "brute", something "merely material, insensible", and outside of history (187).

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, on the other hand, has deconstructed the Viconian binary opposition natural history-human history – upheld and popularised by Benedetto Croce – according to which events occurring in nature are mere events, inscrutable by humans, the only beings who have historical agency. In this view, Nature has no agentive capabilities and is considered to be outside of history (Chakrabarty 2021, 26–31), "which realizes itself through human agency" (Ghosh 2016, 119). However, Nature's "apartness" from the human is only "illusory" (Chakrabarty 2021, 33) as anthropogenic climate change forces us to recognise that the environment is no longer (and has never been) simply a "slow and apparently timeless backdrop for human action" (29). Thus, Chakrabarty calls for a redefinition of the concept of history, which embraces both the recorded history of humankind (including the more recent history of industrialisation) and deep history – "the combined genetic and cultural changes that created humanity over hundreds of thousands of years" (36) – with its relations with non-human entities (60). These intersecting temporalities have resulted in our currently being the "dominant species of the planet", now endangering the very presence of other earthly entities (61). Furthermore, thinking historical connections throughout different scales of times (i.e., the years of our recent history and the thousands of years of deep history) entails a spatial departure

from our conception of the Earth as globe, *viz* as a "category of human history" (74) and the recognition of its own planetary agency, which far out-scales humanity's limited history (79).

Silenced Nonhumans

The nature-history opposition that Chakrabarty dates back to the Enlightenment is given more temporal and political relevance in Ghosh's account of the interconnections between the climate crisis and colonial history. Arguably, nature was not merely left out of history, but was actively silenced through political, social and – more relevantly – cultural practices. In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh contends that the mechanistic conception of Nature (and of those human populations considered uncivilised, i.e., outside history) has also implied that it is considered "mute" and unable to make meaning (2021, 189). Veritably, the process of silencing both human and nonhuman voices was the basis for their becoming a resource and thus for their colonisation (190) and was rooted in the belief that only certain kinds of humans (Western, white men) were able to tell stories and that nonhumans were entirely incapable of making meaning because without language, a uniquely human endowment (201-202).

> The shrinking of the possibilities of this domain [storytelling], and the consequent erasure of nonhuman voices from "serious literature", has played no small part in creating that blindness to other beings that is so marked a feature of official modernity. It follows, then, that if those nonhuman voices are to be restored to their proper place, then it must be, in the first instance, through the medium of stories. (204)

Concurrently, in *The Great Derangement* Ghosh retraces the history of the realist novel and its complicity in the climate crisis, which is also "a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (2016, 9). Namely, we are living at the

time of the Great Derangement, when art and literature are almost completely concealing the world outside, thus hindering people from acknowledging the "realities" of the planetary crisis (11). Because of this "imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis" (8), the humanities are the right venue to understand why "contemporary culture finds it so hard to deal with climate change" (9). Just as Nature has been considered outside history, so has the cultural matrix against which the novel arose banished "improbable" environmental phenomena from the realm of serious fiction, which is instead concerned with "the everyday" (16). In this, the realist novel, by "conjuring up reality", has actually concealed the real (23).

However, forms of art and literature that can give voice to the uncanniness of the climate crisis are required to tackle to the Anthropocene, which has "stirred a sense of recognition, an awareness" of the "presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors" that share with humans "the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness" (30-31). This recognition of a familiarity with the nonhuman is what Ghosh – drawing on Freud's *unheimlich*, the strangely familiar and familiarly strange – calls "the environmental uncanny" (32). Namely, in these instances of recognition, humans realise that they have never been separate from nonhumans and that the nature-culture duality is illusory. Ghosh goes so far as to claim that it is Gaia herself in the time of the Great Acceleration that has "intervened to revise" (31) the nature-culture divide, as climatic perturbations of today are nothing but the "mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms" (32). Indeed, "the gap that modernity created between nature and culture, human and nonhuman" (Ghosh 2021, 167) has concurred in furthering the narrative according to which climate change is happening independently of human actions. On the contrary, the current stage of the planetary crisis is the direct result of the now-planetary scale of the environmental modifications that

were first operated by the early-modern European colonisation of much of world (167), and now compels us to recognise the centrality of nonhuman forces in human history – this is the environmental uncanny at work.

However, realistic literary forms are not equipped to portray the "unbearable intimate connections" that play out over distant temporalities and spatialities (Ghosh 2016, 63), as the temporal and spatial setting of the realist novel is limited. Once again, the problem is scalar – drawing on Chakrabarty's problematisation of fathoming different temporal scales in history, Ghosh argues that such timescales are too vast to be represented by the practices and techniques of the realist novel, which has suppressed all awareness of nonhuman agency (65). Indeed, at the time of the Anthropocene and in particular of the Great Acceleration, "the literary imagination became radically centred on the human" (66), whereas the knowledge of Nature was "consigned entirely to the sciences" (71). This "project of partitioning" (72) also caused the banishment of science fiction – that genre which has most readily dealt with climate change (7) – from the realm of serious fiction. However, in their being set almost entirely in the future, works of science fiction are not – according to Ghosh – the appropriate means of depicting the climate crisis, as this regards our present times and not some other "dimension" (73). Conversely, Donna Haraway espouses science and speculative fiction and agrees with Ursula K. Le Guin's contention that science fiction is not extrapolative but is descriptive of "reality, the present world" (Le Guin 2017, Introduction). For this reason, she laments the attitude of scholars, scientists, and technocrats who are concerned with the future of the climate crisis and are unable to act on the present condition of the planet, and claims that we should "stay with the trouble" of our "thick present" and resist the fascination of dangerous futurisms in order to find possibilities for all "terran critters" – "microbes, plants, animals, humans and

nonhumans, and sometimes even machines" inhabiting the Earth (Haraway 2016, 169) – to "get on together" through practices of "multispecies storytelling" (1–4).

Given that "the planetary crisis is rooted in the past and cannot be understood without it" (Ghosh 2021, 193) and that it is the result of historical distinctions between humans and brutes, i.e., between "who makes meaning and who does not" (195) held by mechanistic epistemologies (201), Ghosh calls for a "transformed and renewed art and literature" that allows humans to "rediscover their kinship" with nonhumans (Ghosh 2016, 162). The next chapter of this thesis attempts to demonstrate – through a close textual analysis of *Gun Island* – whether Ghosh's latest work of fiction succeeds in restoring nonhuman voices and in drawing time-space connections in the history of the climate crisis.

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2. *That Wild Tangle of Mud and Mangrove*: an ecocritical analysis of *Gun Island*

The preceding chapter has argued for the need of literary texts that tackle the changed reality of the Anthropocene. In particular, scholars and novelists have called for literary and artistic works that are able to embrace multiple temporalities and spatialities, in order to grasp the full extent of the Anthropocene, which is planetary in scale and concerns both recent human history and distant geological times. Furthermore, the planetary crisis has reminded humans of the existence of nonhumans, with which we share the planet and whose presence must be contemplated in any serious cultural and imaginative consideration of climate change. For this reason, the following close textual analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) attempts to demonstrate first the conjunctions in time and place that the Anthropocene renders manifest, to then scrutinise the human emotional and affective reaction to the uncanniness of the nonhuman; finally, the presence of the nonhuman voice in language and stories is examined to point to the role of storytelling at the time of the Great Derangement.

2.1 Towards a Cross-Temporal, Translocal and Nonhuman Ecology

The main plotline of *Gun Island* embraces multiple times and places, as the novel follows the protagonist's "strange journey" (GI, 3) across three continents – from cosmopolitan Kolkata and the rural Sundarbans in Indian West Bengal to Venice and the Mediterranean Sea through New York and California. Indisputably set in contemporary times, the timeline of Deen's journey – the novel's main character and narrator – spans across more than

two years. However, next to this historically contemporary timeline, a mythological temporality is also featured in the novel, as a second plotline reimagines the vicissitudes of Chand Sadagar and Manasa, as recounted in the *Manasamangal* – a group of Bengali religious poems originating in medieval times (Moitra 2021, 48) and possibly completed only in the seventeenth century (GI, 7) – through the story of "the Gun Merchant" (3), and his "tormentor" (166), the snake-goddess Manasa Devi.

Furthermore, the legend of Bonduki Sadagar ("the Gun Merchant") is associated from the start with a specific topography, "a shrine – a *dhaam* – in the Sundarbans" (8), the estuarine mangrove forest in the Bay of Bengal, and is also replete with "fairy-tale countries that crop up in folk tales" (17). More importantly, Deen's journey in search of the meaning of the legend will eventually lead to a conflation of historical and mythological temporalities, as both the legend and the *dhaam* are found to date back to the seventeenth century. Additionally, these temporal conjunctions are situated at the crossroads of different places and spatialities, among which are the Sundarbans and Venice. Based on theoretical works on time, place, and spatiality and on Ghosh's own theoretical paradigm, this section intends to provide a close reading of the novel's spatialities and temporalities in order to demonstrate how the novel succeeds in building time-space continuities which are evidence of the contemporary climate crisis, and which may offer new tools for the conceptualisation and understanding of the Anthropocene.

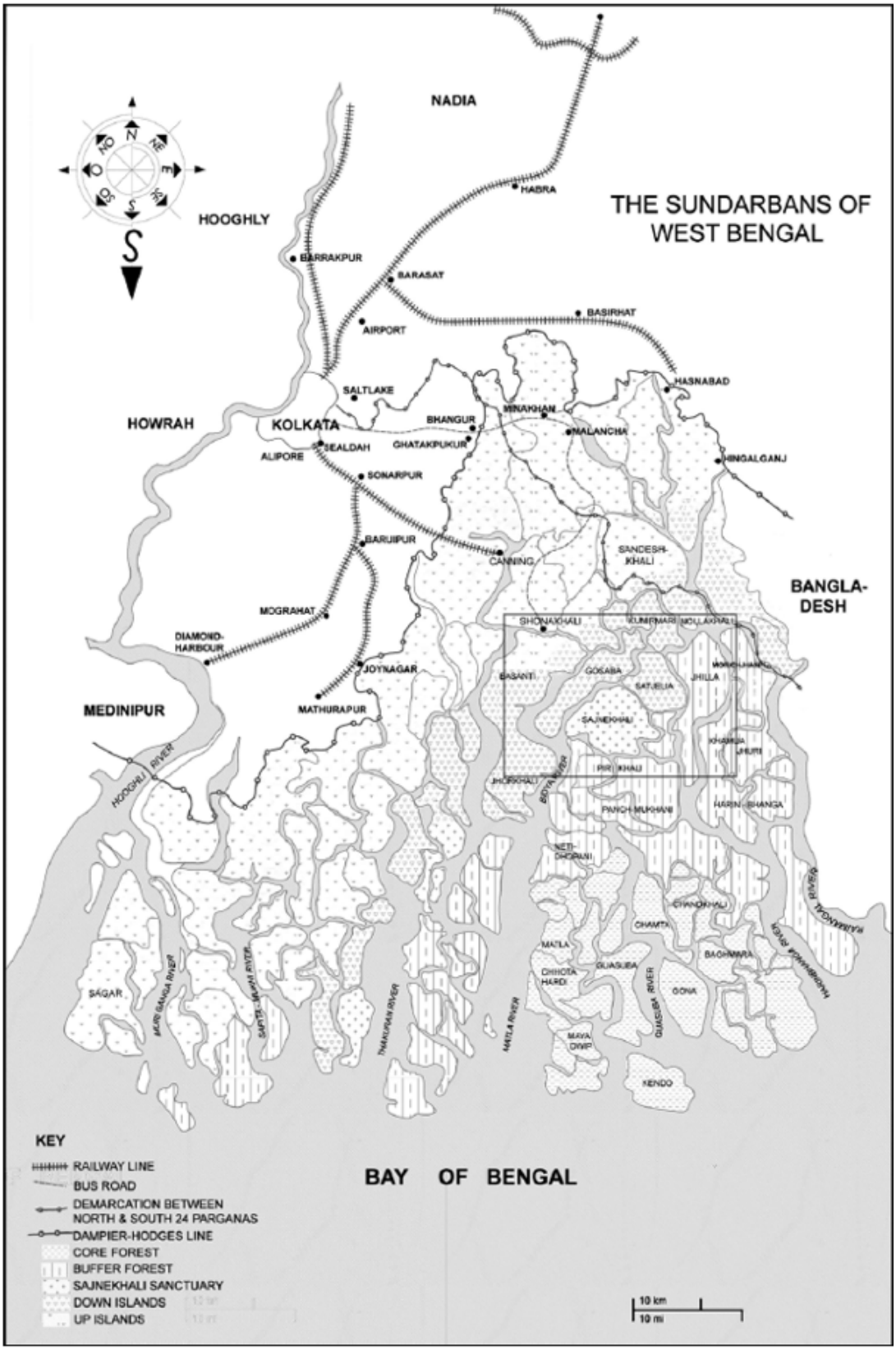

Figure 1. Indian Sundarbans (Jalais 2010, xvi)

A forest that's been moving for millions of years: Temporality and Spatiality in the Sundarbans

The Sundarbans mangrove forest in West Bengal is the starting point of Deen's journey along the footsteps of the Gun Merchant, and the spatial origin of "ecological connections" that stretch to other distant and apparently unconnected parts of the world (Newns 2021, 17). A "tiger-infested mangrove forest" "teeming with snakes" (GI, 8–9), the Sundarbans region is an extremely dynamic and changeable landscape (Ghosh 2016, 6), "where the flow of water and silt is such that geological processes that usually unfold in deep time appear to occur at a speed where they can be followed from week to week and month to month" (5). In *Gun Island*, Ghosh engages with this peculiarity of the Bengal Delta and with the ensuing "ecological destruction" (Kluwick 2020, 69) both by portraying "catastrophic aquatic events" (67) such as the 1970 Bhola and the 2009 Alia cyclones and by describing the fluctuating riverine landscape of the region as part of a "more permanent and destructive submergence" of the forest (68). For instance, the impact of the 1970 cyclone – "the greatest natural disaster of the twentieth century" (GI, 13) – on the southern islands of the Sundarbans is thus summarised:

> hamlets obliterated by the storm surge; islands where every tree had been stripped of its leaves; corpses floating in the water, half eaten by animals; villages that had lost most of their inhabitants (14).

Later on, the boatman Horen Naskar recounts his own experience during the "great cyclone of 1970" (59), when, together with his uncle, he had to take refuge on a tree in the East Pakistan side of the Sundarbans and afterwards "witnessed scenes they could never have imagined: they had had to fight off stranded mobs; they had been forced to evade thieves and river bandits, who had descended like vultures, to take advantage of the chaos" (59-60).

Interestingly, in Ghosh's previous novel set entirely in the Sundarbans, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the same character – Horen Naskar – is given two whole pages to recount what is summarised here in just one paragraph (Kluwick 2020, 71). In this previous novel, Ghosh dwelt on the precarious lives of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans, both human and nonhuman, by recounting the stories of fisherman Fokir, his wife Moyna and his son Tipu, of Horen Naskar and Kolkata-born Nirmal and Nilima. Set in the early 2000s, the novel juxtaposes the main plotline – centred on cetologist Piya and interpreter Kanai and their travels in the Sundarbans – to the events occurring around the Morichjhãpi massacre in 1978 as recounted in Nirmal's journal. Here, the devastations brought about by the daily tides and yearly cyclones are explored in greater detail, together with the ensuing human and nonhuman dislocations. Conversely, in *Gun Island* it is cyclone Alia which figures most prominently in the disruption of both human and nonhuman life in the "disaster-prone region" of the Sundarbans (Mukhopadhyay 2011, 21). Although the number of human casualties was lower than past cyclones because of the presence of warning systems for storms, its "long-term consequences were even more devastating", as

> hundreds of miles of embankment had been swept away and the sea had invaded places where it had never entered before; vast tracts of once fertile land had been swamped by salt water, rendering them uncultivable for a generation, if not forever.
>
> […] The Sundarbans had always attracted traffickers, because of its poverty, but never in such numbers as after Aila; they had descended in swarms, spiriting women off to distant brothels and transporting able-bodied men to work sites in faraway cities or even abroad. Many of those who left were never heard from again (GI, 52-53).

These words, pronounced by Moyna – a local nurse employed by Nilima's Badabon Trust – bear witness to the climatic turmoil of the Bengal Delta, where "both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans" (53) who were eventually forced to leave their homes given the transformations in the ecosystems on which their livelihoods depended. As a matter of fact, the higher-rising tides kept destroying embankments (*badh*) (53), which, once breached, caused "all life that sustains human life" to end – ponds rich in fish suddenly became poisonous wastelands, and once-fertile lands turned barren (Jalais and Mukhopadhyay 2020). As a consequence, thousands of young families left the region in search of work in India's metropolises (Jalais and Mukhopadhyay 2020) thus endangering communities already at the margins of society (Kluwick 2020, 72).

However, the novel also gives voice to the repercussions of the "constantly changing environment" (Jalais 2011, 1) of the Sundarbans on nonhumans through the character of Piya, the marine biologist who had already figured in *The Hungry Tide*. Specifically, Piya maps the migratory habits of a pod of Irrawaddy dolphins – *Orcealla brevirostris* – whose patterns of movement have become "erratic" due to "changes in the composition of the waters of the Sundarbans" (GI, 101). While it is "part of the *natural* processuality of this liminal landscape" for the Sundarbans to be "shaped and continuously reshaped by the agency of the water" (Kluwick 2020, 68 – italics mine), the changes lamented by Piya are far from natural. On the contrary, they are related to anthropogenic sea-level rise, which implies that more and more salt-water has been invading upstream stretches of river, thus making them uninhabitable to freshwater mammals. Furthermore, the life of the *Orcealla* is also threatened by fishermen's nets and motorboats (GI, 102) and by the presence of chemical effluents in the rivers, such as waste discarded by refineries and by-products of agricultural activities (105). If once the *Orcealla*

were "perfectly at home" in their environment, now "the water, the currents, the earth itself" are "rising up" against them, and neither humans nor animals know "where they belong" (106) anymore.

Besides rapid onset natural disasters such as storms and cyclones, the Sundarbans have also become stage of increasingly damaging slow onset disasters, such as sea-level rise. As Nilima asserts, "the islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they are disappearing before our eyes" (19), or, in Annu Jalais's words, "the threat of the salt-water rivers 'reclaiming' entire villages is ever present" (Jalais 2010, 2). A case in point is the location of Manasa Devi's *dhaam* near the Raimangal River bordering with Bangladesh; as the river "has moved", the *dhaam*, which used to be "a good way inland" is now "at the water's edge" (GI, 71), so that the topography of the island has been redesigned (Jalais 2010, 1).

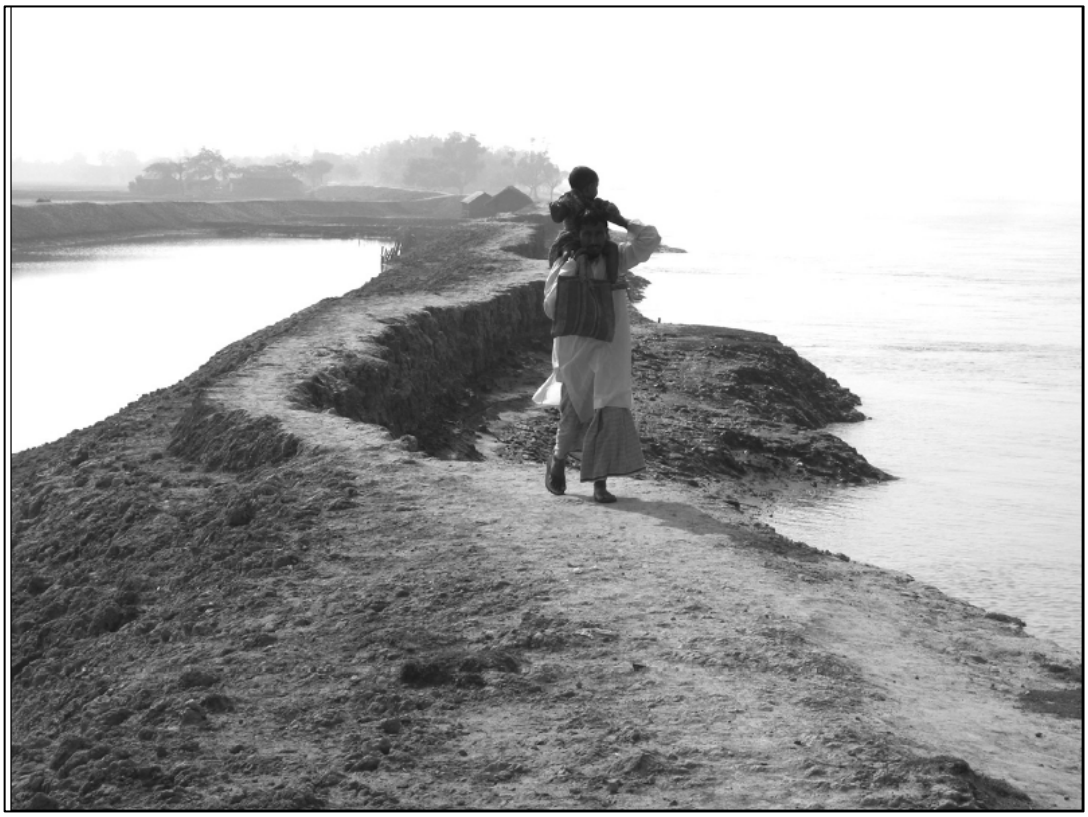

Figure 2. Walking along a badh (Jalais 106)

Throughout the novel, all characters living in the delta region (Nilima, Moyna, Horen, Tipu, Rafi and even Piya) acknowledge the impact that the "metamorphic nature of the Sundarbans" (Kluwick 2020, 68) has on their livelihoods. Rafi for instance explains that his grandfather had refused to teach him "things about animals, and fish and the water" because "things were changing so much, and so fast, that I wouldn't be able to get by here – he told me that one day I would have no choice but to leave" (93). That most people are choosing to migrate is clear evidence that "cyclones no longer signify a temporary rupture but a permanent structural change" (Kluwick 2020, 72). Indeed, sea levels in the Sundarbans have been rising "faster than anywhere else on earth", "at a rate almost double the global average" since the late 1980s (Mahadevia and Vikas 8 in Kluwick 2020, 68). This velocity is such that characters like Tipu and Rafi have seen their environment change so radically that they can no longer envisage a future there. Such rapid transformations are ultimately exemplified by the *dhaam* itself, which, while spared by the Bhola cyclone because its "walls and roof kept [the inhabitants of a nearby hamlet] safe" (15), has presently been "swept away" by a "bad storm" so that "there's nothing left of it now" (148).

