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Dwelling, Dispossession, and “Slow Violence” in the Time of Climate Change
The Representation of Refugees in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract In this essay, I will analyse the crucial issues of dwelling and dispossession concerning refugees in the novel *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh. Political and environmental displacement is addressed within the framework of ‘slow violence’ as proposed by the landmark work of Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). With the intention to define the Morichjhãpi refugees as a foreshadowing of the climate migrations involving the lives of the subalterns in South Asia, as argued by Brandon Jones (2018), the essay provides a historical background of the Morichjhãpi Massacre and studies the forced eviction narrated in the novel through the pages of Nirmal’s diary. Together with Kusum, the Marxist professor experiences the tragedy of the subalterns in the ever-changing ecosystem of the Sundarbans, bridging the gap between environmental and postcolonial categories while providing fruitful insights within the notions of human history and ecological deep time.

Keywords The Hungry Tide. Ecocriticism. Displacement. Migrations. Slow Violence.

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1 Introduction

With *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Amitav Ghosh analyses the significance of place to the formation and expression of personal and social identities in postcolonial India, foregrounding narratives that involve the unfolding of events across time in the dynamic ecosystem of the Sundarbans. Through this paper, my aim is to address the vulnerability of marginalised subjects before the power of nature, especially investigating the community of refugees portrayed in Nirmal's journal, and propose a study of the novel's environmental themes in the wake of Rob Nixon's definition of "slow violence", useful to account for, eventually, the geological dimension of the novel. My reading concentrates on the figure of Nirmal and the representation of the dispossessed: adopting a postcolonial-ecocritical point of view, I will briefly examine the historical background that led to the 1979 Morichjhãpi Massacre, reclaimed in the novel as one of its central plot lines. The episode will allow me to devote attention to issues such as centralised control imposed by the adoption of Project Tiger's developmental rhetoric, neocolonial corporate power disguised as conservation narratives, and abuse towards the poor, already burdened in the past by the forced relocation in apparently hostile 'empty' lands. Besides, with this paper, I wish to propose a reading of the novel which is alert to the discomforting presence of climate change: considering Nirmal the cornerstone of political and geological discourses, I will address the deep-time temporal dimension of *The Hungry Tide* and study how the refugees in the novel may be said to have anticipated the demands of today's climatic migrations. In order to bridge the gap between social and environmental history, the importance of slow violence will be underscored as a way to describe the problems of the subalterns and human responsibility to today's environmental devastation.

In the following section, the historical dimension of the struggle is presented and, while outlining facts and circumstances, I will seek to follow the blurring of fiction and history that revolves around the theme of dispossession and violence against the *Dalit* community in the novel. In the third section, I will mostly focus on the characters of Nirmal and Kusum, both sufferers, on different levels, of the outburst of violence towards the community of refugees who had settled in the Sundarbans in the 70s. Seeking to investigate the political discourse that permeates Ghosh's novel, I will refer to the contradictory notions of 'development' and 'belonging' described by Huggan and Tiffin (2015) as imposed narratives of power affecting the downtrodden. In the last part, the novel will be discussed through the lenses of Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, with the intention of establishing connections between state-mandated violence, the presence of climate change and their repercussions towards the lives of those at the margins in the Global South.

2 The Morichjhãpi Massacre between History and Fiction

Following a narratological approach already adopted in most of his works, Amitav Ghosh intertwines different narratives in the novel across distant temporal lines. Nirmal's account of the facts discloses as his nephew Kanai, a middle-class Indian entrepreneur from New Delhi proceeds in reading his journal, projecting the plot into the past. Besides providing a detailed historical account of colonial and postcolonial settlement in the Sundarbans, Nirmal's journal also offers the perspective of an outsider among outsiders, whose point of view is surely bound to be overshadowed: "I am writing these words in a place that you will probably never have heard of" (Ghosh 2005, 67), he writes in order to introduce the island of Morichjhãpi, theatre of a massacre conveniently marginalised in Indian history (Das 2015, 40). Nirmal, a retired Marxist teacher who had been arrested in the past for his ideals and for the same reason forced to leave the city of Calcutta, appears naively enthusiastic about the villagers: at the beginning of his diary he casually discovers the newly established community and proposes himself to help the refugees, as he romantically believes he is witnessing the outset of a utopian society in the tidal ecosystem. The newcomers have suffered the plight of displacement, as the reader soon gets to know, and are now trying to establish a fixed abode in an ever-changing land that opposes such processes discursively and materially.

These postcolonial migrants embody a narrative of multiple evictions and dispossession.[1] Following post-partition communal conflicts, many Hindu East Bengalis started migrating to escape persecution in their homeland. After being initially forced to settle in hastily made resettlement camps, in 1978 a group of refugees originally from the Khulna district of East Bengal started marching to Morichjhãpi, an uninhabited island in the Sundarbans, with the hope that the new Communist government would fulfil its promises of granting them a place to live, having supported their cause earlier: the political ascendency of the Left is reported to have encouraged the refugees to seek shelter within Bengal as Morichjhãpi, an island in the forests of the Sundarbans, had indeed been cleared in 1975, its mangrove vegetation replaced by a governmental programme to increase state revenue (Jalais 2005). However, as Rajorshi Das explains, the government refused to entertain their demands, initially imposing an economic blockade, and subsequently sinking the boats of the islanders.[2] Many of the refugees consequently died of starva-

1 Historical account of the Hindu East Bengalis' dispossession follows Das 2015 and Jalais 2005.

2 Jalais 2005 offers a full-fledged analysis of the facts and their political implications.

tion and cholera while others were killed in police firing during acts of state-mandated brutality.

The refugees' eviction was justified on environmental grounds: seeking to make room for a conservation enterprise called Project Tiger, Jyoti Basu, at that time Chief Minister of West Bengal, described the settlement of Morichjhãpi as illegal trespassing on a State Forest Reserve and on land designated for Tiger preservation (Das 2015, 41). Ross Mallick estimates as many as 17,000 deaths among the refugees and, despite the scarcity of proofs, Annu Jalais claims that only one in four refugees survived. The refugees, having fled to India from Bangladesh in waves after Partition in 1947 and then, in increasing numbers, after the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence, were mainly *Dalits* who had tried to resettle from situations of cultural and physical displacement. According to Ramachandra Guha, Project Tiger was "a network of parks […] managed primarily for the benefits of rich tourists", whose designation "was made possible only by the physical displacement of existing villages and their inhabitants" (Guha 1989, 75): it was originally intended to create artificial portions of 'cleared' land available to the touristic few, hence undermining long-term residents' livelihood conditions. Despite recognising the successful outcome of the World Wildlife Fund-sponsored conservation project, Weik admits that the Bengali Government has to be blamed for killing and manslaughter while pretending to act on behalf of animals. Thus, conservation rhetoric justified the takeover of land and natural resources, as Jaising aptly remarks. Morichjhãpi settlers were not encroaching upon the resources of the human natives but conversely those of the non-human ones, therefore violating the Forest Acts by their unauthorised occupation of a part of the Sundarban Reserve Forest, according to the government.

The Morichjhãpi Massacre, despite being covered in the Calcutta press at the time, had long since lapsed into oblivion: at the time of Ghosh's writing *The Hungry Tide*, only Ross Mallick's 1999 scholarly account was available in English (Fletcher 2011, 6). For this reason, we can say that the author gives an important contribution in advocacy of a socio-political context overlooked by the political debate, thus confirming what is well stated by Huggan and Tiffin about imaginative literature and its power to mediate functions of social and environmental advocacy while standing as a catalyst for action and engaged cultural critique (Huggan, Tiffin 2015, 14). The detailed account of the historical facts of Morichjhãpi in *The Hungry Tide* is a major example of a text that preserves its aesthetic function while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, following the narration of a group of people in perpetual struggle with the natural and political environment; this offers the possibility to reconcile the interplay of postcolonial criticism and ecological questions in favour of a renovated unitary notion of environmental and social justice.