Far from being a mere setting, that is, a "backdrop for the human drama that really count[s]" (Buell 2005, 4), the Sundarbans as thematised in the novel embody translocal spatialities and temporalities. As "place is succinctly definable as space – areal form in the abstract – that is bounded and marked as humanly meaningful through personal attachment, social relations, and physiographic distinctiveness" (145-147), the representation of the Sundarbans in *Gun Island* appears at first glance to be the rendition of people's interactions with their environment (Vescovi 2019, 152). In his article on Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* and Salgari's *I misteri della jungla nera* – both set in the Sundarbans –, Alessandro Vescovi argues that the traditional

binary opposition space-place that geographers have either upheld or confuted is overcome as Ghosh "envisage[s] a continuum of places crossed by multiple human and non-human trajectories" (152). Drawing on Doreen Massey's *For Space*, Vescovi suggests that the concept of time and temporality be transferred to space, thus creating the category of *spatiality*, which he defines as the "succession of different places which are felt to belong to one hyper-place" (156). His contention that the spatiality of the Sundarbans as depicted in *The Hungry Tide* converges with "trajectories that unfold in history" and are connected to "other places both now and throughout history" (156) rings even truer for *Gun Island* as it "ties local destruction to its global repercussions" even more profoundly than *The Hungry Tide* (Kluwick 69). Indeed, recently critics have recognised that contemporary environmental problems transcend a local sense of place, and as a consequence literature should overcome the representation of localist "place-attachment" and instead envisage "new forms of planetary belonging or eco-cosmopolitanism", through the imaginative creation of planetary communities of humans and nonhumans (Trexler 2015, 76–77). Eco-cosmopolitan scholar Ursula Heise, for instance, has long argued in favour of a form of literature that hinges on "connections and disjunctures across ecological scales" and that incorporates local/regional and global "forms of inhabitation" (Heise 2008, 206).

On account of this, considering the Sundarbans a mere "setting" is reductive. In the sections of *The Great Derangement* devoted to questions of scale, time and place, Ghosh himself provides a problematisation of traditional settings in the history of the novel as these are here equated to the sites surveyed by the cartographers of colonising powers in as far as they are "constructed out of discontinuities" (59). Indeed, "practical men" managed to live in the "predictability and orderliness of middle-class life (58) only by

excluding the "destructive powers of the earth" (56) from their fragmented vision of the world which ultimately "renders the interconnectedness of Gaia unthinkable" (56). Such discontinuities in thought, Ghosh argues, are reproduced by the realist novel, which aims at rationalising its novelistic universe in order to make it consonant with the "new regularity of bourgeois life" (Moretti in Ghosh 2016, 19). Thus, no vast temporal and spatial scales are represented in the realist novel, given that "each setting is particular to itself" (59) and requires a limited "period" as temporal frame (59). Only a "self-contained ecosystem" can function as proper setting in a "narratable" novel where the time-horizon must be limited, so that the worlds portrayed be finite and distinctive (61). One such bounded space is contemporary bourgeois society which, when chosen as setting for the novel, renders the literary form unable to represent the vast scale of the climate crisis (Trexler 2015, 78), which instead resist such discontinuity-producing finitude, as the "inconceivably vast" forces at play in the Anthropocene "defy the boundedness of place" (Ghosh 2016, 62) and "create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space" (63). In this view, the next two subsections will be devoted to scrutinising how Ghosh succeeds in portraying such conjunctions between times and places, firstly by surveying the ecological intersections existing between the spatialities of the Sundarbans and of Venice, to then provide a reading of the legend of Bonduki Sadagar and Manasa Devi as a translocal and cross-temporal story through the analysis of nonhuman agency both within the legend and in the novel.

An estuarine landscape of lagoons, marshes, and winding rivers: floods, water, and mud in Venice.

In her analysis of *Gun Island*'s portrayal of floods and other catastrophic events (Kluwick 2020, 67), Ursula Kluwick examines the ties between "local catastrophes" and the challenges faced by the global society (72). The "multi-layered connections" existing between apparently distant topographies are rendered manifest by climate change (73) and are illustrated in *Gun Island* by way of the topographical similarities between the Sundarbans and Venice and the climate migrations of both humans and nonhumans.

The presence of mud, water, and floods functions as topographical nexus between the Sundarbans mangrove forest and the Venetian lagoon. Relevantly, "floods become increasingly important as links between different events and settings" (69) throughout the whole novel, but even more so between the two spatialities here considered, as both are being increasingly threatened by sea-level rise and warming waters (GI, 251). Namely, there is a structural similarity between the Sundarbans and Venice since both are made of continually shifting mud (180). This is immediately presented through an aerial image – as Deen flies over the Venetian lagoon, he is reminded of the "estuarine landscape of lagoons, marshes and winding rivers" that is the Sundarbans (162). The two spatialities are thus linked by their liminal essence, as both emerge at the conjuncture of different waters and soil, which makes them "alive" (180). Just as the environment of the Sundarbans is characterised as an always moving (71, 104) and constantly changing (53, 106) negotiation between seawater and fresh water, so is Venice connoted as incredibly alive and animated, principally because of the shifting essence of the mud on which it is built (180). This liveliness is especially resonant in Cinta's apartment, which has a language of its own made of a "litany of creaks and groans" (232) and "sighs" (180).

The animation inherent in the foundations of the city, however, is made more and more uncanny as Deen discovers that something alive does indeed hide in the timber pilings on which Venice is built. Shipworms – "wriggling, moving" (250) creatures that are "literally eating the foundations of the city" (251) – are "invading" the lagoon as its waters are warming. Furthermore, a parallel is explicitly established between Venice's wooden pilings and the embankments of the Sundarbans, as Rafi notes that the latter are being burrowed by crabs (256). Commenting on this, Ursula Kluwick argues that the semantic field of "gnawing away at the structures that make human habitation possible establishes a direct link between Venice and the Sundarbans" (Kluwick 2020, 73). Relevantly, the same field of meaning was employed by Nilima to connote the action of another nonhuman agent, namely the sea, which is "swallowing up" the islands of the Bengal delta (GI, 19). Incidentally, Venice is facing a similar predicament as the Sundarbans, since climate change implies that the seasonal floods caused by cyclonic activity in the Mediterranean Sea are becoming increasingly intense and consequently there's a high risk of breaching the sandy barrier islands which keep the lagoon waters separate from the Adriatic Sea – as attested by the 1966 flood (Lionello et al. 2021, 2706, 2713). As Deen comments in the novel and as scholars confirm, lately both the height and frequency of floods have reached extreme levels (Lionello et al 2021, GI). Still, Venetians have adapted to the phenomenon of *acqua alta*, to the point that even during extreme water height, they manage to "carry on as usual" (GI 251). Deen's subtle comment on life carrying on usual despite climate change is the fictional translation of Ghosh's theory of the great derangement and humanity's blind belief in the "regularity of the world" (Ghosh 2016, 36). Namely, when Cinta and Deen are exploring *Fondamenta Nove* in search of the "much more dangerous" real-life monsters that are invading Venice, some

hollowed-out chunks of wood crack and shipworms literally invade the pier and "swarm over" the two characters, who are freed by the floodwaters of the lagoon, which appear to be valued for their "purifying" (Kluwick 2020, 75) effect while also being dangerously inundating the embankment and submerging the two immobile protagonists who are eventually chest-deep in the water (GI, 254).

The impact of climate change on the spatiality of Venice – and its relation to the Sundarbans – is therefore rendered by the joint presence of floods and of migrating human and nonhuman species. Indeed, one of the thematic threads of the novel aimed at connecting different topographies is precisely the presence of nonhumans, as virtually all spatialities are being "invaded" (251) by non-endemic nonhuman species as a consequence of rising temperatures across the globe. While in Cinta's apartment in Venice, Deen sees a small spider which will be later identified as a brown recluse – *Loxosceles reclusa* – a poisonous species native to south-central United States (Cramer and Maywright 2008, 136). Related to the Mediterranean recluse, "already widespread in Italy" (GI, 223), the brown recluse usually inhabits warmer environments than northern Italy. However, given the rising temperatures in Europe, its presence "so far north" does not surprise Piya's arachnologist friend Larry (223). Interestingly, this episode is foreshadowed by the previous appearance of a venomous yellow-bellied sea snake in LA – a species that lives in much warmer habitats but is now "migrating northwards" because of "the warming of the waters" (147). Thus, the ecological connections between distant and otherwise unrelated spatialities in the novel – among which LA, New Orleans, and the Mississippi River – are rendered manifest through the displacements of nonhuman populations caused by anthropogenic climate change (Newns 2021, 18).

The correlation between the spatialities of the Sundarbans and of Venice is additionally established through the portrayal of human migrations, which mirror the animal migrations scattered throughout the novel (Newns 2021, 16). As a matter of fact, Deen is shocked by the discovery that among the indistinct racket of words spoken in the streets of Venice, he discerns "a constant murmuring of Bangla" (238) spoken by Bangladeshi migrant labourers, who are the "second largest group" of migrants coming to Italy (161). Upon inquiring about the reasons of their migrations, Deen learns that most mobilities are "directly related to climate change" (Kluwick 72) since many have left their villages because cyclones have either wiped everything out (GI, 175) or have exacerbated familial disputes (210) and compelled young men to leave their "sinking homeland" (Kluwick 2020, 72) and look for a better life abroad. However, though the climate crisis is indeed a determining factor of their migrations, Ghosh is wary of the now-widespread umbrella term of "climate migration", as he is cognizant that natural disasters and their consequences are intertwined with political oppression and social inequalities as drivers of international migration (Ghosh 2021, 156). Indeed, migrants themselves are sometimes reluctant to label their mobilities "climate migrations", given that "political violence, the employment situation, family disagreements, and aspirations to a higher standard of living" played a part in their decision to leave Bangladesh, as a young man in Parma told Ghosh when he interviewed him in 2016 (157). "For them climate change [is] not a thing apart, a phenomenon that [can] be isolated from other aspects of their experience by a set of numbers or dates" (157); indeed, as already mentioned, the climate crisis is just one manifestation of the planetary crisis and abstracting it would imply the setting aside a whole set of related phenomena, which are instead interrelated, as Ghosh attempts to demonstrate in *Gun Island*.

In the novel – as in reality –, the Bangladeshi migrants encountered by Ghosh have found themselves in a similar environment to their homeland, since Venice, too, is a sinking city subject to seasonal floods (72). However, far from being a downside, the migrants' ability to navigate flooded environments is rather beneficial, since they are able to "earn well" on flood days – as Rafi concedes, "for us it's like home – we're used to floods" (GI, 255). This seems to contradict Rafi's grandfather's statement that his knowledge of the Sundarbans wasn't worth passing down given that everything was changing and that he would soon have to leave its sinking islands (95). What his grandfather hadn't foreseen, however, was that this knowledge, far from being localised to his native environment, would be valuable in a translocal planet of intimate connections between distant and seemingly unrelated localities.

Translocality as a theoretical tool has been employed by scholars of anthropology, geography, history, and cultural studies to describe "phenomena involving mobility, migration, circulation and spatial interconnectedness not necessarily limited to national boundaries" (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013, 373), and migration studies have adopted the term to refer to the "importance of local-local connections" during international migration (Brickwell and Datta 2011, 4). Expanding on the notion of transnationalism – which is still mainly concerned with phenomena surrounding national borders (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013, 374) – translocality points to the transgressions of fixed boundaries of scale (such as the nation state and its borders) that make up the contemporary world of reproduced spatial differences (375). Thus, translocality as conceptual framework transcends Heise's "Sense of Planet" – i.e., the cognition of the intricacies and mutual relationships of environmental and cultural places and practices (Heise 2008, 21), which still implies a scalar hierarchy between local

and global – and instead examines local relationships that are enmeshed in larger planetary processes but still maintain the significance and uniqueness of place (Newns 2021, 18).

In *Gun Island*, the human and nonhuman connections "between locations with otherwise different cultures, languages, and positions in the capitalist world system" are aimed at depicting a "mobile" and "translocal form of ecology" (18). Not only "global or planetary" (18), the translocal relations between Venice and the Sundarbans establish a new model of "ecological belonging" which allows characters like Rafi to "establish belonging in both [local] places" (18). As Newns rightly points out, the novel joins together seemingly unrelated spatialities which are dealing with the same environmental issues, thus unveiling other hidden connections either referring to economic systems, human mobilities or the cultural knowledge at large (20). Hence, Rafi's own local knowledge – apparently useless outside the Sundarbans – proves to be valuable for his livelihood in Venice and is thus translocal. Because of the deep ecological connections between these distant parts of the planet (20), his ability to discern when an "embankment [in the Sundarbans] is going to collapse" because burrowed by crabs (GI, 256) renders him an able navigator of Venice's own embankments and ecology.

In short, the correlation between climate-induced human and nonhuman displacements serves the purpose of demonstrating the scope of the climate crisis which concerns not only subaltern populations living at the margins (the Sundarbans being a case in point), but whose "detrimental effects" are seen also in "cities of very developed nations" such as the USA and Italy (LA and Venice in the novel) (Huda 2021, 111), as the planetary crisis "does not recognise borders" (Ghosh 2021, 178). Furthermore, far from equating human migrations to 'natural' and cyclical animal migrations, the novel stresses how both displacements are linked to our human history of "global

consumer capitalism" and "local unscrupulous manufacturing practices" (News 2021, 16). This is particularly evident in Cinta's assertion that the brown recluse's presence in Venice is neither "natural" nor "scientific" and that it is rather due to "*our* history" (GI, 235 – italics in the original). Indeed, Ghosh's own contribution to the literature on the climate crisis is precisely his ability to shed light on timespace connections – concealed by our fragmented worldview perpetrated by modern culture (Ghosh 2016) – by retracing humanity's footsteps in the history of our Great Derangement.

Bonduki Sadagar and Manasa Devi: models for a translocal, crosstemporal and multispecies ecology

The narrative device used by Ghosh to draw attention to the history of the planetary crisis is the legend of Bonduki Sadagar and Manasa Devi. A rewriting of the *mangalkabyas* featuring the Shiva-worshipper Chand Sadagar and his nemesis, the snake-goddess Manasa (Moitra 2021, 41), the legend recounts the story of Bonduki Sadagar and the journey he makes to flee the wrath of Manasa Devi, whom he refuses to worship. Plagued by her forces – cyclones, storms, and venomous creatures – the Bengali Merchant seeks refuge in disparate "fairy-tale countries" (GI, 17). Captured by pirates, he is freed by Nakhuda Ilyas who eventually travels with him to the "Land of Palm Sugar Candy" where they are attacked by "poison-spitting monsters" and forced to flee to the "Land of Kerchieves" where Manasa has sent "scorching winds" against them and "the land [has] become so dry that one day a burning wind had set their house afire, incinerating everything around them" (81). Captain Ilyas thus decides to travel to Gun Island, the only place where Manasa's snakes cannot reach them (81). Still, even Gun Island is not exempt from Manasa's forces as the Merchant is bitten by a poisonous spider and the goddess herself appears "to him out of the pages of a book" (17). Eventually, he yields to Manasa's powers, becomes her devotee, and builds a *dhaam* in

the Sundarbans to thank her for having set him free from the pirates who had once again captured him (18).

While listening to Nilima's recitation of parts of the epic poem narrating the legend, Deen is struck by the following lines, which appear to suggest a timeframe for the construction of the shrine: "Calcutta had neither people nor houses then / Bengal's great port was a city-of-the-world" (17). Interpreting the first line as referring to a time before the founding of Calcutta – that is, before 1690 – and the second line as being a "cryptic reference" to the enthronement of Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1605), Deen concludes that the *dhaam* must have been built between 1605 and 1690. Further in the novel, these dates are confirmed by Cinta's explanation of the spatialities of the legend, which thus becomes a probable account of a real journey from Bengal to Venice, through the Maldives, Egypt, Turkey, and Sicily made in the seventeenth century. Therefore, the *Manasamangal* is re-imagined in the novel as a journey through the "tribulations of the Little Ice Age" (136) to draw attention to "the connection between the seventeenth century and our own era of human-induced climatic perturbation" (Ghosh 2021, 53). Namely, during a conference in LA, a young historian gives a talk on "Climate and the Apocalypse in the Seventeenth Century", a period of "severe climatic disruption" renowned as the "Little Ice Age" (GI, 135), a "relatively synchronous global event noted in geologic deposits worldwide" (Lewis and Maslin 2015, 175).

> During this time temperatures across the globe had dropped sharply, […] many parts of the world had been struck by famines, droughts and epidemics in the seventeenth century. At the same time a succession of comets had appeared in the heavens, and the earth had been shaken by a tremendous outbreak of seismic activity; earthquakes had torn down cities and volcanoes had ejected untold quantities of dust and debris into the atmosphere. Millions had died: in

> some parts of the world the population had declined by a third. In these decades more wars had raged than at any time before (GI, 135).

Thus, as far as temporalities are concerned, *Gun Island* is the fictional response to Ghosh's own arguments in *The Great Derangement.* The modern novel, he argues, emerged and flourished at the backdrop of both "Protestant and secular theologies" which conceived time as an "irresistible, irreversible forward movement" (70). According to Doreen Massey, this understanding of time caused spatial difference to be conflated into temporal sequence and thus produced the modern discourse according to which Western Europe is advanced and other parts of the world are backward (Massey 2005, 68). Incidentally, this stance is unconsciously held by Deen himself, who judges Rafi's rusticity as a feature of his backwardness and deems such a "creature of the wild" – "a backwoods fisherman"– to be backwards compared to Westernised, cosmopolitan Indians (GI, 93-94). In accord with Ghosh's own theories, Massey argues that "in these discourses of modernity there was one story, which the 'advanced' countries/peoples/cultures were leading. There was only one history. The real import of spatiality, the possibility of multiple narratives, was lost" (Massey 2005, 71).

Concurrently, Ghosh argues for the importance of reclaiming silenced temporalities through which humankind can fathom the actual scale of the climate crisis. Thus, "the possibility of our deliverance lies not in the future but in the past, in a mystery beyond memory" (GI, 312), as the inscription in the Venetian church of Santa Maria della Salute testifies: "*Unde Origo Inde Salus*: From the origin salvation comes" (244). Indeed, it is in the spatiality of Venice that the temporality of the legend and the temporality of the main plotline first converge. While the narrator hints at similarities between the two spatio-temporalities through indirect semantic reiterations – in

seventeenth-century Venice "the weather *turned against* humanity" (241) and "both land and water were *turning against* those who lived in [present-day] Sundarbans" (53 – emphasis mine) –, he also explicitly notes that "the Venice I had encountered today […] was closer in spirit to the city that the Gun Merchant would have seen in the seventeenth century"(181), when humankind "started down the path that has brought us to where we are now" (137). Thus, the climate crisis is nothing but the past of the Little Ice Age "rising from its grave and reaching out to us" (139), if only with unimaginable more force, as it is as if "the very rotation of the planet had accelerated" (181). Namely, the Great Acceleration is the result of the "worldwide adoption of colonial methods of extraction and consumption" (Ghosh 2021, 196) which is responsible for the present crisis. These temporal conjunctions between past and present – now made visible by the agency of the nonhuman – is translated in the novel by the Bengali word *bhuta* which means "being" or "existing presence" and indiscriminately refers to both humans – "u and I" (114) – and nonhumans – "animals" such as snakes and dolphins (115). However, the same Sanskrit root *bhu* has also the meaning of "a past state of being" (115), hence simultaneously signifying both "existing" and "existed", which would imply – as Tipu points out – that "the past wasn't past? That the past was present in the present?" (115). Indeed, the narrator himself confirms that

> only a word derived from this root could account for our presence in the Ghetto: Rafi and I were both *bhutas* in the sense of being at once conjunctions and disjunctions in the continuum of time, space and being (170).

Besides time and space, a third element is here introduced, namely, "being". As a matter of fact, the novel accounts for yet another convergence. As noted when discussing the parallelisms between human and animal migrations, the novel draws attention to the human encounter with the nonhuman, which

figures prominently both in the legend and in Deen's own journey and which dismantles modernity's conceptions of a disconnected world. As Ghosh acknowledges in *The Great Derangement*, the novel has perpetuated the "project of partitioning" which is the intensification of the imaginary chasm between Nature and Culture (2016, 68), thus silencing "every archaic reminder of Man's kinship with the nonhuman" (70). However, the Anthropocene forces us to recognise the "uncanny intimacy of our relationship with the nonhuman" (33), which has never vanished from the consciousness of people whose livelihood directly depends on their environment, as for example the people living in the Sundarbans mangrove forest have always been aware of animals possessing intelligence and agency (64); similarly, "all around the world, ordinary people appear[ed] to have sensed the stirring of something momentous" in the years now referred to as the Little Ice Age (GI, 137).

While "novels do not usually bring multiple universes into conjunction" (Ghosh 2016, 59), Ghosh portrays a spatiality that is open and dynamic, namely the sea, which "suggests that we think with a different, nonlinear, nonmeasurable notion of time" because of the extremely alive, lively and vitalist essence of its waters (Steinberg and Peters 2015, 255–56) – vitality which, as seen above, was already shared by Venice and the Sundarbans. Thus, "space ceases to be a stable background" (258) as the waters of the novel – far from being a mere setting – are the active spatiality in which the encounters between past and present, humans and nonhumans can take place and the potentiality of "multiple narratives" (Massey 2005, 71) become an actuality. This conjunction of multiple spatialities, temporalities, and beings reaches its climax in the final pages of the novel, when Deen, Piya, Cinta, and Rafi are aboard a ship in the Mediterranean Sea waiting for the arrival of the Blue

Boat, a "fishing boat crowded with refugees" (GI, 264) from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Bangladesh.

Unexpectedly, millions of migratory birds, various species of dolphins and whales, and dinoflagellates are crossing the sea as well, giving rise to a "storm of living beings, of *bhutas*" (307). In her analysis of natural borders in *Gun Island*, Lucinda Newns contends that this superimposition of human and nonhuman migrations first points to a fundamental difference between the two mobilities: while animals are free to fly and swim across the Mediterranean, for the humans on the Blue Boat this spatiality represents an international border which they are not normally allowed to cross (Newns 2021, 19). Incidentally, the same boundedness and restrictions of movement had been pointed out by Tipu with reference to the Raimangal River functioning as natural and national border between India and Bangladesh. While moving across the two nations implies passing through recognised border zones with the apt documents such as passports and visas, "pieces of paper" which possess a "kind of sacredness" for Deen (GI, 64), for Rafi "all you have to do is cross the river and you're in Bangladesh" (64). The permission to cross this border, however, is not granted to many "dirt-poor, illiterate" (65) people, who eventually resort to irregular migrations. Nonetheless, the Mediterranean Sea, "along with its nonhuman inhabitants, exerts its presence and agency in resisting its role as border guard" (Newns 2021, 19) by being the spatiality against which the miraculous "series of migratory patterns intersecting in an unusual way" (GI, 309) takes place, thus allowing the admiral of the Italian Navy to rescue the migrants – the Interior Minister had claimed that refuges would be allowed to enter Italy "only in the event of a miracle" (309). As the materiality of the seas and oceans is flowing, dynamic and alive, Steinberg and Peters suggest thinking the geopolitics of the Anthropocene as "dynamic assemblage, in which mobile

human and nonhuman elements and affects are not merely passively consumed but imagined, encountered, and produced" (Steinberg and Peters 2015, 256). Such an assemblage is a territorial whole that is shaped and reshaped by dynamic components which are both independent and in relation with each other (255). Furthermore, thinking with the vitality and dynamicity of liquid matter and conceiving the waters of seas and oceans as places of continuous, nonlinear change implies embracing a notion of time that is itself open, "nonlinear and fluctuating" (256), thus allowing for multiple narratives and for the encounter of human and nonhuman creatures on the move (256).

Pertinently, the "miraculous spectacle" (GI, 307) in the Mediterranean Sea echoes the salvific episode at the end of the legend of Bonduki Sadagar, when "the creatures of the sky and sea [were] rising up" to save the Merchant from his captors (306). Throughout the novel, just as Deen and Tipu's journeys mirror the odyssey of the Merchant, so are the nonhumans of the legend reappearing in the contemporary spatialities of the novel; for instance, when in Venice the Merchant is bitten by a poisonous spider, which also appears to Deen and Rafi in Cannaregio. Thus, the agency of the more-than-human is restored through the medium of the story of Bonduki Sadagar. Relevantly, it is the presence of the "voice-carrier" Manasa Devi (167) – a "travelling figure that emerges in different places and times" – that makes the communication between animals and humans possible (Newns 2021, 20). Without her mediation, "humans – driven, as the Merchant, by the quest for profit – would recognise no restraint in relation to other living things" (GI, 167). Indeed, excessive greed is lamented in the novel as a cause of anthropogenic climate change and of the contemporary derangement that renders humans blind to their predicament. Right from the start, the presence of the *dhaam* in the Sundarbans is explained precisely because of its relevance as "frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye" (9).

In the Bay of Bengal, a "war between profit and Nature is fought" (9), and indeed the two protagonists of the novel, Bonduki Sadagar and Deen, are both merchants – Deen himself, being a "dealer in rare books" (3), is a "merchant in his own right" (Moitra 2021, 55).

Both the Sundarbans as a spatiality and Manasa Devi as an agent have the role of mediating between humans and nonhumans, who have "no language in common and no shared means of communication" (GI, 167). In his latest nonfiction work, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh expands on the possibility of a human-nonhuman communication and on the process of silencing the nonhuman. Here, by tracing the history of the nutmeg's habitat in the Banda Islands, he dates the origins of today's planetary crisis back to seventeenth century European early capitalism and colonialism in the East and West Indies. As mentioned in the first chapter, Ghosh attributes the silencing of the nonhuman voice to the history of Western colonialism and capitalism, as the consumerist way of life requires for nature to be an inert resource, capable only of producing sounds but unable to produce meaning (189). The muteness conferred to Nature, Ghosh argues, was also reflected in the project of silencing "the brutes", i.e., those populations conveniently considered outside history – for example the Amerindian peoples –, so that colonisation also implied a "process of subjugating, and reducing to muteness, an entire universe of beings that was once thought of as having agency, powers of communication, and the ability to make meaning" (190). The process of rendering nature a mere resource to be dominated and exploited, thus, first required for it to become "brute".

Hence, Ghosh thematises both human and nonhuman migrations in an attempt to restore the voices of silenced humans and to raise awareness of the presence of nonhumans and their interconnection with human history. Namely, in the latter part of the novel, Palash tells Deen that he has always

dreamt of moving to Europe because "the world told me I couldn't; because it was denied to me. When you deny people something, it becomes all the more desirable" (GI, 291). To underscore the relevance and "vitality" (Ghosh 2021, 192) of history, Ghosh explains how the "derelict refugee boat" – the Blue Boat – embodied the overturning of the "centuries-old project" that was chattel slavery and indentured labour, which changed the "demographic profile of the entire continent" (GI, 305). That past, however, is reaching out to the present and completely reversing its functioning systems, as now the migrants in the novel have "launched their own journeys" to follow their dreams, alimented by the same "desires and appetites" that drove Western capitalism to first make use of slavery (304). Thus "Deen perceives a direct line from colonialism and chattel slavery […] to the world-shaping powers wielded in the Anthropocene" (Cole 2021, 13). Indeed, as a line from Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* Encyclical quoted in *The Great Derangement* recalls, "a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor" (Ghosh 2016, 157).

Thus, given that Western culture has silenced both 'undesirable' humans and nonhumans and that "the question of who makes meaning and who does not" is central to the origin and predicament of the planetary crisis (Ghosh 2021, 195), then those past stories where the presence of the nonhuman is still alive may prove to convey a salvific message in the Anthropocene. Indeed, to counteract the historical tendency of a certain part of the world population to believe in the muteness of other beings and in their inability to tell stories, Ghosh employs the figure of the "portavoce" Manasa Devi as an agent who grants humans the ability to "awake" (GI, 237) to the ecological consciousness, which can be achieved only through the recognition of the uncanniness of the nonhuman.

Figure 3. Manasa Devi's mud idol in the Sundarbans (Wikipedia)

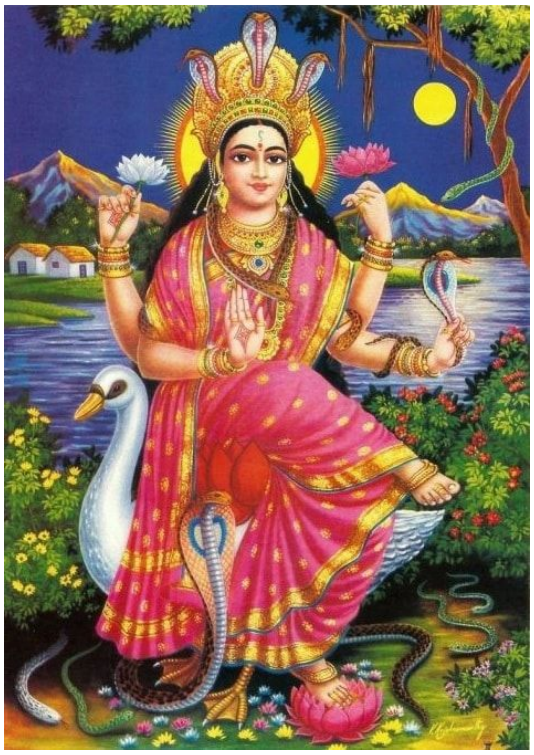

Figure 4. Manasa Devi (dheevi.com)

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2.2 Affect and the Ecological Awakening to the Nonhuman

In *The Great Derangement,* Ghosh argues that the presence of the nonhuman in the spatiality of the Sundarbans is so vital that it leads to "innumerable moments of recognition" (Ghosh 2016, 6), *viz*, instances in which an already-existing awareness flashes before our eyes when we encounter the otherness we had expelled from consciousness (6). This leads to a passage from ignorance to knowledge, which arises from a renewed reckoning with a potentiality that lies within oneself (4-5). As in Ghosh's own experience, in *Gun Island*, too, the Sundarbans plant a seed of recognition both in the mind of the main character, Deen, and in the emotionality of Tipu, a modern Merchant of sorts. Indeed, the Sundarbans – and partially Venice – are outside Deen's "normative and lived experiences" (De 2021, 65), thus being an apt spatiality for the ecological awakening through the "affective uncanny", which "includes the diverse cultural imaginary of postcolonial modernity with all its uncertainties and tensions" (72). In this section, Deen's emotional responses to the agency of the nonhuman are analysed to highlight the shortcomings of the human understanding and imagination of the more-than-human (69) in order to "recuperate a nuanced view of human agency that enables humans to engage more fully with the unprecedented crisis" (Johns-Putra in Cole 2021, 15). This will also bring to light the "conjunctions in being" (GI, 170) between humans and "two zoological species" (De 2021, 74) – the snake and the spider – as these are most emblematic of the "powerful grip" (74) that the affective uncanny has on Deen.

The above section on translocality has demonstrated how the people of the mangrove forest no longer know where "they belong" (GI, 109); in other words, because of the climate crisis, they too are "anxious" (De 2021, 71)

about the future of their ecosystem and their livelihoods. Thus, before analysing Deen's emotional awakening to the ecological and affective uncanny, a few words must be written about Tipu's own reckoning with the nonhuman of his home environment. At the beginning of the novel, Tipu is a rebellious character who works in the "people-moving industry" (GI, 65), connecting prospective migrants who "need help finding a better life" (65) to "connection men or *dalals*", i.e., smugglers. From the start it is evident that Tipu cares about money, as he works in this industry mostly because it is quite profitable. For this reason, he is deeply aware that everyone in the world is *possessed* by greed, as he confesses wanting "more everything" (121) and underscores how Deen himself desires to "sell more books" (121). Starting his journey as a modern greedy Merchant, Tipu will eventually end up on the Blue Boat in the Mediterranean having followed Bonduki Sadagar's steps and travelled as an irregular migrant through Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt.

The metamorphosis in Tipu's *Weltanshauung* is undoubtedly brought about by a nonhuman agent, namely by the king cobra protecting Manasa Devi's *dhaam*, which bites Tipu "with astonishing speed and power" (84). Interestingly, the cobra's venom is only alluded to and at first referred to as "something" that the cobra put into Tipu, and which can never be totally expunged (84). Indeed, Tipu himself laments that there is "something inside of me" that is "taking hold of me" (87). Thus, the venom is not merely a poisonous substance that has invaded Tipu's body, but it is rather a "burning ember" (88) that has seemingly possessed Tipu, or rather freed him from what already possessed him, i.e., greed and a detachment from the environment. As a matter of fact, the two are connected, as "commercial greed […] destroys the living environment" (Huda 2021, 110). During the venom-induced delirium, Tipu is in a different state of "consciousness" – he is "blessed with

Manasa's visions" (Moitra 2021, 57) – which allows him to be aware of the "shadows" and "moving voids" against which snakes – presumably voice-carrier Manasa's messengers – are protecting him (GI, 88-90). These shadows are chasing Rani, the individual *Orcealla* whose pod Piya has been studying and who is now said to be in danger (92); Piya will discover the pod of dolphins to have beached themselves simultaneously, so that Tipu's premonition ends up being true. The essence of the shadows is never clarified in the novel but given that they seem to be the cause of the pod's beaching they can very well symbolise the uncanniness of climate change and man's inability to come to terms with it, as Tipu "could never explain what it was he was *afraid* of" (257, emphasis mine). Besides this first premonition, Tipu will oftentimes be caught by seizures, which terrify him as he sees "a kind of darkness closing in around him" (257). Taking this darkness to be a symbol of climate change could be coherent with the sense of *fear* of "loss, devastation and death" which engenders the anxiety that "plays a significant role in serious environmental engagement" (De 2021, 68), but which is not conducive to action when wanting a balancing positive emotion, such as hope (Cole 2021, 16). As a matter of fact, Tipu is never paralysed by anxiety, as his visions allow him to have hope, indeed almost certainty, about a better future and to endure present hardship, as for instance during his journey to and on the Blue Boat.

Conversely, Deen is paralysed by anxiety for the better part of the novel and will be able to "overcome [his] initial passivity" and be "moved to action" only as the "crisis intensifies" (Cole 2021, 15). This is quite striking if we consider that the first line of the novel immediately defines the plot as a "strange journey" (GI, 3), thus establishing a moving and mobile chronotope. Still, Deen acknowledges from the start that his initial emotional condition is one of "planned placidity", as he "spared no effort to live a quiet, understated, uneventful life" (8). Indeed, placidity is the very opposite of anxiety as it

connotes an "absence of agitation" (OED), and is even opposed to any kind of emotion, term which etymologically refers to "movement" as it derives from the Latin root *moveo* (to move) (De 2021, 75). Furthermore, Deen starts his journey with almost no "ecopolitical sensitivity" (Cole 2021, 16) as he "didn't much care for swamps and mangroves" (GI, 19), and he himself acknowledges that "the reasonable, practical, cautious parts" of him were "dead set against going" (21). While De claims that the legend makes "Dinanath deeply inquisitive" and "passionately drawn" to unveiling its hidden meaning (De 2021, 69), in actuality Deen doesn't immediately find reasons that are "worth the risk of a trip to the Sundarbans" (GI, 24), as not even the disquiet he feels towards a televised version of the *Manasamangal* (22) and the interest that the dating of the legend arouses incite him to act. Namely, what will first set him in motion is neither his own volition nor the intervention of nonhuman factors, or at least not directly, as it is Cinta's "very strange" (27) call that finally convinces Deen to "go to that temple after all" (48). Cinta phones Deen because of a "dream or memory" she had about an image that appeared before her eyes of Deen standing in front of a tent (26). Reminiscing about this episode – occurred when Cinta had visited Calcutta more than twenty years before –, Deen discovers that what had originally struck his friend was the image of "a female figure with snakes wrapped around her body – Manasa Devi" (28). Thus, it could be said that Manasa's agency is acting through Cinta, eventually convincing Deen "not to do the easy thing, just out of habit" (48) and unconsciously setting his journey in motion.

While a visit to the Sundarbans is a necessary condition for Deen's awakening, it is not sufficient in itself. Namely, Deen the "intruder" in the cobra's lair stands "frozen" when the king cobra appears before his eyes (83), as its "uncanny presence" "paralyses" him (De 2021, 70). However, while

the cobra's venom literally transforms Tipu, who lets his consciousness be affected by the nonhuman, Deen still falters as he rushes back to "civilization" (GI, 73). The closing image of chapter six is peculiarly enlightening, as Deen is grateful to step back on a plane, thus entering "an impregnably metallic, mechanical, man-made womb, where everything served to protect [him] from that world of mud and its slithering, creeping inhabitants" (111). The plane, just as the airport – whose "rituals" "signalled a return to sanity" (111) – is to be considered in the terms of Augé's non-place, i.e., "a neutrally engineered space […], designed to provide security for the displaced without the thick platial identity connoted by place" (Buell 2005, 145). Throughout the novel, after having fearful experiences resulting in anxiety and/or paralysis, Deen often tries to hold on to the sense of security provided by an idea of civilization. This usually results in the disavowal of the experience itself, denoted now as an "extended hallucination" and an "absurd expedition" (GI, 110), which he must have been "mad" to undertake (111).

The same reassuring idea of civilisation is found in the two encounters with the yellow-bellied sea snake in LA and the brown recluse in Venice and is opposed to a sense of disorientation *vis à vis* the improbable and inconceivable presence of the nonhuman in such "civilised" (252) spatialities. For instance, Cinta expresses her disbelief that her niece's dog is killed by a snake bite "here in LA!" "I don't' believe it" (145) and Deen too is dumbstruck to hear that there could be an infestation of poisonous spiders "in Venice? Surely not?" (223). As a matter of fact, Venice is portrayed as a civilised city "secure from nonhuman intrusion" (166) and devoid of fauna (200), so that Deen understands why the Merchant "would feel safe here, beyond the reach of Manasa Devi and the creatures and forces that she commanded" (166). Conversely, as De underscores, the presence of the king cobra in the *dhaam* is not "beyond scientific environmental understanding", but it is rather

"logically acceptable" as the "mangrove forest is one of the 'natural' habitats of cobras" (De 2021, 71) – if still perceived as an unusual encounter resulting in paralysis by Deen, who confesses that "such things don't happen to people like myself – reclusive antiquarians" (GI, 83). However, the uncanniness of climate change lies precisely in its inescapability, so that both the legend and Deen's journey demonstrate that "fleeing to another place" is not a "valuable option" (Huda 2021, 112).

Repudiating the transformative effect of the nonhuman also implies forgetting about its richness, as Deen's connotation of the Sundarbans throughout the first six chapters attests. Namely, as seen above, when Deen begins his journey, he is indifferent to "swamps and mangroves" (GI, 19) and "impenetrable battlements of mud and tangled foliage" (71) with its "slimy, slithering things" (72). After leaving the Sundarbans, his idea of the environment is unchanged, as he still considers them a "wild tangle of mud and mangrove" (111), thus utterly disregarding what Piya had shown him, *viz* the "incredible variety of life forms" that populate the "innumerable streams" that make up one single river (104) of the Sundarbans, which hence becomes a "small ecological niche" with an "astonishing proliferation of life" (104).

Still, the presence of mud in the mind of Deen is relevant, as it is one of the translocal nonhuman agents which deeply affect him. Just as Tipu is possessed by the transformative venom of the king cobra, so is Deen's feeling of being possessed associated with the mud of the Sundarbans even when he is no longer in that spatiality. This superimposition of the effects of the cobra's venom and the mud of the mangrove forest is suggested by the following paragraph, where Deen laments feeling a "burning sensation stewing in [his] guts"; similarly, Tipu felt there was a "burning ember" inside his body (88):

> "It was as if *some living thing had entered my body*, *something ancient that had long lain dormant in the mud*. I could only think of it in analogy to germs or viruses or bacteria, yet I knew it was none of those things: 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* – something fearsome, *venomous* and overwhelmingly powerful, something that would not allow me to *be rid of it*" (113, emphasis mine).