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3 Nirmal, Kusum, and the Representation of Refugees: Dwelling and Dispossession

Nirmal, the character who best exemplifies the fluidity of historical and environmental categories in the novel, is often read by commentators as in opposition to his wife Nilima, whose life is "entirely rooted in her sociocultural milieu" (Das 2006, 180). According to S. Das, Nirmal intrinsically appears as a violator of the law established by Nilima's commitment to Lusibari: following the poetic abstractions of Rilke, he chases "a romantic ideal across the margin of history" eventually collapsing "in the illusory space between what the Bangladeshi refugees claim as home and what renders them homeless" (180-1). Poetry and unsettlement characterize his social consciousness, which gradually develops into active commitment throughout the novel. Forced to flee to the tide country in the middle of his life, where one's existence can be lived "on the margins of greater event", he discovers that "no place was so remote as to escape the flood of history" (Ghosh 2005, 77). Initially his engagement with the tide country is a forced construction in the wake of post-war conflicts and the post-partition hideous political climate, where opposition against revolutionary thinkers permeates Indian culture. At the beginning, he admits, in the Sundarbans "nothing was familiar […]. How was it possible that these islands were a mere ninety-seven kilometres from home and yet so little was known about them?" (79). Years later, after retiring from working as headmaster of Lusibari school in 1979, he feels the need to support the cause of the Morichjhãpi refugees, an issue that would deeply change his erratic spirit and cause his mental breakdown, according to Nilima's words (117). Despite his initial scepticism towards local mythology and religion, he gradually develops a peculiar connection to the land through his commitment to the Morichjhãpi refugees, not limiting himself to a static perception of his personality but acknowledging that, in the tide country, "transformation is the rule of life" (224). A first account made by his wife precisely describes to her nephew Kanai the historical circumstances which led to the refugees' forced relocation in the island of Morichjhãpi:

> Morichjhãpi, said Nilima, was a tide country island a couple of hours from Lusibari by boat. It fell within a part of the Sundarbans reserved for tiger conservation, but unlike many such islands it was relatively easily accessible from the mainland. In 1978 a great number of people suddenly appeared on Morichjhãpi. In this place where there had been no inhabitants before there were now thousands, almost overnight […].
>
> "Most of them were Dalits, as we say now," said Nilima. "Harijans, as we used to say then."

> But it was not from Bangladesh that these refugees were fleeing when they came to Morichjhãpi; it was from a government resettlement camp in central India. In the years after Partition the authorities had removed the refugees to a place called Dandakaranya, deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of miles from Bengal.
>
> “They called it resettlement,” said Nilima, “but people say it was more like a concentration camp or a prison. The refugees were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave. Those who tried to get away were hunted down”. (118)

The author provides the reader with all the necessary details to delve into the context of the episode. History is the main source for Nilima’s reconstruction: she adequately sets her account in a post partition narrative that involves acts of forceful eviction and internment of the peasant population. The word *resettlement* is a key word here, a linguistic euphemism which masquerades the acts of violence perpetrated by the government. As she explains, the refugees had decided to settle in the Sundarbans assuming that they would not face opposition from the State Government. Nilima’s attitude seems dismissive towards the refugees, she shows no eagerness to take part in the clash between the refugees and the government, her description of the acts of violence perpetrated in the Sundarbans are elusive, outcome of a “miscalculation” (119), and her husband’s obsession with this oppressed group of people is nothing more than a form of idealism that will turn the couple into two strangers in the same house. She cannot feel an intimate shared experience with those people that had partially betrayed her sense of a fixed community committing an act of transgression by transcending physical and mental borders with the threat of upsetting the intimate stability of her newly-established community-oriented programme.

No sooner does Kanai start to read Nirmal’s diary than a more nuanced point of view of the history of Morichjhãpi discloses to the reader. His account begins with the admittance of a defeat: “the truth was that I had not written a single word in all my time in Lusibari; not just that, I had even abandoned my other great pleasure – reading” (144). Partly for “superannuation”, partly for the desire for following higher ideals of knowledge he decides, after retirement, to visit some other schools of the region. During one of his trips with the boatsman Horen across the archipelago, he finds himself “picked up and shaken by huge waves” (160) while travelling, so the pair decides to take shelter on a nearby island. The two men approach a small shack – “of the usual kind, made with bamboo and palm-leaf thatch” (161). Inside this small dwelling, the casual encounter with Kusum is narrated in a naïve quasi-romantic style: “I looked down and saw a young woman kneeling in front of me, touching my feet. That I could not identify

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her was no more a surprise that she should know me […]. As a schoolteacher, then this happens with almost everyone you meet. […] new faces do not match the old" (162). While the rain is still pouring outside, the two men can learn about Kusum's story, which constitutes one of the essential nodes of the novel.