As a matter of fact, Rafi had claimed that "one can never *be rid of*" what the king cobra "puts in you" (84, emphasis mine). This first moment of recognition in Deen happens only "weeks after" his return to Brooklyn (113) and is conceptualised as a kind of possession, as if something had entered his body. Relevantly, "germs or viruses or bacteria" (113) will also be mentioned a few pages later, when Tipu videocalls Deen and tells him that he looks like he has got something "inside" (121). Thus, a conversation about possession and greed ensues, and Tipu warns Deen not to get scared on the way to meeting Cinta in LA, as that trip will help him "get rid of that bacteria or whatever that's got into your head" (124). Asis De argues that this feeling of being haunted by "something that had long lain dormant in the mud of the Sundarbans" and which has now "entered his body" (141) is an instance of "affective bioregional attachment" (De 2021, 78) – although Deen is an expat, "he is emotionally emplaced in the cultural space of his country of origin" (78). However, it can be argued that Deen doesn't immediately feel attached to the Sundarbans and at times seems to repudiate his cultural origins, especially as he mocks his fellow countrymen's "superstitious" belief in stories and rather aligns to a westernised secular rationality (GI, 36). Certainly, it is Cinta – once again – who sheds light on the legend being a "lifeless fragment" for Deen (35), whereas the audience of the *jatra* performance in Calcutta were

"completely spellbound" (34), as for them "that poem is alive" and "more real than real life" (36). A debate on the concepts of natural and supernatural follows, where Cinta debunks Deen's secular stance and instead argues that not believing in the supernatural means not believing in the natural either, as "neither can exist without the other" (37). Thus, this affective attachment to the nonhuman is not a condition inherent in Deen and present from the beginning, but it is rather slowly negotiated as its uncanny agency gives rise to experiences that "fall outside our usual range of explanations" (38) which will force Deen to fully embrace the uncanniness of the nonhuman. Indeed, not "every form of human or non-human behaviour may […] be visible to human logic or subject to explanation or causation, but that does not imply their absence" (De 2021, 71).

After his first partial awakening occasioned by the joint influence of the king cobra and the mud of the mangrove forest, Deen still needs to undergo other transformations before he can fully awake to the presence of the nonhuman. While flying over LA, he witnesses the devastation produced by wildfires when his attention is suddenly caught by two birds of prey fighting over their catch, namely a "twisting, writhing, sinuous animal" (GI, 129). This makes Deen unconsciously scream "Snake! Snake!" (130), as he is "not aware then" of what he has done, but only registers a "sound burst[ing] from my throat" (129). Indeed, something seemed to have possessed him as he didn't "know what got into me" (130). Deen is so deeply affected by this that he becomes even more inert, and it is only inertia which keeps him in LA since "to go back to the airport to arrange a return flight [to New York] was more than I could bring myself to do […]. Instead I got into a taxi" (130). Thus, despite Tipu's warning of the necessity of his being in LA with Cinta, Deen is still passive and nonattentive to the messages that both humans and nonhumans are trying to convey to him. This sense of immobility is not

overcome even after the episode of the yellow-bellied sea-snake (145) and Cinta's unveiling of the historical plausibility of the legend (155), as Deen's promise to go to Venice "began to seem increasingly implausible" (158). As a matter of fact, Deen himself acknowledges that he "fell into a kind of paralysis, a state of drawn-out, perpetual panic" so that many months go by before something happens – Cinta's niece needs him to work as Bengali translator during her interviews with Bengali migrants and thus organises his trip to Venice herself. Deen is "so moved that [his] eyes filled with tears" (161). Curiously, his being *moved* here references both his being emotionally affected and his being put in physical motion by external forces (OED).

Still, the agency of the affective and environmental uncanny is mostly embodied by the presence of the brown recluse in Venice, *viz* when Rafi gives a "cry of alarm" after spotting a "large, long-legged spider scuttling away into the shadows" (GI, 184). The uncanniness of the encounter is mostly due to its effect on Rafi's mind, as he remembers an episode of the legend where the Merchant, certain to be "beyond his tormentor's grasp" in the security of Gun Island (166) is "bitten by a poisonous spider" (187). Thus, the legend is re-enacted in the present by the uncanny presence of the spider, which unsettles Deen (De 2021, 74) as he can hardly fathom these "improbable intersections between the past and the present" (GI, 201) that can only be grasped by his rational attachment to the safe concept of "pure chance", which implies that "nothing was outside the range of the probable" (201). However, the environmental uncanny does entail a "dissociation from the orderly and the normative" (De 2021, 72), indeed from the probable, as after this shocking encounter, Deen is "seized by" a sense of "dread" and feels "paralysed" (GI, 205) – "it was as if something or someone had taken possession of us [Deen, Tipu, and Rafi] for reasons beyond our understanding" (205). Also, he soon encounters another spider in Cinta's

apartment, which frightens him even more as he recalls that some "spiders are poisonous" (215).

Yet, Deen still wavers between the sense of panic produced by the nonhuman and his rationalistic attitude which convinces him that "spiders are everywhere" and that to read some other meaning into this encounter would imply losing his sanity (215 and De 2021, 74). Deen's blindness to the natural uncanny is tantamount to his unwillingness to read meanings into his experiences, indeed to recognise that "nonhuman forces have the ability to intervene directly in human thought" (Ghosh 2016, 31), recognition that finally happens thanks to the Aldine Press edition of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, "a fifteenth century allegorical text" (GI, 225) in which a man "dreams a dream in which he is dreaming creatures, sculptures and monuments" and where "voices and messages emanate from beings of all sorts – animals, trees, flowers, spirits…" (227). While looking at the images of "writhing snakes" (228) in the book, he feels close to the Gun Merchant (228), who is thought to have seen the same images when in Gun Island. This has a transformative effect on Deen, as he has the "uncanny feeling" that he had become part of the dreams of "fantastical" creatures such as spiders, and sea snakes (227). As a matter of fact, back in Cinta's apartment, when he jumps back "in fright" because a migratory bird has fallen "against the windowpane with a thud" (230), he "suddenly ha[s] an odd feeling at the back of [his] neck" (231). At this point Deen is more aware of the presence of the nonhuman as "everything seem[s] to be alive" (231); however, "concurrent emotions" (De 2021, 70) still affect him, given that his reaction is once again of anxiety and disquiet and he has to "calm himself" (GI, 231).

It is only during a conversation with Cinta that Deen can finally appreciate the extent of the environmental uncanny. Here, Deen confesses to feeling as if he were not in control of his actions, as if he were losing his will and

freedom, especially after the "unsettling" encounter with the brown recluse (234). Also, he does acknowledge that there may be a "connection" between them – which he had until now refused to recognise – but still he finds a "natural, scientific explanation" – "global warming" (234). Cinta rebukes that "the spider's presence here" is "natural" or "scientific", and instead claims that it is rather due to human history. Thus, Deen does have a "prior *connection*" with that spider, as the actions of all humans are directly linked to the unusual migration patterns of nonhuman species (235 – emphasis mine). Indeed, "the events set in motion by global warming have an intimate *connection* with humans […] because we have all contributed in some measure, great or small, to their making (Ghosh 2016, 32 – emphasis mine). At this point Cinta also reveals that Deen's feeling of being possessed is actually an awakening, as he was already possessed by the "impersonal systems" which govern our world and make humankind lose "their sense of their presence in the world" (GI, 236). That humans "go about [their] daily business through habit" and "surrender […] willingly to whatever it is that has us in its powers" (237) is evidence of the "phantasmal dissolution of agency and responsibility which the climate crisis precipitates" (Cole 2021, 14). Thus, by pointing to the intersections between the natural, the scientific, the historical and the emotional, Cinta brings to light the "historicity of the cultural production of nature" (De 2021, 75) but also provides a source of hope in the form of an "emotionally and ecologically balanced existence of all humanity and the biosphere" (75). Indeed, thanks to the legend of Bonduki Sadagar, the mediation of Manasa Devi (Moitra 2021, 57), and the environmental uncanny, Deen is "waking up to things that [he] had never imagined or sensed before" (GI, 237), i.e., that were thought to be "beyond the scale of human understanding" (De 2021, 71). It is relevant, then, that at first Deen believed that "there's nothing and no one here but us…", given

that what Tipu saw during his venom-induced delirium, was "invisible" to him (GI, 89). However, while looking at the images in the *Hypnerotomachia*, Deen becomes aware of "voices and messages" (227) that he used to be unable to hear, thus finally recognising the "presence and proximity of non-human interlocutors" (Ghosh 2016, 30).

In *The Great Derangement,* Ghosh confesses that the "vast majority of human beings" is guided by "the inertia of habitual motion" (54), just as Deen in the novel tends to do "the easy thing, just out of habit" (GI, 48). For this reason, Deen's journey through the Merchant's footsteps, from fear to agency (Cole 2021, 16), functions as a proxy for the reader, who is thus incited to look at the climate crisis as a "transformed context" for "cooperative action and shared responsibilities" (16) in the light of "collective survival" (Ghosh 2016, 54). Though this era of climate change mostly causes anxiety (De 2021, 78), the "outpouring of hope, goodness, charity and generosity" kindled by the conjunctions in human and nonhuman migrations in the Mediterranean (GI, 295) not only sets Deen "free" (294), but also signals a potential "moment when everything changes", an "awakening happening around the world" (310) to new collective "ethical values justifying the rights of all human and non-human creatures" (De 2021, 78). Finally, the superimposition and interdependence of the concepts of natural and supernatural is embodied by the "storm of living things, *bhutas*" (307), as the miracle of the legend is re-enacted by the "series of migratory patterns intersecting in an unusual way" (309), which appears to be supernatural but also to lie within "scientific reasoning" (De 2021, 73), given that what appears miraculous to most spectators is "scientific to the expert" (73) – the scientist Piya.

However, Ghosh has been criticised for his lack of realism in this last part of the novel, i.e., when envisaging alternative presents and futures. For instance, Kluwick claims that this climactic episode "most fully embraces the supernatural" and is presented as a "spiritual event", thus being a "clear deviation from realism" (Kluwick 2021, 74). While she does consider the miracle a "benign sign of cross-species connection" (75), she also contends that Ghosh's ability to stay within the confines of realism wavers when it comes to the representation of hope (76) as the "supernatural" image of the "ocean'd earth" – taken from the *Manasamangal* – indicates that any future projection of inter-species cooperation resides "in the realm of the miraculous" (76). Whereas she demonstrates that the presence of floods and the agency of the water throughout the novel function as "connector[s]" and prevent the "disintegration of his text into disparate parts" (75), thus being as a "potent realist device" (76) through which the realist novel is "capable of representing climate change", she also claims that Ghosh's faith in realism fades when he tries to envisage a future of social cooperation in response to the climate crisis (76).

Indeed, as Lucio De Capitani has underscored, the hope resulting from the final episode of the "stand-off between different types of crowds" (de Capitani 2020, 121) does not arise out of a "collective effort" but originates in the actions of an individual – the Italian admiral (121). As seen above, the admiral allows the miraculous appearance of the storm of *bhuta* to affect him and eventually convinces him to rescue the refugees. Interestingly, Admiral Vigonovo, besides being an "honest man", is also a devout Catholic (GI, 287), and does not hide that his "religious beliefs" (310) may have played a part in his decision. This episode is just an instance of the presence of the "sacred" (Ghosh 2021, 161) in the novel, as Cinta herself – the guiding humanist – resorts to prayer when overwhelmed by the agency of the nonhuman in the

guise of the floodwaters submerging her (GI, 253). Furthermore, religious concepts play a fundamental role in the novel, as Deen's awakening to the uncanniness of the nonhuman is also mediated by the concepts of natural and supernatural, which, as Cinta points out, were labels used by the Catholic Inquisition to promote "true religion" (37). Finally, Cinta's words (echoing anthropologist Ernesto de Martino's works) may indeed serve to respond to Kluwick's criticism of the improbability and supernaturality of the final miracle, given that "the label of the 'supernatural' implies that:

> unexplained forms of causation cannot in principle exist. Yet, as de Martino shows, there are many well-documented instances of things that cannot be explained by so-called "natural" causes" (GI 38).

⁂

2.3 *Gun Island* v. *Jungle Nama* – Storytelling and the Nonhuman

By choosing to write *Gun Island* in the form of a realist novel with a traditionally linear plotline, Ghosh seems to have found a way to give voice to the reality of climate change in our present time and space while staying within the confines of "serious fiction" (Ghosh 2016, 7-9). However, a further narrative layer is needed – the legend of Bonduki Sadagar – to represent the Anthropocene and investigate the history of the human relationship with the nonhuman, which transcends the boundaries of the realist novel, given that most Western middle-class forms of art and literature – including the realist novel – were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognising the realities of the Anthropocene – what Ghosh terms the Great Derangement (11). Namely, in its evocation of what was considered to be reality, the novel concealed the improbable in its foregrounding of the orderly, rationalised and secular everyday uniformitarianism (17-25). However, many peoples have always been aware of "elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with other beings, and even perhaps the planet itself" (63), and which have been given voice to in traditional forms of narrative (64). For this reason, those belief systems and storytelling practices and techniques need to be recuperated, considering that "the Anthropocene has forced us to recognise that there are other, fully aware eyes looking over our shoulders" (66).

Ghosh has attempted to fictionally translate the theorical content of his nonfiction work on the Anthropocene in *Gun Island* and *Jungle Nama*, where he has experimented with different narrative forms, namely the novel – within the confines of realism – and a "graphic verse" (Rakshit and Gaur 2021, 7) in the form of the modernised version of a legend from the Sundarbans, *Bon Bibi Johuranama*. The legend of Bonbibi – of which written

versions date to the nineteenth century (Ghosh and Toor 2021, 74) – narrates the story of Dokkhin Rai, a Brahmin sage who lived in the forest and became so greedy as to declare himself "lord and master of the mangrove forest" and thus acquired a tiger avatar to enforce his reign and prey on humans (Jalais 2011, 70), and of the Lady of the Forest Bonbibi and her bother Shah Jongoli who were invested by Allah with stopping Dokkhin Rai's "reign of terror" (70-71). The episode recreated by Ghosh tells Dukhey's tale – a poor young boy is persuaded by his rich and greedy uncle, Dhona, to venture with his fleet in the "tideland jungle" (Ghosh and Toor 2021, 16) to "collect the richest hoard of our lives" (10), thus trespassing Rai's realm. For this reason, Dokkhin Rai demands that Dhona pays a price, namely that he lets him have Dukhey as prey. Just as he is about to be devoured by the "jungle lord" (32) in a "tiger's disguise" (52), Dukhey remembers his mother's words and invokes Bon Bibi, who saves Dukhey, punishes Rai and makes him accept the young boy as his "brother" (57).

The fishermen of the Sundarbans explained to anthropologist Annu Jalais that they identify with Dukhey's "unfailing belief" in the mother-like Bonbibi, who teaches them that the forest's resources must be taken only by those who need it to survive (Jalais 2005, 73) and who are pure of heart (72). Thus, this part of the legend is a warning against excessive greed:

> [Bon Bibi]'d taught him the secret of how to be happy:
> All you need to do, is be content with what you've got;
> To be always craving more, is a demon's lot.
> A world of endless appetite is a world possessed (Ghosh and Toor 70).

Both the legend of Manasa Devi and of Bon Bibi are "more real than real life (GI, 36) for the inhabitants of Bengal, and especially of the Sundarbans, as they function as their "politics of survival" (Rakshit and Gaur 2021, 2). In

Gun Island, the legend of Manasa Devi represents the Sundarbans' local knowledge of the "irrational and improbable forces" (4) of the environmental uncanny and is superimposed and alternated to the "objective empirical observations" (4) of both the locals and the scientific voice of Piya, whose rational explanations of the uncanny and miraculous serves to remind readers of the "reality of climate change" (Ghosh 2016, 140). However, Piya admits that she can't explain everything as there's much that scientists still don't know about the planet (GI, 108, 310), thus deconstructing the Western "project of partitioning" that ensured that the knowledge of nature be "consigned entirely to the sciences" (Ghosh 2016, 71). As a matter of fact, Piya herself hints at a moment of mutual recognition between her and Rani that transcends a strictly scientific observation:

> The dolphin had begun to make eye contact with her, in a manner quite different from other members of the pod – a manner that suggested something more than mere recognition (the word 'gratitude' suggested itself all the more strongly because Piya was so careful to avoid using it) (GI, 101).

This mutual recognition is the only possible form of communication between humans and this presence which is recognised as having a consciousness of their own only in that moment of encounter (Ghosh 2016, 29). It is in these moments of "mutual beholding" (29) that humans recognise the "presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors" (30). Indeed, such an encounter is represented in both *Gun Island*, – Deen looked "into [the king cobra's] shining black eyes" (GI, 83), and the brown recluse in Cinta's apartment had "its eyes apparently fixed" on him (GI, 215) –, and in the legend of Bonbibi, as Ghosh himself points out that the tiger-demon Dokkhin Rai and Dukhey exchange gazes (Ghosh 2016, 29).

While the importance of moments of mutual recognition is expressed in both *Gun Island* and *Jungle Nama* – there are many other points of contact between the two books, such as the mediating role of Manasa and Bonbibi between humans and nonhumans and their warning against greed –, interestingly the two works give different relevance to language and images. Namely, the "graphic verse" (Rakshit and Gaur 2021, 7) *Jungle Nama* intertwines the poetic re-telling of the legend in "twenty-four syllable couplets" (Ghosh and Toor 2021, 75) with "illuminations" by artist Salman Toor, which are not merely "images subordinated to words" but rather "throw their own light upon the text" (78-79). This "confluence of the image and text" (Rakshit and Gaur 2021, 7) is indeed coherent with Ghosh's exhortation that we "think in images" (Ghosh 2016, 83): as our "accustomed logocentrism" (83) has silenced the nonhuman, and as the Anthropocene, in its resistance to literary fiction also defies "language itself" (84), then new, hybrid forms of cultural production must be sought to think what cannot be thought through words (83). Thus, "the ability to make meaning" (Ghosh 2021, 190) of the nonhuman is to be found again in a dimension beyond language (Ghosh 2016, 83), which has been historically considered an exclusively human faculty (Ghosh 2021, 35).

Relevantly, the most significant spatialities and agents (both human and nonhuman) of the legend are not merely represented linguistically, but also iconographically, as they appear in the form of hieroglyphs in the friezes of the *dhaam*, which "discharge the function of storytelling" (75). While this may well serve the detective side of the novel in the search for the legend's meaning, it also emphasises the vitality of memory when kindled by images. Also, most moments of recognition happen thanks to images, as in the case of Rafi's associating the symbol of two concentrical circles criss-crossed by lines with the spider that bit the Gun Merchant in Gun Island, only after

seeing a real spider in Venice (185-87). It is also interesting to note that in this frieze there is a complete superimposition of the spatiality of Gun Island (represented by the concentrical circles) and of the nonhuman agency of the spider (represented by the criss-crossing lines). More relevantly, however, this episode is an instance of the possibility of connecting experiences "into meaningful patterns […] through memory, sight" (Ghosh 2021, 201), which is also incidentally proposed as a form of meaning-making and storytelling alternative to the modes "tied to human forms of language" (201). As a matter of fact, the most "vital" (GI, 80) moments and places of the legend are understood either through images or the re-enactment of memory, oftentimes only through the presence of their nonhuman referents.

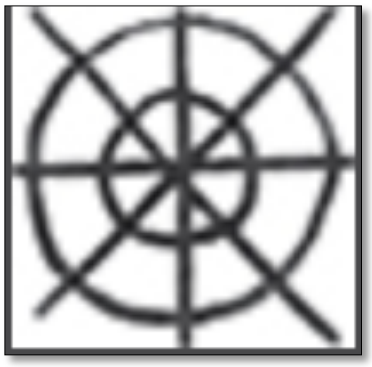

Figure 5. "Circles overlaid with criss-crossing lines" (GI, 77)

Still, some indigenous cultures have never undergone the process of silencing the nonhuman, which in their stories still speaks and has the ability to make meaning (Ghosh 2021). Indeed, as humanist Cinta suggests in *Gun Island* and as Ghosh articulates in *The Nutmeg's Curse*, "the faculty of storytelling" is "the last remnant of our animal selves" (GI, 141), and not an exclusively human endowment. This would explain why stories can draw upon and conjure up more-than-human dimensions and why "it is only through stories that the universe can speak to us" (141). "It follows, then, that if those nonhuman voices are to be restored to their proper place, then it must be, in the first instance, through the medium of stories" (GI, 204), like the

legend of Bonduki Sadagar and *Bon Bibi Johuranama*, which are instances of local place-attachment, balance and recognition between humans and nonhumans and which thus communicate a message of hope for the present and future of the climate crisis and may function as a model for a renewed, translocal and multispecies ecology.

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3. *LA TERRA DELLE TIGRI E DEI SERPENTI*: AN ANALYSIS OF *I MISTERI DELLA JUNGLA NERA*

> I was just looking at this book called *The Mystery of the Black Jungle . . .*'
>
> 'Oh yes!' cried Cinta. 'By Salgari! Lucia loved that book – she used to say she could see the Sundarbans in her dreams (GI, 182).

Salgari's portrayal of the Sundarbans in *I misteri della jungla nera* is as vivid and rich in details as to appear in the dreams of Cinta's daughter Lucia and affect her imagination; interestingly, this is mentioned twice in *Gun Island*. However, while Salgari's book figures in two uncanny episodes in which it seems to have its own agency and appear in different parts of Cinta's apartment, it plays no further role in Ghosh's novel. In spite of Cinta's claim that "in Italy everyone knows about the Sundarbans […] because of a famous children's book that was set there" (GI,139) I had never read any works by Salgari before working on this thesis, so my reading of *Gun Island* was not influenced by Salgari's imagination of the Sundarbans. For this reason, reading *I misteri* after Ghosh's two books set in the "tideland jungle" seemed an interesting undertaking. Unexpectedly, though at first influenced by the evidently different pedigree of the two authors, a joint exploration of the two works of fiction does bring to light relevant considerations on the portrayal of the nonhuman in literature. Thus, this chapter is devoted to a close-textual, ecocritical analysis of Salgari's *I misteri della jungla nera*, informed both by works of criticism on Salgari's fictional world and by Ghosh's essays on fiction and the climate crisis. First, the depiction of the environment of the Sundarbans is analysed to shed light on the exotic representation of the

botanical and zoological nonhuman and on the role of Salgari's textual sources. This will include the scrutiny of Orientalist attitudes towards both humans and nonhumans and the implications that such a worldview has on concepts of time, space, nature, and culture. Then, Salgari's own imaginative portrayal of acting nonhuman animals is examined to demonstrate that some nonhuman agency can be featured in the adventure novel because of its liminality. Namely, a few words on the mixed genre of the adventure novel, wavering between romance and realism, will be written to shed light on the genre's possibilities for the depiction of nonhuman forces.

Figure 6. "Gli Strangolatori del Gange": sketch made by Salgari for the 1887 instalments (Lawson Lucas 2017, 15)

3.1 The Exotic and the Nonhuman

I misteri della jungla nera is the title of an 1895 adventure novel by Italian author Emilio Salgari set in the Sundarbans. First published in instalments with the title *Gli Strangolatori del Gange* in 1887 and written for an adult readership, the novel came out in 1895 with the current title, aimed at young adults and set almost entirely in the Sundarbans. In 1903, a final edition with an addition of eight chapters – located before the third to last and set in Calcutta – was published (Pozzo 2012, 78).

Set in 1855, the novel recounts the adventures of Tremal-Naik, "il Cacciatore di Serpenti della Jungla Nera", and his loyal friend, the Marathi ("mahratto") Kammamuri in the Sundarbans. Namely, what sets the plot in motion is Tremal-Naik's vision in a dream of a young girl, Ada Corishant, who is to be sacrificed by the antagonists of the novel, the "*thugs*" devoted to the blood-thirsty, dark goddess Kali. Thus, the protagonist and his friend embark on a journey to the temple where the Thugs venerate their goddess and where Ada is held captive in order to save her; however, Tremal-Naik falls prey to the Thugs and almost dies, but he is eventually saved by Kammamuri. The second part of the novel introduces a new character, Captain Macpherson, "l'europeo" (Salgari 2004, 139), who attempts to defeat and capture the Thugs and save Ada, who is actually his daughter. In this part of the novel, Tremal-Naik forms an alliance with the Thugs because of their promise to free his beloved Ada on condition that he kills their sworn enemy, Captain Macpherson (at this point Tremal-Naik does not know that Ada is his daughter). At the end, Tremal-Naik changes loyalties and helps the British to enter the temple of the Thugs and save Ada; however, the leader of the Thugs, Suyodhana, flees, and will later reappear in the other novels of the "ciclo indomalese" featuring Sandokan, among which *le Tigri di Momparcem* (1901) and *Le Due Tigri* (1904) (Pozzo 2012, 77, 79).

Un delta gigantesco, intricato, meraviglioso, e forse unico: the Sundarbans as hostile wilderness

Although "the chasm" between Salgari and Ghosh is seemingly "unbridgeable" (Vescovi 2019, 143) a comparative analysis of the two authors' representations of the spatiality and ecology the Sundarbans may serve to highlight some similar or dissimilar imaginations of the same space and to bring to light some aspects of their "respective poetics" that "would be harder to observe when taken singularly" (143). Bruno Traversetti claims that speaking of poetics with reference to a "minor" author like Salgari may at first seem uncommon; however, he also concedes that his works do manifest a singularity and uniqueness of expression, which sets the Italian writer apart from other adventure novelists (1989, 24–25). Still, it is also the case that Salgari never explicitly and consciously pondered on the role of literature and on his own literary production (unlike Ghosh), and no overt poetics are found in his works of fiction – only once, in a letter to his children written before taking his life, he points to the didactic and entertaining role he hoped his works would have by referencing the millions of readers he had "taught and amused for years" (Vescovi 2019, 145). For this reason, Traversetti suggests speaking of an *implicit poetics* (1989, 25). An aspect of this implicit poetics which will be scrutinised in this chapter is the richness of details with which his external narrator describes the setting of his novels, in this case the environment of the Sundarbans (Vescovi 2019; Singh 1980). Indeed, *I misteri* begins with one such description:

> Il Gange, questo famoso fiume celebrato dagli indiani antichi e moderni, le cui acque son reputate sacre da quei popoli, dopo d'aver solcato le nevose montagne dell'Himalaya e le ricche provincie del Sirinagar, di Dehli, di Odhe, di Bahare, e di Bengala, a duecentoventi miglia dal mare dividesi in due bracci, formando un delta gigantesco, intricato, meraviglioso e forse unico. La imponente massa

> delle acque si divide e suddivide in una moltitudine di fiumicelli, di canali e di canaletti, che frastagliano in tutte le guise possibili l'immensa estensione di terre strette fra l'Hugly, il vero Gange, ed il golfo del Bengala. Di qui una infinità d'isole, d'isolotti, di banchi, i quali, verso il mare, ricevono il nome di Sunderbunds (Salgari 2004, 5).

This "detailed cartographical view of the Ganges" (Vescovi 2019, 145) gives the reader some geographical and naturalistic information about the setting of the novel, i.e., the unique and wonderful topography of the Sundarbans (Lawson Lucas 2000, 32), which is hinted at in the titular "Jungla Nera", suggestive of both linguistic exotism and of a perilous natural environment (Lawson Lucas 2017, 112) – both relevant features of the novel. However, this multitude of little islands is immediately characterized as a fearful and desolate environment, defined at first not by the varied ecology, but by the complete absence of human settlements:

> Nulla di più desolante, di più strano e di più spaventevole che la vista di queste *Sunderbunds*. Non città, non villaggi, non capanne, non un rifugio qualsiasi; dal sud al nord, dall'est all'ovest, non scorgete che immense piantagioni di bambù spinosi, stretti gli uni contro gli altri; le cui alte cime ondeggiano ai soffi del vento, appestate dalle esalazioni insopportabili di migliaia e migliaia di corpi umani che imputridiscono nelle avvelenate acque dei canali (Salgari 2004, 5).

Indeed, the only human referents are the thousands of dead bodies that float on the "poisoned waters of the canals", thus immediately contrasting the previous atmosphere of uniqueness and wonder with an ambience of death and decay. Even the first botanical species are connoted negatively, as the thorny bamboos are gathered in an intricate and dense mass. As a matter of fact, while some exotic trees are listed, they are mentioned because of their

absence, thus contrasting a potential bountiful nature with the reality of a desolate environment:

> È raro se scorgete un *banian* torreggiare al di sopra di quelle gigantesche canne; ancor più raro se v'accade di scorgere un gruppo di manghieri, di giacchieri o di nagassi sorgere fra i pantani, o se vi giunge all'olfatto il soave profumo del gelsomino, dello sciambaga o del mussenda, che spuntano timidamente fra quel caos di vegetali (5).

In her monography on Salgari's fascination with the unknown ("ignoto"), Ann Lawson Lucas argues that the almost scientific precision with which the Italian novelist reports the details of the topography transcends the mere representation of facts and instead serves to evoke a fascinating and exotic atmosphere (Lawson Lucas 2000, 32) and to affect the reader with sensations of mystery and desolation, thus setting the tone for the narration of the plot. The initial dismay at the absence of human life takes the form of utter horror as the second paragraph ends with the image of the dead bodies on the water (37). All this serves the purpose of evoking a sense of danger and death, as "inoltrarsi in quelle jungle è andare incontro alla morte" (Salgari 2004, 6), not least because of the presence of wild animals, such as tigers, crocodiles, rhinoceros, and indeed poisonous snakes (6). Namely, the mangrove forest is here connoted as "la terra delle tigri e dei serpenti" (8, 11) since the only inhabitants are wild beasts (8):

> Infatti è là, fra quegli ammassi di spine e di bambù, fra quei pantani e quelle acque gialle, che si celano le tigri spiando il passaggio dei canotti e persino dei navigli, per scagliarsi sul ponte e strappare il barcaiuolo o il marinaio che ardisce mostrarsi; è là che nuotano e spiano la preda orridi e giganteschi coccodrilli, sempre avidi di carne umana; è là che vaga il formidabile rinoceronte a cui tutto fa ombra e lo irrita alla pazzia; ed è là che vivono e muoiono le numerose varietà

> dei serpenti indiani, fra i quali il *rubdira mandali* il cui morso fa sudar sangue ed il pitone che stritola fra le sue spire un bue (6).

Thus, the spatiality of the Sundarbans is portrayed as "hostile nature" (Vescovi 2019, 150) and "wilderness epitomized by tigers" (150), given that "la jungla non ha che delle tigri per abitanti" (Salgari 2004, 8) – the only exceptions being Tremal-Naik, who lives at the southern edge of the jungle; and the Thugs, who worship Kali in a subterranean temple in the "mysterious island" (15) of "Raimangal" and who hide in the dense vegetation of the forest and the brackish waters of the canals to "strangle" any man who dares to venture there and offer him to the goddess of death (6). Namely, Salgari's Tremal-Naik is perfectly at home in his beloved jungle – "la mia cara *jungla*" (Salgari 2004, 8) –, where he was born and bred and where he plans to die. Analogously, the Thugs, who are depicted as being closer to animals than to humans, feel at ease in the matted vegetation of the Sundarbans, as the deadly atmosphere is governed by their goddess. Also, both Tremal-Naik and the Thugs, by being identified with the black jungle, are wild and untamed, as Tremal-Naik's strength and untouchability are directly related to his connection with the wild natural environment (Fratnik 1980, 60): he doesn't fear the Thugs not because of acquired courage, but because he is the savage progeny of the jungle – "il selvaggio figlio della *jungla*" – (Salgari 2004, 20, 37, 40, 51, 243). Also, he is sometimes compared to a "vera tigre sbucata dalla *jungla*" (51) or a "belva, anzichè un uomo" (120). Thus, Tremal-Naik's exoticism is synonymous with strength and animality (Fratnik 1980, 60). Furthermore, his being tethered to the Sundarbans could be understood in terms of Asis De's "bioregional attachment" (2021, 15), as Tremal-Naik is "emotionally emplaced" in the cultural and environmental space of the jungle (15), more so than Deen in *Gun Island*. The Thugs's own savageness, though partially derived from the wilderness of the Sundarbans, is rather to be

attributed to other exotic features, namely fanaticism and superstition (60), as the cruelty of these "*mostruose* creature" (Salgari 2004, 47), these "terribili *fanatici*" (70 – emphasis mine), is associated with their worship of Kali, "mostruosa divinità" (38).

Conversely, far from being inhabited only by tigers (40), the Sundarbans in Ghosh's *Gun Island* – as demonstrated in the previous chapter – are the spatiality against which continuities between humans and nonhumans are rendered mostly visible, as both are equally being impacted by the rapid transformations in the ecology of the Sundarbans, to which they feel they no longer belong. Unexpectedly, Ghosh's connotation of the Sundarbans is not dissimilar from Salgari's, as Deen firstly calls them "a tiger-infested mangrove forest" (GI, 8), so that in both authors the tide country (Ghosh's definition of the region in *The Hungry Tide*) is symbolised by the presence of tigers and dense vegetation. As seen in the second chapter of this thesis, Deen's judgement is left unchanged even after venturing in the Sundarbans (which is here too portrayed as a perilous journey – GI, 24, 71-73), as he still sees the tidal landscape as "that wild tangle of mud and mangrove" (GI, 111). Again, Deen perceives the jungle as "impenetrable battlements of mud and tangled foliage" (62) as he himself claims that "to my unaccustomed eyes, the matt brown and greens of the landscape looked almost featureless, unreadable"; conversely, Horen and Piya are acquainted with the details of every island and river and have the ability to recognise the "incredible variety of life forms" that inhabit the ecology of the mangrove forest (104). In this case, the first-person narration in *Gun Island* limits the possibility of describing the reality of the Sundarbans other than what they appear to Deen, as the narrator also seems to take little interest in giving space to Horen's local knowledge. (*The Hungry Tide,* on the other hand, reproduces detailed accounts of the environment of the tide country in all its botanical and zoological variety and

gives voice to the viewpoints of disparate characters, from metropolitan Kanai to local fisherman Fokir). This connotation of the Sundarbans as tangled is also found in *The Great Derangement*, where Ghosh argues that:

> The Sundarbans are nothing like the forests that usually figure in literature. The greenery is dense, tangled, and low; the canopy is not above but around you, constantly clawing at your skin and your clothes. No breeze can enter the thickets of this forest; when the air stirs at all it is because of the buzzing of flies and other insects. Underfoot, instead of a carpet of softly decaying foliage, there is a bank of slippery, knee-deep mud, perforated by the sharp points that protrude from mangrove roots. Nor do any vistas present themselves except when you are on one of the hundreds of creeks and channels that wind through the landscape—and even then it is the water alone that opens itself; the forest withdraws behind its muddy ramparts, disclosing nothing (Ghosh 2016, 28).

This description is uncannily similar to the opening passages of Salgari's novel, which is fraught with both semantic and lexical repetitions of the connotation of the Sundarbans as tangled foliage, as for instance the adjective "fitto/a/e/i" with reference to the vegetation (and to bamboos in particular) is found in almost thirty instances.

Nonetheless, despite this superficial similarity, the world-views inherent in the two representations of the Sundarbans as wilderness are hardly the same. Namely, Ghosh is deeply aware of the social and historical complexities of the human-nonhuman relations in the mangrove forest, as he studied the history of both Sir Daniel Hamilton's settlement in the Sundarbans in the early 1900s and of the 1978 Morichjhãpi massacre, and also travelled through the Sundarbans with anthropologist Annu Jalais before writing *The Hungry Tide* (Vescovi 2019, 148–49). Contrariwise, Salgari never travelled outside Italy, if not with his imagination and the help of the many travelogues, atlases,

encyclopaedias, and indeed adventure novels – mostly French and British – that he avidly read (Traversetti 1989, 37; Torri 2012, 32–33). It is precisely in these works, which Salgari used as sources for his novels and stories, that many critics find the origin of the "myth of the hostile wilderness" (Vescovi 2019, 150) inherent in *I misteri*, myth which is a "colonial stereotype accepted by Salgari" (150), not only in his representation of a dense vegetation, but also – and above all – in his portrayal of ferocious animals. Namely, the British administration of the East Indies considered wild animals to be a threat to human populations and thus decided to exterminate them (150). The tiger, especially, became a symbol of the dangers that wild and unruly nature posed to society; thus, its hunting epitomised the ability of the British colonial administration to rule over nature (Hussain 2012, 1222) – and incidentally also over Indian Princely States, as Annu Jalais points out, noting that the Royal Tiger has always been the emblem of Indian monarchs (2010, 191). An example of the symbolic essence of the tiger in colonial discourse is given by Luca Raimondi, who mentions member of the Indian Civil Service William Wilson Hunter's attempt to underscore the "superiority of the European in controlling the territory against – but supposedly in favour of – the fearful native" by employing the anecdote of a "single fierce tiger" having "frequently forced an advanced colony of clearers to abandon their land, and allow it to relapse to jungle," until an English gentleman armed with guns finally killed "the pest" (2016, 125).

Indeed, a scene of a tiger-hunt is depicted in the second part of Salgari's novel, where Captain Macpherson and Bhârata, the sepoy sergeant, see "una massa nera, dotata d'una straordinaria agilità" (Salgari 2004, 148). The initial sense of threat soon turns into shock and bewilderment when they discover that it is a tiger, since they were certain of having killed all of them – "Ma se le abbiamo tutte distrutte!" (148). Thus, given that the captain doesn't like to

have such a ferocious animal in his vicinities, he decides to hunt it with the help of the elephant Bhagavadi (148-149). The scene of the tiger-hunt takes up more than four pages and functions in the novel both as an exotic adventure and as narrative expedient: the hunted tiger is none other than Darma, Tremal-Naik's loyal companion, and for this reason is not killed. In actuality, the whole hunt was orchestrated by the snake-hunter himself to gain favour with Macpherson. One of Salgari's confirmed sources, i.e., *L'Inde des Rajahs* by Louis Rousselet, travelogue of a Grand Tour of Central India taken by Rousellet between 1863 and 1868 (Torri 2012, 33–34) may have inspired him in the writing of this scene, as some occurrences and words are echoed in *I misteri*. As authoritative source on tiger-hunt, Rousselet cites a passage from an account of Captain James Forsyth's travels (1838-1871), a conservator of forests for the East India Companies and renowned hunter. Interestingly, in his *Highlands of Central India* (1871) Forsyth underscores that tigers roaming free in the forests have a "costly" effect on the government revenue as they scare wood-collectors away (Hussain 2012, 1221); similarly, Rousselet writes that the sixty or eighty domesticated bovines killed yearly by a single tiger cost the owner a "somme de quatorze à quinze mille francs" (Rousselet 1877, 730). Economic concerns and profit-making are hence confirmed as a paramount interest of the British Raj.

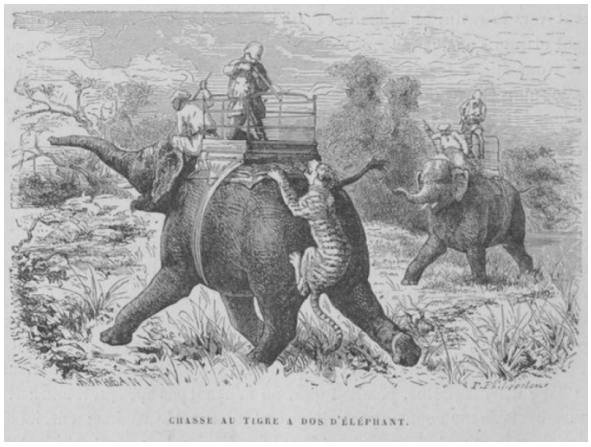

Figure 7. Tiger hunt with Elephant (Rousselet 1877, 734). A similar scene – the tiger almost reaching the mahout – is also reproduced in Salgari,152.

The British colonial administration's attempt "to control and keep nature at bay" through tiger-hunting (Hussain 2012, 1222) and the related practices of transforming the "existing agrarian landscape" by changing "crop patterns" and of turning uncultivated into cultivated lands (1222) are hinted at in *L'Inde de Rajahs* as well, as Rousselet writes that since the English tried to develop rice plantations in the region of the Sundarbans, they have supplied the local inhabitants with strychnine in order to kill more tigers (1877, 765). Furthermore, he, too, describes the island of the Sundarbans as being populated mostly by wild animals – "la plupart des îles n'ont d'autres habitants que les bêtes féroces" – and as being made of soil too soft to be cultivated (766). A similar description of the Sundarbans is offered by French explorer Conrad Malte-Brun (1775-1826)'s *Universal Geography* – another attested source of Salgari's: "the only inhabitants of the forests are wild beasts" and much of the land of the "impenetrable forest" is uncultivable marsh (Malte-Brun 1822, 158). Curiously, any mention of wild beasts is erased from the English edition of Rousselet, which instead only translates the praise of the "islands whereon Englishmen have established themselves" for their exhibition of "magnificent cultivation of rice, fine indigo, and sugar plantations", thus being "on the high road to prosperity" (1882, 611). Following Rousselet, Salgari, too, portrays a more bountiful and serene vegetation in the islands inhabited by British Captain Macpherson:

> Era una magnifica notte d'agosto, una vera notte tropicale. L'aria era tiepida, dolce, elastica, imbalsamata dal soave profumo dei gelsomini, degli sciambaga, dei mussenda e dei nagatampo.
> Lassù, in un cielo purissimo, d'un azzurro d'indaco, punteggiato da miriadi di scintillanti stelle, l'astro delle notti serene seguiva il suo corso, illuminando fantasticamente la corrente dell'Hugly, la quale svolgevasi come un immenso

> nastro d'argento, fra le interminabili pianure del delta gangetico.
> Schiere di marabù volteggiavano sopra la corrente, posandosi sull'una o sull'altra riva, ai piedi dei cocchi, degli artocarpi, dei banani e dei tamarindi, che curvavansi graziosamente sulle onde (2009, 139).

The same environment is depicted a second time when Tremal-Naik and the thugs make a journey upriver, from the mouth of the Hooghly to Calcutta, where they see rice plantations, lousy villages, and small embankments built to keep the tidewaters away:

> Talvolta apparivano miseri villaggi, soffocati sotto una densa vegetazione, oppure cinti da risaie, chiusi tra arginetti alti parecchi piedi, destinati a trattenere le acque e più spesso rizzati sull'orlo di putridi stagni sopra i quali ondeggiava una nebbi pestilenziale, carica di febbre e di cholera (201).

Still, this appearance of civilisation is limited to the British lands upriver and signals a change in environment, from the wilderness of the jungle to the city of Calcutta, more civilised only in so far as it is "la regina del Bengala, la capitale di tutti i possedimenti inglesi delle Indie" (206); conversely, the "Indian city" – i.e., the part of the city inhabited by Indians and known as "the black city" – is "la più sporca, la più miserabile" (241). Curiously, Malte-Brun argues that the "metropolis of the British power in India", Calcutta, "is rendered somewhat unhealthy by being in the vicinity of extensive muddy lakes and an immense forest" (Malte-Brun 1822, 156) so that the brackish atmosphere of "the jungle" (156) actually invades the colonial city.

Historian Michelguglielmo Torri traces the *topos* of the jungle as hostile nature in Salgari's Indian novels – of which the Sundarbans in *I misteri* are an archetypical representation – back to his orientalist sources (Torri 2012, 43). Namely, by drawing on Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism* (1978), and

on his own studies on the history of India and its orientalist Eurocentric conceptualisation, Torri reviews the development of Orientalism as a discipline, which was established by missionaries and officers of the East India Company in the latter part of the eighteenth century (35). Both parties relied on the knowledge of local intellectuals, especially of what Torri, elaborating on Gramsci, names "traditional intellectuals", i.e., spokespeople of an orthodox view of both Hinduism and Islam who were however excluded from political power, whereas they avoided collaborating with "organic intellectuals" precisely because of their being an integral part of the ruling class (36-37). Thus, the first Orientalist view of India pitted the past glories of the antiquity against a following period of decadence, which lasted until present times. Because of its longevity, such decadence came to be considered a permanent condition of Indian society and culture – which was also homogenised – and meant that British officials considered contemporary India as degenerate (37). In order to justify their dominion over such an antique civilisation, the East India Company first and the British Empire later had to depreciate India's present political and cultural state and to affirm its inaptitude to progress, thus describing it as a static society unable to advance economically, also because of the social ramifications of Hinduism and Islam – the caste system, for example, was considered rigid and static (39).

However, these orientalist conceptions of India as the "degenerated offspring of glorious ancientness, or as a never-changing, exotic essence" (Raimondi 2016, 120) are oblivious to the long history of trade connections across the Eurasian mass and of the fecund circulation of ideas in the early modern period (Ghosh 2016, 94–99). In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh attempts to deconstruct the European discourse according to which modernity was a uniquely Western endeavour by providing a few examples of Asian advancement: for instance, the Burmese had used oil from natural

springs for more than a millennium and had mastered its extraction from creeks and used oil as fuel for lamps already in the eighteenth century, when the British would then invade and annex the Burmese realms to take control of their oil fields (100-103). Furthermore, the history of the steam engine demonstrates that India soon became the second-largest importer of British engines, and that in the first half of the nineteenth century it manufactured its own steam engines – besides supplying much of the manpower for the boiler rooms in merchant ships all around the world (103-104). Interestingly, in 1815 British parliament passed a law that forbade India-built ships and Indian sailors to access British ports so as not to deprive English shipwrights of their livelihood, and thus damaged India's own economy. Thus, the "multiple modernities" (96) which were occurring all around the world came to suppressed by Western hegemonic power, whose economic interests required that its technological advancements be not imitated by the rest of the world (107). British Imperial rule in India "assured that it was not" (107), thanks to both its legislative power and the ideological discourse produced by the field of Orientalism. Indeed, while the orientalist discursive constructs according to which India was unable of progress were exploited to ensure economic control of the crown jewel of the Empire, its consequences did include an economic crisis, which was itself the result of European conquests and colonial dominion over Indian territories (Torri 2012, 39).

Finally, the temporal and historical stagnation which the Orientalist discourse ascribed to Indian culture and society is embodied by Salgari's depiction of the spatiality of the Sundarbans, which is indeed as "unique" (Vescovi 2019, 151) as the incipit of the novel evokes. Though neither the Sundarbans nor the Indians are necessarily characterised as "backward" (151) in Salgari's novel, they do figure as exotic realities, with the mangrove forest appearing as a "land apart, a dark place that has little or no connection with

the rest of world" (153). Thus, the jungle is a "circumscribed, isolated place" which establishes no connections either with neighbouring spaces or the rest of the world – nor indeed with the past (156).

The Exotic Space: Culture as Nature and Nature as Culture

In order to apprehend the spatial and temporal stagnation of Salgari's depiction of the spatiality of the Sundarbans, a close-textual analysis of some passages describing botanical and zoological species, and human characters is here provided. Namely, both Marina Noseda Fratnik and Bruno Traversetti have demonstrated how the use of travelogues, encyclopaedias, and journals as sources contributed to the formation of an "exoticist scenery" (Traversetti 1989, 3). Traversetti argues that it is precisely the lack of direct experience with the narrated matter that enabled the Italian writer to describe the world according to the unifying discourse of "the exotic" (37), as the "epigrammatic" schematism typical of the atlas (38) is taken up by Salgari in the faithful reproductions of the sources which crop up in the novel. For instance, after Tremal-Naik and Kammamuri find the dead body a friend of theirs, chapter three begins with the description of the banyan tree, an exemplar of which plays a fundamental role in the novel, as it is associated with the Thugs, who take refuge in its wide trunk:

> I banian, chiamati altresì al moral o fichi delle pagode, sono gli alberi più strani e più giganteschi che si possa immaginare. Hanno l'altezza ed il tronco delle nostre più grandi e più grosse quercie e dagli innumerevoli rami tesi orizzontalmente scendono delle finissime radici aeree, le quali, appena torcano terra, s'affondano e s'ingrossano rapidamente, infondendo nuovo nutrimento e più vigorosa vita alla pianta. Avviene così che i rami s'allungano sempre più, generando nuove radici e quindi nuovi tronchi sempre più lontani, di maniera che un albero solo copre un'estensione vastissima di terreno. Si può dire che forma una foresta sostenuta da centinaia e

> centinaia di bizzarri colonnati, sotto i quali i sacerdoti di Brahma collocano i loro idoli. Nella provincia di Guzerate esiste un banian chiamato Cobibr bor assai venerato dagli indiani ed al quale non esitano a dare tremila anni d'età; ha una circonferenza di duemila piedi e non meno di tremila colonne o radici che dir si voglia. Anticamente era assai più vasto, ma parte di esso fu distrutto dalle acque del Nerbudda, che rosero una parte dell'isola su cui cresce (Salgari 2004, 22).

As Lawson Lucas argues, the introduction of such descriptive passages in the middle of adventurous and dangerous situations may serve to delay the action and create suspense (Lawson Lucas 2000, 38). Furthermore, she claims that Salgari's lingering on natural descriptions bears witness to his conception of nature as a "lively and wonderfully varied presence" (36). Contrariwise, both Fratnik and Traversetti point to the encyclopaedic and didactic role of such interjections (this is not disputed by Lawson Lucas), which are also employed with reference to other botanical species (e.g., bamboos), animals (tigers, rhinoceros, elephants, and snakes), religious figures (mostly fakirs), and practices (e.g., ablutions in the Ganges). According to Traversetti, this eventually leads to a simplification of the world and of the distant other, aimed at reassuring readers that the differences between themselves and the other, by being made manifest and exotic, pose no threat to their way of life (1989, 38). Recalling the positivistic culture of the nineteenth century, embodied by Universal Exhibitions, the Italian critic contends that the historically complex cultural reality of – in this case – India is presented as a fixed, ahistorical object to be enjoyed, as it were, in a museum (39). See for example the following passage in which the fakir Ninpor, a friend of the thugs, is introduced:

> Quel disgraziato non era però un fakiro comune, come ve ne son tanti altri in India: i *saniassi*, che sono veri bricconi, più ladroni che santoni; i *dondy* che vivono alle spalle dei ricchi indiani, saccheggiandone i giardini; i *Nanek-punthy*

> che sono d'indole tranquilla e che per distintivo delle loro caste portano una sola scarpa ed una sola basetta ed i *biscnub* che possono paragonarsi, su per giù, ai nostri monaci.
>
> Quel fakiro era un *poron-hungse*, uomini che secondo l superstizione indiana sono d'origine celeste, che vivono mille anni senza giammai prendere il più piccolo nutrimento e che anche gettati nel fuoco e nell'acqua non periscono, quindi da tutti venerati come esseri soprannaturali e rispettati (Salgari 2004, 242).

Fratnik affirms that from this description of the fakir, a widely known attitude towards the Orient and the 'other' emerges, which consists in depriving the Orient of its historical dimension (1980, 52). In this regard, the cultural category of the fakirs is reduced to a natural phenomenon, as they are presented as biological species and endemic natural products – "si 'trovano' precisamente in India, come certe essenze, certi rettili, ma anche certe pagode" (52). Indeed, the narrative techniques used to illustrate natural and cultural phenomena are the same in that the latter are both transformed in "exhibited objects" (Traversetti 1989, 39) For instance, a list of snakes is reproduced a few pages later:

> Intanto due altri rettili, attratti da quella musica che per loro doveva essere irresistibile, si erano mostrati. Uno era un boa, un serpente superbo, lungo circa quattro metri, dalla pelle verdeazzurrognola, ad anelli irregolari; l'altro invece un serpente del minuto o *minute-snake*, lungo non più di quindici centimetri, grosso quanto un cannello, colla pelle nera a macchie gialle, il più pericoloso di tutti poiché in novantasei secondi uccide l'uomo più robusto (Salgari 2004, 252).

Here, too, the listed species are first named and then described through some characteristic traits, as with the fakir. Thus, the "exotic space" both in its natural and cultural components is deprived of its own essence to become

the apt place and setting for fantastical circumstances and stereotyped *topoi* (Fratnik 1980, 55). Furthermore, as Torri demonstrates, the Orientalist view of India inherent in Salgari's sources is most visible in his references to Indian religious practices (Torri 2012, 44–45), which are defined as superstitious, foolish, peculiar, and based on strange prejudices – both fakirs and thugs are "fanatics" and the fakir himself is described as "quel miserabile indiano, quella vittima del fanatismo religioso e della superstizione indiana, faceva davvero orrore" (Salgari 2004, 241). However, it must also be conceded that Salgari's "political neutrality" (Traversetti 1989, 49) translated into a positive connotation of the non-European protagonists of the novel, as Tremal-Naik and Kammamuri are always the "good" characters, and the British are described as the "oppressors", thus distancing himself from the nineteenth century ideology according to which only the European man could be centre and agent of extra-European history (48). Indeed, Torri himself concludes that the orientalist motifs inherent in the sources and inadvertently reproduced in Salgari's novels vanish completely in the imaginative matter of the text, of which Salgari is sole author (Torri 2012, 64), and which drives him to create such strong, courageous, but also kind and rational protagonists as Tremal-Naik (54). In this, Salgari seems to reject the "dehumanising orientalist system" (64) and its East/West dichotomy, according to which a totally mysterious, excessive, and seducing East is opposed to the rational, moral, and measured West (Traversetti 1989, 42). In as far as his choice of subject-matter and protagonists is concerned, Salgari did not partake of this worldview (42), which is also wholeheartedly repudiated by Ghosh, as Deen's secularity and rationality do "not conform to the stereotypes of Indians" as "religious" and believing in the "supernatural" (GI, 36).

Still, Fratnik and Traversetti maintain that in so far as the same descriptive techniques are applied indistinctively to both "exotic *flora* and *fauna*" and

cultural categories (Fratnik 1980, 52), and as peoples, ethnicities and religious groups are portrayed as *botanical* species, eternally fixed in their *nature*, without history nor variety (Traversetti 1989, 39 – emphasis mine), Salgari unconsciously reproduces Orientalist visions of an ahistorical, uniform, and exotic culture. While their arguments are convincing, the two critics do not question the conceptualisation of nature as inert and static that the they have observed in Salgari's works, possibly because they share Salgari's same cultural matrix. Namely, claiming that the a-historicity of India is mostly rendered by the naturalisation of cultural categories presupposes a theoretical framework or cultural paradigm that sees "Nature" as an "inert entity, a conception that would in time become a basic tenant of what might be called official modernity" (Ghosh 2021, 38-39), thus becoming ingrained in the culture of the West. An ecocritical approach both to Salgari's own novel and to his critical reception may shed light on and disengage from such a cultural matrix.

Ghosh traces this conception of Nature back to "the ideology of conquest" that coincided with the emergence of the "new economy based on extracting resources from a desacralized, inanimate Earth" (38); hence, the "colonialist envisioning" sees nature a "vast mass of inert resources" (40). While Ghosh is here referencing early colonial enterprises by the English and Dutch East India Companies, a similar attitude applies to the nineteenth century colonialist management of the Indian environment, given that the British government in India tried to "subdue" human "savages" (38) and indeed exterminate an "entire range of nonhuman beings – trees, animals, and landscapes" (38). As seen above, this was manifestly evident in the case of the killings of tigers. Furthermore, the colonial representation of wild inhabited places as hostile, void of people and populated only by wild beasts – *viz*, the conception of the Bengal delta as a "no man's land" (Raimondi 2016, 124) – precisely served the justification of British colonisation, which was aimed at

the transformation of those territories "that were perceived to be wastelands into terrain that fitted a European conception of productive land" (Ghosh 2021, 63). These territories were to be "reclaimed, cleared, and repopulated", as the "rhetorical sanitization" of the colonialist discourse rephrased the practices of seizing, transforming, and colonising these lands (Raimondi 2016, 125) inhabited only by "brutes" (Ghosh 2021, 186).

Thus, Ghosh's analysis of the category of "brute" sheds light on the connections between the Orientalist discourse of India's ahistoricity and the colonial envisioning of Nature as inert resource. Namely, the word "brute", while initially referring to "dull, stupid, insensible" animals, came to "merge certain kinds of humans with things whose existence was merely material, insensible" (187) so that the "majority of humankind" came to be "assimilated to the rubric of 'Nature'", and thus "excluded from 'History', which was the domain solely of the civilised or 'historical' nations" (187). Hence, once made "brute", Nature can be deemed a resource to be subjugated (190). In order to do so, undesirable human and nonhuman brutes need first to be "exterminated" in light of what Ghosh calls "omnicide", i.e., "the extermination of everything – people, animals, the planet itself" (82). Indeed, the assimilation of certain peoples and animals under the category of brute emerges in Salgari's description of the Indian part of the city of Calcutta, where hundreds of naked boys "si involtavano come animali immondi" and the greater adjutants "passeggiavano gravemente" (Salgari 2004, 241), almost human-like. Thus, Salgari's novel unconsciously perpetuates this colonial attitude towards the nonhuman, inherent in his Orientalist sources, which are also the reason for his adoption of another colonial stereotype that assimilates humans to nonhumans, namely the discourse according to which the Thugs are a "powerful race of fanatics almost without human character and beyond the reach of civilisation" (Vescovi 2019, 150) – indeed, "human

savages"(Ghosh 2021, 38) to be captured and imprisoned. Namely, in his depiction of the Thugs, Salgari has further exoticised the colonial discourse of the "explicit Kali-worshipping religious cult", which added a "religious dimension to the practice of banditry" (Parveen and Rath 2018, 159, 164) and made of the Thugee the major "pan-Indian" (161) criminal phenomenon.

However, despite his strict reliance on sources whose aim was to classify knowledge rationally and encyclopaedically in order to make it familiar and subdued, Salgari's wild, untamed, and "deserte" Sundarbans (Salgari 2004, 107) populated by ferocious animals are portrayed as something mysterious, as the title suggests. Whereas Ghosh claims that the conquered object – by becoming inert – no longer poses a challenge to the imagination of the conqueror and thus "holds no more mysteries" (Ghosh 2021, 76) because it has become "familiar" (77), Salgari still portrays a fascinating, wonderful, and exotic topography, which is presented as mysterious (a major semantic field in the novel) and unknown to the reader – certainly, *unfamiliar*. This is concurrent with another colonial *topos* employed to justify the reclaiming of the lands, i.e., the Sundarbans as a "land of wonders" (Raimondi 2016, 123) with such a dense vegetation that "history has hardly ever found the way in" (Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* quoted in Raimondi 2016, 123).

Hence, a double attitude can be found in Salgari's poetics. On the one hand, he demonstrates a genuine interest in the other – epitomised by the frequent and rich descriptions of Indian nonhumans – while at the same time he seems to domesticate it through its strict cataloguing. According to Fratnik, this duality has a favourable outcome, as the representation of the exotic enables the Italian writer to intertwine familiarity and unfamiliarity, mystery, and desire for the supernatural, thus projecting the reader's own "oneiric" desire for the alterity of the other (Fratnik 1980, 62–64). Thus, in what she calls

"apprivoisement" – i.e., domestication – Fratnik brings to light the dual attempt to project an inner alterity to the distant other and to reduce the actual external alterity of the other to the familiar, thus leading to the thematization of the Freudian *unheimlich* (65). In her opinion, however, this does allow for the essence of the exotic other to emerge, even in the frequent encyclopaedic interjections (65). In short, while Lawson Lucas reads a vitality in Salgari's natural descriptions, the analysis provided by Fratnik and Traversetti, though uncritical towards the conceptualisation of nature as inert and ahistorical, seems more tenable with regard to the heavy influence that the Orientalist and colonialist sources had on Salgari's implicit poetics. Indeed, though the natural environment is depicted as chaotic and mysterious, this refers to a colonialist conception of untamed nature as hostile, which eventually reduced Nature to a "moderate and orderly" (Ghosh 2016, 22) entity and object of study, an attitude which is yet again derived from the scientific sources used by Salgari and which is mostly evident in the rhetorical devices he employs to describe the environment of the Sundarbans, as the following section aims at demonstrating.

A Jungle of Names

Among Salgari's preferred rhetorical devices is listing, "elencazione" (Traversetti 1989, 79), as the above-quoted descriptive passages demonstrate (Salgari 2004, 6, 139, 242, 252) together with many other instances scattered throughout the text, especially with reference to botanical species (17); the most eloquent example, however, is the description of the environment against which Captain Macpherson is introduced (see above-quoted page 139). According to Traversetti, in all these passages the referents to which the linguistic signs refer, already perceived by the reader as distant others, become rarefied in linguistic abstraction, thus impinging on the reader's mind only as pure phonemes, which sound exotic and verging with the fantastic and

wonderful, but which end up being completely deprived of meaning and thus leading the reader into the realm of the "asemantic" (1989, 81). This "jungle of pure names" – "jungla di soli nomi" (81) thus deprives these passages of any descriptive capability (81) and rather answers to a positivistic need for scientific definition and thus to a stabilisation of natural phenomena. Indeed, both listings and encyclopaedic digressions circumscribe the described objects, which are hence framed within precise defining confines (Fratnik 1980, 51). Eventually, the exotic environment becomes a "little world of words" (51).

In *The Nutmegs's Curse*, Ghosh devotes whole chapters to the critique of the colonialist "task of assigning new names to all beings" (2021, 93). His postcolonial, ecocritical stance provides the analysis of Salgari's 'jungle of names' with interesting insights. Namely, Ghosh argues that imperial policymakers were able to decide how to better use the resources of the conquered territories by seeking the help of the natural sciences' catalogues and classifications of botanical and zoological species (93). As "science and empire are cause and effect of one another" (Lafuente and Valverde 2007 in Ghosh 2021, 93), Ghosh seems to mistrust, if not science *in toto*, certainly "Linneaus's binomial system" (95), a "marvellously elegant method of categorisation" which was however employed by European empires to make the natural world comparable and nonhuman entities easily turned into "useful resources" (95). Curiously, in *Gun Island* the three most agentive nonhumans are given their Linnaean names – the Irrawaddy Dolphin, *Orcealla brevirostris*; *Luxoceles reclusa* is the brown recluse; and the king cobra *Ophipahagus hannah*. Whereas Salgari's listings and descriptive techniques do reduce the world to names, those names are never Linnaean. Given that his sources oftentimes reproduce both local, common and Linnaean names, this seems to be a conscious choice made by Salgari, who either calls plants and trees by their Italianised names (e.g. the *pipal* tree is

never once called *Ficus religiosa*, nor the banyan *Ficus Bengalis*; instead Salgari lists "palmizi", "manghi", "bambù", "nagassi", "giacchieri") or by their Bengali names, as with subspecies of bamboo – *bans tulda, behar bans*:

> I *behar bans*, alti appena un metro, col fusto vuoto ma forte ed armato di lunghe spine, ed una varietà numerosa di altri bambù conosciuti comunemente nelle *Sunderbunds*, col nome generico di *bans*, i quali si stringevano così da vicino, che era d'uopo servirsi del coltello per aprirsi un passaggio (Salgari 2004, 30).

The same applies to the above-quoted list of snakes (252), to the *rubdira mandali* – probably Russel's viper, *Daboia russelii* –, and to the *coomareah* and *merghee* elephants. Thus, Salgari's attitude to the exotic environment is yet again permeated by paradoxical dualities, as he seems to partake of the standardised colonialist stance when reproducing excerpts from his sources in his listings and digressions, but then chooses to avoid a strictly scientific denomination and classification according to the Linnaean system and instead uses local names. However, this might still be aimed at fascinating the mind of the readers with strangely exotic names, as the referents, though not merely "useful resources" (Ghosh 2021, 95), are certainly not "capable of generating forms of narrative and meaning" in the vitalist sense of participating in human-nonhuman fellowship (94) or of being "makers of history" and "protagonists in songs and stories" (98). Indeed, contrary to poisonous creatures and freakish weather events in *Gun Island* and in the *Manasamangal*, and to tigers and more-than-human forces in the *Bonbibi Johuranama* – which, as seen above, have their own historical agency –, nonhumans in Salgari's catalogues do not appear as actors enmeshed in human and nonhuman history. Furthermore, the reproduction of local names does not translate into the acceptance and praise of local knowledge, which has no translocal benefit, given that the environment of the Sundarbans is fixedly

exotic. Conversely, Rafi's local knowledge of the tide country in *Gun Island* is translocally useful because of the planetary connections of climate change. Though allegedly influenced by evolutionism (Traversetti 1989, 68 and Lawson Lucas 2000, 43), Salgari's catalogue of nonhumans does adhere to what Ghosh calls the "modern conception of matter as inert – or as 'an inanimate object of enquiry'" (2021, 86). Indeed, Salgari's vast use of encyclopaedias – which are the product of the belief that "no aspect" of the "machine-like Earth" "can elude human knowledge" (87) – is testimony to this conception.

Figure 8. Giuseppe Gamba's cover drawing of the 1886 edition of " I misteri della jungla nera" demonstrating a dynamic and captivating sense of the exotic (Lawson Lucas 2017, 114)

⁂

3.2 Nonhuman Agency

The representation of nonhuman animals in *I misteri*, however, is not limited to such catalogues, as two other levels of analysis can be discerned, one metaphoric-symbolic and the other agentive-anthropomorphic. Namely, the human protagonists of the novel are usually associated to nonhuman animals, as the snake-hunter Tremal-Naik is often compared to a tiger – both through similes and metaphors – and the thugs are associated to the symbol of a snake with the head a woman – "misterioso serpente colla testa di donna" – also to create a parallelism between the two species that Tremal-Naik has to hunt down, i.e., snakes and thugs. However, Tremal-Naik's arch-enemy and leader of the thugs, Suyodhana, is also compared to both a tiger and a lion, so that the qualities of these two 'royal' animals are indiscriminately ascribed to both characters – *Le Due Tigri* (1904) amplifies Suyodhana's characterisation as Tiger, and pits it against another Tiger, namely Sandokan, so that the battle between good (Sandokan) and evil (Suyodhana) is presented as a battle between two tigers.

Nonhuman Gaze

Elephants, snakes, rhinoceros, and tigers also appear in staggering and dangerous encounters with both humans and other nonhumans which make readers hold their breath, as required by the adventure novel, and which present those nonhumans as proper acting characters in the novel. Both an elephant and a rhino fight against tigers; furthermore, all always pose a threat to the protagonists and are referred to as "nemico" (Salgari 2004, 63). Interestingly, the rhino is regarded with "contempt", not because it is a conquered species that has become "familiar" (Ghosh 2021, 77), but rather because it is unfamiliar and even untamed and untameable: "questo animale intrattabile, rozzo, brutale e povero d'intelligenza" (Salgari 2004, 63). Salgari also appears to confer human qualities to nonhumans, as a python *hoped* to

pull Tremal-Naik into its coils ("sperando di allacciarlo fra le sue viscose spire e stritolarlo con una di quelle terribili strette alle quali nulla resiste" – 31) and a rhino suddenly became "pazzo" because "si *divertiva* a spezzare, a frantumare, a disperdere i bambù" (63, emphasis mine). However, though partially humanised, the rhino remains a "bruto" (63) – a brute. In another typically Salgarian narrative expedient – *viz*, the accumulation of dangerous animal appearances (Traversetti 1989, 71) – this mad rhino is threatening Kammamuri and Tremal-Naik's lives when suddenly "il miagolio della tigre" is heard (Salgari 2004, 64). Thus, the two wild animals exchange gazes and fight:

> Puntò rapidamente il fucile verso la fiera, la quale *sgomentata*, si slanciò giù per guadagnare la jungla, ma si trovò dinanzi al rinoceronte. I due formidabili animali *si guardarono reciprocamente* per qualche istante. La tigre, che forse *sapeva* di nulla avere da guadagnare in una lotta col *brutale* colosso, cercò di fuggire, ma non ne ebbe il tempo.
>
> […]
>
> I *due nemici* s'erano entrambi risollevati, con rapidità fulminea, precipitandosi l'un sull'altro. Il secondo assalto non fu fortunato per la tigre. […] Ricadde, cercò di risollevarsi mugolando di dolore e di *rabbia* e tornò a volare ancor più in alto perdendo torrenti di sangue.
>
> Il rinoceronte *non attese* nemmeno che ricadesse. Con un terzo colpo della sua terribile *arma* la sventrò, poi rivoltandola contro terra la schiacciò coi suoi larghi piedi riducendola in un ammasso di carni sanguinolenti e di ossa infrante. Il colosso, *soddisfatto*, emise due o tre volte il *suo sordo fischio* (64 – emphasis mine).

Similarly, after killing the tiger, the rhino finally notices the two protagonists and fixes his surprised gaze on them: "*guardò* il gruppo coi suoi occhietti piccoli e brillanti, ma più con *sorpresa* che con *collera*" (66, emphasis mine). The encounter between rhino and tiger is here depicted as a battle

between two armed enemies who make tactical decisions and feel anger and satisfaction; in other words, the two animals are "humanised" and "anthropomorphised" (Traversetti 1989, 73). More than that, Traversetti argues that Salgari's "modello atropomorfico" (69) is tinged with Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest mixed with nineteenth century positivism. Namely, he draws similarities between post-industrial human societies and Darwinist zoology and contends that Salgari's beasts belong to a natural order that is parallel and similar to ours, but that is not interrelated to our human universe, thus being different from the "fantastic zoology"– typical of Aesop's fables and Kipling's works of fiction – which is built on the interrelations between human and animal worlds (68). Thus, Traversetti concludes that Salgari's representation of the animal world as "teatro di un'impietosa sopraffazione" is derived from Darwinism in so far as after Darwin's evolutionism – which meant that human history is part of natural history –, zoology can hardly figure as symbolic repertoire. However, the Italian critic also allows for the opposite process and contends that Darwin's theory of evolution is designed "a immagine e somiglianza della società umana, favorendo così un più profondo e segreto antropomorfismo" (68). Lawson Lucas' contention that Salgari's scientific precision is an instance of "literary Darwinism" (Lawson Lucas 2000, 43) has the appearance of a praise. However, if read in light of Ghosh's ecocritical stance comes to be conceived as silencing of nonhuman voices resulting from the cataloguing of species in a defined and comparable system of categorisation (Ghosh 2021, 95). Furthermore, when nonhuman animals are presented as acting beings with hopes and emotions, they are always depicted in life-threatening encounters with humans, who eventually have to exterminate these brutish beasts, emblem of unruly, dangerous, and wild nature.

Ultimately, perhaps paradoxically, cultural human phenomena in *I misteri* are found to be presented as fixed, ahistorical, and natural realities, while at the same time nonhuman animals are endowed with human-like qualities and feelings. An analysis of Tremal-Naik's tame tiger Darma may serve to bring to light Salgari's own fictional contribution to the representation of the more-than-human, as its characterization is due to the writer's own imagination and not to his orientalist, mechanistic sources. Besides being a jungle of mere names, however, Salgari's Sundarbans are permeated by nonhuman presences, as this "terra delle tigri e dei serpenti" – where "concealment is so easy for an animal that it could just be a few feet away" (Ghosh 2016, 28) – is indeed inhabited by nonhuman interlocutors, whose "presence and proximity" (30) is often recognised in dangerous encounters given that nonhumans "are everywhere and nowhere" (28) as they are concealed by the dense vegetation, just like tigers in Ghosh's Sundarbans. Such an encounter takes place early on in the book, at the beginning of an "accumolo" (Traversetti 1989, 71, 79) of human and nonhuman dangerous apparitions, when Tremal-Naik bumps into the above-mentioned "hoping" python:

> Percorse ancora tre o quattro metri strisciando, poi alzò il capo, ma lo riabbassò quasi subito. Aveva urtato contro un corpo tenero che pendeva dall'alto e che erasi subito ritirato.
>
> - Oh! – fe' egli.
>
> Un *pensiero terribile* gli attraversò il cervello. Si gettò prontamente da un lato sguainando il coltello e *guardò* in aria. *Nulla vide o almeno nulla gli parve di vedere*. Eppure era sicuro di aver urtato contro qualche cosa, che non doveva essere una foglia di bambù. *Stette alcuni minuti immobile come una statua*.
>
> Un pitone! - esclamò ad un tratto, senza però sgomentarsi.
>
> Un fruscio repentino erasi udito in mezzo ai bambù, poi un corpo oscuro, lungo, flessuoso, discese ondeggiando per una di quelle piante. Era un mostruoso serpente pitone, lungo più di venticinque piedi, il quale allungavasi verso il

> 'Cacciatore di Serpenti' *sperando* di allacciarlo fra le sue viscose spire e stritolarlo
> con una di quelle terribili strette alle quali nulla resiste. Aveva la bocca aperta colla mascella inferiore divisa in due branche come i ferri d'una tenaglia, la forcuta lingua tesa e *gli occhi accesi, che brillavano sinistramente fra la profonda oscurità* (Salgari 2004, 31).

Here, the theme of "seeing" and "not seeing" (Ghosh 2016, 29) is central, as Tremal-Naik's "terrible thought" implies that he is "aware of" the presence and "gaze" of the snake, which he can see only when "it launches its charge" and which "shocks" him (29). At this point, Tremal-Naik is thinking about the snake and recognising its presence. Furthermore, the narrator's use of the word "sperando", which attributes will to the nonhuman animal, could also be read ecocritically as bearing witness to "a sense of recognition, an awareness that humans were never alone, that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought, and consciousness" (30).

Darma as Nonhuman Agent

The "humanisation" of nonhuman animals is most evident in the realm of "royal animals" such as tigers and elephants (Traversetti 1989, 73) and is here epitomised by Darma, whose appearance is still directly derived from encyclopaedias and scientific manuals, but whose behaviour and actions are all the result of Salgari's work of imagination (68). Namely, Darma is mostly called by Tremal-Naik "amica mia" (Salgari 2004, 118), "brava compagna" (119, 194), "intelligente" (119, 194, 196), "fedele bestia" (182, 194), but she is also portrayed as a "feroce animale" (119) employed as a weapon by her "padrone" (119). Although she is said to be "addomesticata" (74), she still retains her wild aspect and behaviour, and Tremal-Naik, more than her

tamer, seems to be her companion. Indeed, he is affectionate towards his beloved friend, as he caresses her and is worried when she appears to be injured (157-158). In this, Tremal-Naik and Darma may be said to be "kin" in the sense intended by Haraway, as their relations are of reciprocal "care" and interspecies companionship (Haraway 2016, 103). Interestingly, the two interspecies companions understand each other and do seem to be able to communicate. For instance, Tremal-Naik understands Darma's emotion of disquiet when she moans (Salgari 2004, 11), and she too seems to have an affectionate behaviour towards Tremal-Naik as she gently licks his hands and face to reassure him that she is not hurt (157). More relevantly, the two often exchange gazes and Darma's eyes, which are always described as "due punti luminosi" (157, 194), become incandescent when beholding her companion and understanding the meaning behind his utterances and gazes:

> "[…] Tu, Darma, rimani qui e sbrana senza pietà quanti si presentano".
>
> *La tigre certamente lo comprese*, poiché si raccolse su se stessa, *cogli occhi fiammeggianti,* pronta a scagliarsi sul primo venuto (71, emphasis mine).
>
> ⁂
>
> "Va' e sbranalo, amica".
>
> Darma *guardò* il padrone, poi l'indiano. I suoi *occhi* si *dilatarono* e parve che *s'incendiassero*. *Aveva compreso ciò che il "Cacciatore di Serpenti" desiderava*. Si abbassò fino a toccare col ventre la terra, *guardò* un'ultima volta Tremal-Naik che le additava l'indiano e s'allontanò con passo silenzioso, ondeggiando lievemente la coda, come un gatto in collera (118-119, emphasis mine).

It is not irrelevant that most communication between Tremal-Naik and Darma "hinges on the eyes" (Ghosh 2016, 29). Indeed, though Tremal-Naik does talk to Darma, their non-linguistic communication is based on a "mute exchange of gazes" (29) and on physical gestures which need to be interpreted

as "communicative acts" (82) given that some meaning is expressed and understood by the two interlocutors. Reading these communicative acts through Ghosh's ecocritical lens serves to reappraise Salgari's imaginative contribution to the representation of the nonhuman environment. While the taming of Darma could also be read as an attempt to subdue nature (as in the case of the tiger-hunt), and while Tremal-Naik is indeed a hunter himself, some of Tipu's words from *Gun Island* may shed light on a different interpretation of Tremal-Naik's communication with the tiger. In other words, Tremal-Naik may have "a special thing with some animals" (GI, 117) in the sense of being able to recognise meaning behind Darma's gestures, thus being in a "communication of a sort" (117) with her, just as "bauleys" (117) do, i.e., men who lead people into the Sundarbans because of their knowledge of the habits and patters of communication of animals. Thus, Salgari's portrayal of Darma, though clearly belonging to the fantastical aspect of the adventure novel, contrasts with the listings and encyclopaedic digressions derived from his sources and demonstrates instead a transcending of Cartesian dualism, which "arrogates all intelligence and agency to the human while denying them to every other kind of being" (Ghosh 2016, 31).

Anthropomorphising nonhumans, that is, attributing "human qualities to animals", is considered a "cardinal error" (Ghosh 2021, 203) both by religious and secular upholders of "human exceptionalism" (203) and by scientists and environmentalists themselves. In *Gun Island*, for instance, Piya is wary of attributing a deeper meaning to Rani's gaze, given that "scientists aren't allowed" (2019, 117) to assign human feelings, such as gratitude (101), to nonhumans. However, Ghosh mentions that scientific research itself has "established that many animals have long memories and are able to communicate in complex ways" (2021, 202). Furthermore, he warns his readers that a staunch avoidance of anthropomorphism can oftentimes lead to

"the related fallacy of mechanomorphism – the assumption that animals are machine-like creatures that cannot, in principle, be endowed with minds or interpretative faculties" (Eileen Crist in Ghosh 2021, 203), embodied by Cartesian dualism. Salgari cannot be certainly accused of mechanomorphism in his depiction of Darma, nor his portrayal of the python, the rhino, and the 'wild' tiger. Thus, the care that the Italian writer devoted to the depiction of nonhumans and the role he assigned to them is demonstration of a sensibility which somewhat departs from his contemporary mechanistic and colonialist attitudes to the environment. In light of this, the fixed, ahistorical temporality ascribed to the Sundarbans comes to be opposed to the positivistic, industrial culture of the nineteenth century and can thus be seen in a new light as it allows for the portrayal of characters like Tremal-Naik and Kammamuri, who are voice-carriers of a "generative" (Haraway 2016) relation to their inhabited space, and like Darma, who embodies "nonhuman forms of agency and expression" (Ghosh 2021, 203).

Certainly, Darma is not a speaking character of the kind found in fables or children's books, unlike Kipling's Sher Kahn and Bagheera, or the tiger-demon Dokkhin Rai from the legend of Bonbibi. While she has been considered a character of the novel in her own right (Salgari 2004, xvii) – namely, she is not only part of the setting or "backdrop" to the plot (Ghosh 2021, 32), but rather an agent –, her depiction is never symbolic nor totally fantastic. Although she is a "tigre letteraria" (Salagri 2004, xvii), her portrayal is more realistic than fanciful, as her aspect and threatening behaviour correspond to the reality of her environment. Still, the fact that such a wild beast can become a loyal "companion species" (Haraway 2016) strikes the reader as improbable, not only in reality, but also in the context of realist fiction. As a matter of fact, Darma's agency is admissible if inscribed within the adventure novel, which vacillates between *romance* and realism.

Figure 9. Cover Illustration by Alberto della Valle for the 1903 Donath edition (Wikepedia). The two most important nonhuman of the novel are portrayed: Darma, lovingly lying next to Tremal-Naik; and a snake.

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3.3 The Nonhuman in the Adventure Novel: between romance and realism

In her analysis of the genre of the adventure in Salgari's literary production, Donatella Lombello, by drawing on Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism,* argues that the adventure novel aspires on the one hand to the probable and realistic, "il verosimile" – *viz*, to the time-space prescriptions of the realist novel –, while on the other hand also tends towards the romance, that is towards the fantastic wonder tale (2011, 237–38), thus oscillating between the departure from reality and a return to the real (239). In other words, the adventure novel wavers between the readers' desire for imaginary matters typical of the romance and their need for realistic semblance typical of the novel *stricto sensu*. Relevantly, Lombello recalls Frye's contention that "the essential element of plot in romance is adventure" (Frye 1957, 186) and explores the interconnection of romance and adventure in Salgari's novels. In detail, she claims that the three fundamental stages of the principal adventure of the romance ("the quest") – namely, the *agon* or conflict, the *pathos* or death-struggle, and the *anagnorisis* or discovery and the recognition of the hero (187) – are also found in Salgari's adventure novel (Lombello 2011, 242–43). In *i Misteri*, the quest is represented by the attempt to save Ada, whose disappearance is the agon of the plot and whose captors, the thugs, represent Tremal-Naik's enemy in the mortal combat of the pathos. The final anagnorisis takes places both between Ada and Tremal-Naik, Tremal-Naik-Saranguy and Captain Macpherson, and Macpherson and Ada Corishant/Macpherson (242-243). Furthermore, the leitmotifs of the agon and pathos are "so magnified that they invest the plot with exceptionality and departure from the norms of regular and habitual life (243). Also, many motifs typical of the romance are found in Salgari's novel, among which Tremal-Naik's love for Ada, his disguise as a thug, Ada's kidnapping and

misidentification, and the descent into an underground temple of virtually all characters, which is linked to religious rituals, sacrifices, and superstitions, further features of the romance (244-245).

Furthermore, Lombello underscores that the motif of the descent to darkness and death is linked to the presence of negatively connoted animals, as for example the thugs leave injured Tremal-Naik to be killed and eaten by tigers at the entrance of the underground temple. However, the presence of such life-threatening and wild animals is always counterbalanced by positive nonhumans, for instance in the shape of Darma, who usually comes to the rescue of her companion (244-245). Interestingly, in her account of "the environment" in Salgari's works of fiction (246), she too underscores the "scientific precision" of the depictions of its botanical and zoological features (246). Furthermore, as Fratnik and Traversetti had already claimed, this "ancoraggio geografico-ambientale" (247) serves to better present the exotic other in its magnification of the distance between the geographical reality of the reader and the wonderful topography of the novels (247). However, Lombello further highlights that this exotic other, more than simply a manifestation of topographical distance, is relevant in so far as it pits a known and habitual world against the "extraordinary world of the adventure", whose marvellous character is indeed evoked by the fictional creation of what she calls "i luoghi dell'avventura" (247). However, in order to create such a sensational topography, Salgari needs to engage the senses of the readers, and thus to resort to precise descriptions of tactile, auditory, olfactory, and visual aspects of both natural and human environments. By doing so, he succeeds in completely captivating the readers, but he also manages to project a sense of verisimilitude (248) more typical of the realist novel.

Additionally,, the romance prescriptions of the adventure novel call for unbounded temporal coordinates, as these cannot be too restricted by the

attentive respect of the social and political historical transformations of reality, but instead require a certain ahistoricity (Traversetti 1989, 46). As seen above, *I misteri,* though dating the plot in 1855, are actually devoid of any defining historical contour, especially as the orientalist sources employed by Salgari were not aware of the many cultural, social, and political changes that the Indian peninsula was undergoing at the end of the nineteenth century, and of which Salgari couldn't have been totally aware (Torri 2012, 34). Traversetti, too reads in Salgari's works, and even in his personal attitude, the double tendency of the adventure novel, i.e., "l'agire simultaneo, in lui, di un'ossessione documentaria e realistica e di un violento impulso centrifugo verso l'arbitrio fantasticante" (1989, 47). Indeed, the listings and encyclopaedic digressions somewhat criticised by Traversetti are attributed to the mimetic requirement of the realist novel. However, the encompassing tone of the narrative remains "non verista" (77), given that, in his attempt to elude Italian low-middle class everyday life, he completely abandons the realm of the "verosimile" (78). Of a different opinion is Fratnik, who maintains that the reality of the distant other is essentially perceived (though indeed orientalised) in what she names "il verosimile esotico" (1980, 60), which is the result of the balanced succession of "action and digression" (Traversetti 1989, 76).

Nonetheless, despite the absence of the limited temporal confines that are usually "conjured up" by the realist novel (Ghosh 2016, 61), *I misteri* does not represent "inconceivably vast forces" (61) either, given that the setting still has the appearance of a "self-contained ecosystem" (61) which does not represent any connections in time or space, contrary to *Gun Island*. Namely, Ghosh's novel strives to give voice to the vastness of the Anthropocene, though still "telescoping" its transformations into a somewhat "limited-time horizon", since only the past of the Little Ice Age intervenes in the novel,

while "connections and events" unfolding in the scale of "thousands of years" would still strike the reader of the realist novel as "not just unlikely, but also absurd" (61). Still, it is precisely this limited presence, if not absence, of history in Salgari that enables "the un-heard of" to be pushed towards the foreground, "while the everyday moves into" the background (17), in a process which is the exact opposite of how "the novel takes its modern form" (17). Thus, though no spatial or temporal connections are portrayed in *I misteri*, its liminal collocation within the adventure novel, and hence its wavering between realism and romance, enables Salgari to give voice to more-than-human presences and forces, as "the improbable" needs not be wholly banished, but can and is indeed weaved into the fabric of the novel on condition that a semblance of verisimilitude be maintained.

⁂

CONCLUSION: ON NONHUMAN STORYTELLING

After having discussed the depiction of the nonhuman in *Gun Island* and *I misteri della jungla nera*, some considerations on storytelling practices in the Anthropocene can be drawn. Namely, Ghosh has demonstrated that in time of planetary crises the novel must be able to represent connections in time and space that the Anthropocene makes manifest and that the mechanistic culture of the Enlightenment and the emergence of realist forms of narrative in the eighteenth century have concealed (Ghosh 2016, 9-11). The climate crisis forces humans to recognise that we have never been the dominant species on the planet, and to come to terms with the "presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors" (30). Thus, the uncanniness of the Anthropocene lies in this recognition of the agency of the other and of our cultural blindness, i.e., the Great Derangement.

Since the "climate crisis is a crisis of culture of thus of the imagination" (9), Ghosh has called for renewed cultural, literary, and artistic practices that restore the voices of silenced nonhumans and that succeed in representing different scales of time and spatio-temporal connections that the Anthropocene brings to light. Thus, the analysis of *Gun Island* has demonstrated that the climate crisis is a planetary crisis and that no place of the world is isolated by drawing connections between cities and continents. Namely, the same phenomena caused by climate change in the Sundarbans are also happening in Venice, as both localities have to face sea-level rise, the warming of waters, and the invasion of nonhuman species in human environments, a case in point being the parallelisms between crabs and shipworms burrowing the wooden embankments, and the waters rising and invading the streets of Venice and the badhs and fields of the Sundarbans.

Furthermore, due to increasing atmospheric temperatures, many nonhuman species are migrating northwards, e.g., the brown recluse to Venice and the yellow-bellied sea-snake to Los Angeles. Human migration patterns have also been portrayed in the novel to shed light on the social and political repercussions of the planetary crisis. Moreover, Ghosh has depicted the history of the climate crisis by setting his re-interpretation of the legend of Manasa Devi and Chand Sadagar against the climatic disruptions of the Little Ice Age. It is through the narrative expedient of the legend of Bonduki Sadagar that Ghosh has mostly succeeded in giving voice to the uncanniness of the more-than-human, to its relations with the human, and to translocal and cross-temporal connections. Finally, it has been illustrated how the medium of the legend in *Gun Island* and in *Jungle Nama* represent an attempt at finding a more appropriate venue for the restoration of the nonhuman voice and the recuperation of human awareness of more-than-human presences, which has been suppressed by modern forms of narrative but not by oral cultures and mythologies, as "it was the literary imagination, most of all, that was everywhere informed by this awareness" (56).

Conversely, Salgari's *I misteri della jungla nera* has been shown to represent the Sundarbans as a fixed, ahistorical, and isolated topography, tinged with orientalist stereotypes in the narrative reproductions of Orientalist colonial sources. In the parts of the novel where nonhumans are listed, they appear as a "jungle of names" (Traversetti 1989, 81), of phonemes even, which hardly evoke the referent. Even in the more descriptive passages, the encyclopaedical nature of the descriptions is such that it rather refers to a scientific, categorising necessity ascribed to the Linnaean system of nomenclature, which – according to Ghosh – cannot be separated from colonial practices of silencing the nonhuman and reducing it to mere resources. However, an analysis of the nonhumans which figure as characters and even protagonists made in light of

Ghosh's theoretical considerations has brought to light Salgari's ability to go beyond his contemporary cultural worldview and to both create active nonhuman characters and to inform the setting with their uncanny "urgent proximity" (Ghosh 2016, 5). This possibility was granted to Salgari by the adoption of the genre of the adventure novel, in its wavering between prescriptions of the realist novel – respected in the 'scientific' knowledge on which the book is based – and the liberty granted by the romance in the figuration of more-than-human and more-than-probable occurrences. In this conclusive chapter, some final remarks on the nonhuman in the Anthropocene and on the role of storytelling during the planetary crisis are given in light of the analysis of the previous chapters.

The Nonhuman in the Anthropocene: Colonisation and Ecocriticism

The close-textual analysis of Salgari's *I misteri della jungla nera* provided after the elaboration of Ghosh's non-fiction works and a study of *Gun Island* has served to demonstrate the reality of Ghosh's claims on the limitations and potentialities of the novel as expressed in *The Great Derangement*. Cognizant that Salgari is a minor author who lived in a specific cultural and historical environment, i.e., *fin de siècle* Italy, who had a peculiar and unique fascination for the unknown, and who wrote within the genre of the adventure novel and not the realist novel, his work provides interesting insights into the question of human awareness of nonhuman presence at the time of the Anthropocene. Namely, both Ghosh and Salgari may be said to belong to the same era of anthropogenic climate change if one takes as onset date for the Anthropocene either the seventeenth or the eighteenth century. Also, Ghosh's considerations of the interconnections between capitalism, colonialism, and climate change do provide the analysis of Salgari with new postcolonial and ecocritical insights.

As a matter of fact, the divergent depictions of the spatiality of the Sundarbans in *I misteri* and *Gun Island* bear witness to colonial and postcolonial conceptions of space and nonhuman beings. As seen above, the representation of the Sundarbans in Salgari's novel can be traced back to the two colonial discourses of wild nature as land of wonder and no-man's-land (Raimondi 2016, 120–25), constructed to justify European and British appropriation of local territories and their transformation into profitable cultivated land. This implied that both human and nonhuman inhabitants were either exploited, denied their rights to the land, or actively exterminated, as in the case of the tiger. The analysis of Salgari's novel *vis à vis* his colonial sources has demonstrated that such discourses were shared by the authors of travelogues and atlases – consulted by Salgari and eventually unconsciously reproduced in his novels (Torri 2012; Vescovi 2019). Furthermore, Salgari's Sundarbans are depicted as an exotic land apart, a perfect setting for the adventure novel aimed at fascinating young Italian readers. The exotic flora and fauna have been proved to be merely a catalogue of names, yet again drawn from sources whose aim was to categorise knowledge of nature in order to make it a conquerable resource. However, the passages of the novel which Salgari created out of his own imagination, and which are not affected by the influence of colonial sources, do allow for the depiction of some nonhuman agency and the figuration of nonhuman animals as characters – e.g., the rhino, the python, and Bhagavadi the elephant – and even as protagonists in the case of Darma.

Despite Salgari's imagination of the nonhuman, for which he is indeed to be praised, the third chapter of this thesis has rather insisted on the analysis of those instances in which the colonial influence is mostly felt. This has served a precise aim. Namely, given that Ghosh traces "the trajectory that has brought humanity to the brink of a planetary catastrophe" (2021, 195) back

to the "the ways in which certain classes of humans […] have actively muted others by representing them as brutes, as creatures whose presence on Earth is solely material" (195), analysing Salgari's novel and his use of the sources is aimed at underscoring that some of the causes of our current predicament are indeed visible in both his and his sources' attitudes towards those silenced and suppressed human and nonhuman beings, as it has been suggested with reference to the naturalisation of cultural, human categories and the underlying consideration of nature as inert resource to be conquered and exploited.

Conversely, in *Gun Island* Ghosh provides a counter-narrative to the depiction of the Sundarbans as land of wonder and no-man's-land by shedding light on spatial networks maintained between the Sundarbans and the rest of the world, through the depiction of similar effects of climate change on the spatiality of Venice and Los Angeles, and by employing the Sundarbans as starting point for the journeys of both Deen and Bonduki Sadagar, and thus for temporal connections between the present and the past of the Little Ice Age. Furthermore, far from being an exotic land apart, Ghosh's Sundarbans are a realist reproduction of real environmental problems which equally affect the lives of human and nonhuman inhabitants, culturally and physically emplaced in their home environment, which they now struggle to belong to. Indeed, the Bay of Bengal is the spatiality against which human and nonhuman migrations also take place, thus becoming the setting for the portrayal of connections with planetary political realities such as the migration crisis, which is employed by Ghosh to shed light on the history of colonialism, slavery, and global commerce and on its social, cultural, and environmental repercussions. Thus, his Sundarbans are the embodiment and synecdochical reference for the temporal and spatial scale of planetary crisis, given that in reality as in the novel the effects of climate change are mostly visible in this

liminal landscape where "geological processes that usually unfold in deep time appear to occur at a speed where they can be followed from week to week and month to month" (Ghosh 2016, 5). Such a spatiality becomes the perfect setting for the representation of the scale of the planetary crisis, which cannot be fathomed by the present cultural paradigm, derived from conceptions of time and place as limited and disconnected, and disseminated by European early-modern and Enlightenment "habits of mind that proceeded by creating discontinuities" that render "the interconnectedness of Gaia unthinkable" (56). By choosing the Sundarbans as first stage for the representation of the climate crisis and by intertwining its spatiality with the rest of the world both in the present and in the past of the seventeenth century, Ghosh attempts to provide a solution to the representation of vaster scales of time and space in which the agency of Gaia is also evident. Namely, in both plotlines – Deen's and Bonduki Sadagar's – the planet emerges as a living entity inhabited by acting nonhumans whose presence is recognised in moments of uncanny encounters with the human protagonists of the novel and of the legend. Thus, Ghosh shows that Gaia has never been inert and that precisely in the period in which "the intellectual titans of the Enlightenment" (GI, 137) were blind to the "severe climatic disruptions" of the Little Ice Age (135), all around the world "famines, droughts, epidemics", "fluctuations in solar activity", volcanic eruptions" and "earthquakes" (135) were bearing witness to the agency of "monstrous Gaia" (Ghosh 2021, 85).

Nonhuman Agency: Narrative Faculty and Storytelling Practices

"It is only through stories that the universe can speak to us", claims Cinta in *Gun Island* (141). Indeed, it is in stories – legends, myths, but also novels – that nonhuman forms of "articulation and agency" (Ghosh 2021, 201) can be better represented, as "the faculty of storytelling" may be "the last remnant

of our animal selves", "a vestige left over from a time before language, when we communicated as other living beings do" (GI, 141). Namely, Ghosh ponders whether it is possible to "connect experiences into meaningful patterns" "in the absence of language" (Ghosh 2021, 202), given that "it is well established now that many animals have long memories and are able to communicate in complex ways" (202). Relevantly, Ghosh draws some parallelisms between the connection of experiences in time and place and "the 'unfolding' of a story" and concludes that animals' ability to "interpret their surroundings, create their own experiential world" implies the same cognitive processes taking place when creating a story (202-203). Thus, "the narrative faculty is the most *animal* of human abilities" because it originates from the interpretation of one's environment, which is "one of the traits that humans indisputably share with animals and many other beings – attachment to place" (204). Indeed, the legend of Bonduki Sadagar itself and its interpretative process demonstrate that humans and nonhumans are strictly tied to the narrated and real spatialities which engender the narrative, and that the narrative itself acquires meaning only against those spatialities, since before unveiling the meaning of the "fairy-tale countries" (GI, 17), the meaning of the legend itself is foreclosed. Moreover, it is in their attachment to place that nonhuman forms of agency are most uncannily resonant, as the presence of the brown recluse and the yellow-bellied sea snake affect the protagonists because of the unusual spatiality in which they appear. Hence, more than tied to language, the narrative faculty seems to arise from attachment to place and to be linked to other modes of meaningfulness, such as memory and sight. As seen in section 2.3, *Gun Island* portrays human modes of interpreting reality and connecting experiences through memory awaken by sight, as in the case of Rafi's remembering the vital part of the legend in which Bonduki Sadagar is bitten by a poisonous spider in Venice only when seeing a spider in

Cannaregio, thus pointing to common ways of interpreting one's surroundings in humans and nonhumans. This is further highlighted by the presence of friezes on the dhaam and their graphical reproductions in the novel.

However, *Gun Island* is also a novel about words, as Deen's "strange journey" is "launched by a word" (3), and indeed the whole novel arises from Deen's attempts to find meaning behind the name 'Bonduki Sadagar' and all the names of the lands featured in the legend, which "doesn't make any sense" (17) because of the unintelligibility of these names. Eventually, the meaning of the legend is unveiled precisely because Cinta retraces the etymology of these place-names, thus also enabling the relocation of the narrative in the history of the seventeenth century. Conversely, Ghosh provides a response to his own exhortation to think about the Anthropocene not only through words but also "in images" (Ghosh 2016, 83) by intertwining poetry and graphic "illuminations" in *Jungle Nama* in order to counteract the "deepening logocentrism of the last several centuries" (83). Still, even in graphic verse *Jungle Nama* – and in *Bonbibi Johuranama* itself – references to the importance of language and even metre are scattered everywhere, as it is the "alchemic"(Ghosh and Toor 2021, 68) power of the dwipodi-poyar that enables Dukhey's prayer to reach Bonbibi; also the tiger-demon Dokkhin Rai is finally subdued by the metre itself:

> You must stay within your bounds and never transgress;
> with what you have you must make do, don't seek excess.
> Your first step is to find a proper way to speak, it's come
> time for you to learn some better technique.
> Count your syllables, it'll help rein your appetites in, the
> yoke of meter will give you discipline.
> It's the chaos in your mind that unbridles your desires, by
> measuring your thoughts you'll learn to quench those
> fires.'

> This strange punishment wasn't easy for Dokkhin Rai, but
> one day he was glad he'd learnt to metrify.
> 'Thanks to you, Bon Bibi,' he said, falling before her, 'I've
> learnt restraint, with the magic of meter.
> With word-count and rhyme, I will master my needs, my
> desires I shall check, and repent for my misdeeds.' (56-57)

While "new, hybrid forms" (Ghosh 2016, 84) to "think about the Anthropocene" (83) are needed given its "resistance to language itself" (84), the power of words is never underestimated by Ghosh, either in their concealment of the more-than-human, or in their ability to "effect changes in the real world" (150) which can also restore forms of kinship between humans and nonhumans and teach humans to 'master their needs'. While a certain use of the written word made in the context of the above-mentioned colonialist and mechanistic discourses – and visible in Salgari's reproductions of the sources – has reduced Gaia to the "orderly, mechanistic universe conjured up by the term 'nature'" (Ghosh 2021, 209), language itself is not "inert" (210). Indeed, the multiplicity of meaning which the "fairy-tales places" in *Gun Island* convey reveals the richness of language and its ability to portray the nonhuman if disenfranchised from mechanistic practices which deprive the nonhuman of its agency. Salgari's imagination of Darma, for instance, demonstrates that disavowing those "modes of thought and expression" (Ghosh 2016, 65) that have suppressed nonhuman voices enables "the awareness of nonhuman agency" (64) to surface. What is paramount, then, is to choose the right words and the right stories where "nonhuman voices be restored" (257).

What Stories? Realism and the Uncanny

As seen in the second chapter of this thesis, Ghosh's attempt to restore nonhuman voices to their proper place in *Gun Island* has been criticised for its apparent lack of realism in some parts of the novel. In *The Great*

Derangement, Ghosh has illustrated the role that the realist novel has played in the silencing of the nonhuman, given that "ours [is] time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognising the reality of our plight" (2016, 11). One of the reasons why the realist novel has not been able to illustrate the scale of the Anthropocene, Ghosh argues, is the rationalisation of the novelistic universe (19) and the eradication of the improbable from its verisimilar setting (19-27). Indeed, because of the discontinuity-producing and mechanistic philosophies of the Enlightenment (56), the agency of the nonhuman and the contemporary climatic disruptions sound indeed improbable, as "every archaic reminder of Man's kinship with the nonhuman" (70) has been erased by the "project of partitioning the imaginary gulf between Nature and Culture" (68). This has meant that the "literary imagination became radically centred on the human" "exactly in the period in which human activity was changing the earth's atmosphere" (66). Nonetheless, though calling for "new, hybrid forms" (84) of literature, Ghosh is still anchored to realistic forms of literary production.

Salgari's adventure novel may provide a possible solution to this *impasse* given that, in its wavering between the romance and the novel, it allows for the representation of verisimilar human and nonhuman characters, tethered to their historical reality as they are described with scientific precision, while also leaving space for the depiction of nonhuman forms of agency which would appear improbable if limited to the confines prescribed by formal realism. It is also the case, however, that climate change does not belong to the romance mode, where the narrated matter is "something that doesn't happen and may never happen" (Lombello 2011, 241). Conversely, climate change is here and is happening. From this perspective, the criticism addressed to Ghosh's less-than-realistic passages – e.g., "the storm of living beings" at

the end of the novel –, rather than bearing witness to Ghosh's own limitations in portraying the climate crisis and imagining new possibilities for other forms of human existence (Ghosh 2016, 128), brings to light the readers' own difficulties in coming to terms with the uncanniness of Gaia, as "much, if not most, of humanity today lives as colonialists once did – viewing the Earth as though it were an inert entity that exists primarily to be exploited and profited from" (Ghosh 2021, 257). Namely, Ghosh does not merely "depict climate crisis", but "recreates(s) the experience of living through risk and uncertainty" (Bracke 2020, 166) via the affective uncanny and what literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan calls "the principle of minimal departure" (172). In her analysis of genre as a narratological category, Astrid Bracke argues that genres "provide the frameworks to help people make sense of the world around them, especially in a time of crisis and change" (167); thus, some genres appear to be "ecocritically or environmentally more sound than others" according to how they affect readers (168-169). Whereas Ghosh pins climate fiction to a subcategory of science fiction dealing with "disaster stories set in the future" – "there is now a new genre of science fiction called "climate fiction" or cli-fi" (2016, 72), Bracke, following a number of critics, employs the term "cli-fi" to "refer to novels that depict climate change and crisis" and that are "set more or less right now" (2020, 170). Interestingly, Ghosh's *Gun Island* may be considered climate fiction in so far as it "describes a risk society, a constant state of living in potential man-made danger" where the "environmental crisis has become more and more a place in which people dwell" (Trexler 2015 in Bracke 2020, 170-171). As demonstrated in the second chapter of this thesis, the pervasiveness of the planetary crisis and its being "part of people's daily, domestic experience" (171) is thematised in *Gun Island*.

More importantly, Ryan's "principle of minimal departure", namely readers' tendency to "use their own world and environment as a starting point

for their understanding of the narrative's world", and thus "the relationship between the actual world and the textual actual word", is "a defining element of genre" (172). Focusing on the "chronological compatibility" between the textual actual world and the real world – the actual-world-reader's ability to understand the entire history of the textual world –, Bracke argues that "cli-fi's textual actual worlds are compatible with the actual world, since climate fiction reflects on changes as they are in the process of occurring" and is thus "set as close as possible to the present" (175), besides featuring the same natural laws, species, properties of the real world, which is also logically, linguistically and analytically compatible with the fictional actual world (174). Still, the interplay between familiarity and improbable/unfamiliar occurrences is paramount, as cli-fi's "narratives reflect something of the epistemological uncertainty that defines today's unpredictable climate crisis, full of known and unknown qualities" (175). This is also the intended aim of Ghosh's environmental uncanny and of his reproduction of the planetary crisis in *Gun Island*, which is "about more than *just* depictions of what a world in crisis looks like" as the principle of minimal departure stretches "the reader's actual world to encompass the possibilities the textual world suggests" thus making "epistemological uncertainty" "part of the reader's experience of the novel" (179). In fact, however, Ghosh's engagement with the planetary crisis is not limited to climate change, so that confining his work to genre fiction could cast a shadow on his theorisation of the interconnectedness of time, place, and beings.

While Salgari's partly encyclopaedic novel does not show the epistemological uncertainty of our times of crisis, his adventure novel does indeed "provide the frameworks to help people make sense of the world around them" (167). By portraying an unknown, unfamiliar environment which is however scientifically grounded, his adventure novel combines

different storyworlds, i.e., "projected environments that enable readers to travel from the actual world to the textual world" (172). The storyworld of the romance does not coincide with the actual world; this allows readers of Salgari to suspend their disbelief and accept the character of Darma as compatible with the textual actual world. Still, because of the chronological, taxonomic, logical, and analytical compatibility between the two worlds in the adventure novel, Salgari's Sundarbans are not completely an "imagined 'other' world apart from ours" (Ghosh 2016, 72). Recuperating such a storyworld, where more possibilities for the depiction of the agency of the nonhuman are accepted may accompany humans out of our Great Derangement and towards the recognition of our kinship with more-than-human presences and forces, which is becoming increasingly urgent in these confounding and dangerous times.

⁂

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