Kusum's words come to Nirmal like a flooding torrent: Shakti Jaising defines her character as a "network narrative" that "features the experiences of two generations of metropolitan and rural characters whose lives intersect in the Sundarbans" (Jaising 2015, 67). Hers is a deep account of grief and loss: she recounts her travel to a mining town called Dhanbad in search of her mother, where she is saved by a food retailer named Rajen[3] and, thanks to him, discovers that her mother, previously betrayed by a snake oil salesman, now works "in a place where truck-drivers came […] and buy women for the night" (163). Soon after Kusum's marriage with Rajen and her mother passing away, her connection to the tide country becomes evident: she starts to fathom that her personal idea of belonging cannot match with the iron and rails of her temporary sojourn, dreaming of "storm-tossed islands straining at their anchors, and of the rivers that bound them in golden fetters, […] high tide […] islands submerged like underwater clouds" (164). After a railway incident that kills her husband, leaving her alone with their son Fokir, she gets to know about the "great march to the East". The story of the refugees displaced from Bangladesh in search of a fixed abode shakes her unquiet spirit, as they appear "like ghosts, covered in dust, strung out in a line, shuffling behind the rail tracks", with children on their shoulders and bundles on their backs. Most importantly, this group of dispossessed people speak Bangla, the very same language as Kusum and the other dwellers of the tide country. Thus, the refugees are first portrayed as a colony of ghosts who, however, can rely on the use of words to describe their situation and their stateless condition deprived of the basic rights. This is how a spokesperson from this group replies to Kusum, once questioned about their destination:

> "Once we lived in Bangladesh, in Khulna jila: we're tide country people, from the Sundarbans' edge. When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash; we crossed the border, there was nowhere else to go. We were met by the police and taken away; in buses they drove us to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red it seemed to be stained with blood. For those who lived there, that dust was as good as gold; they loved it just as we love our tide country mud. But no matter how we tried, we couldn't settle there: rivers ran

3 Kusum's story is narrated in Ghosh 2005, 162-5.

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> in our heads, the tides were in our blood. […] We sent some people ahead, and they found the right place; it's a large empty island called Morichjhãpi. For months we prepared, we sold everything we owned. But the police fell on us the moment we moved. They swarmed on the trains, they put blocks on the road – but we still would not go back; we began to walk". (164-5)

This reading of the postcolonial dispossessed does not spare the postcolonial state from harsh criticism: *The Hungry Tide* depicts the invisibility of those "living in the aftermath of emancipatory moments/projects such as Independence and postcoloniality" (Nayar 2010, 105); they come after such movements that, among their outcomes, saw the creation of welfare states and social mechanisms of charity and development but, at the same time, overlooked the lives of those at the margins. The Indian State appears inadequate to recognize and welcome those who are stateless, denying its land to those who need it with the presumption of keeping it inviolable. On addressing the inadequacy of the postcolonial state, Pramod Nayar implies that India has created two opposed narrations, portraying men antithetical to the environment they inhabit: people are doubly dispossessed by state actions, first through war and then through evictions and forced relocations; the characters find their own counternarratives to the institutional "pedagogy of national identity" (113), where violence emerges from silence and voice is given to what has been suppressed in ghostly forms.

The circumstances around the refugees precipitate quite rapidly: Nirmal is taken aback when he notes that a wooden watchtower has been erected in Morichjhãpi for better controlling the land and several men are required to patrol the island's shore; however, inducements to leave and, later, threats prove ineffective as the settlers remain adamant in their decision not to leave their land. The strong measures taken by the government start with banning all movements in and out of the island under the provision of the Forest Preservation Act, then forbidding people from gathering, treated as a criminal offence. In Lusibari it is rumoured that dozens of police boats were encircling Morichjhãpi and, by employing gas and conventional warfare, prevented anyone from bringing rice or water to the islanders.

During one of their final journeys to Morichjhãpi, Nirmal and Horen witness a scene of police brutality against some settlers that were hoping to enter the island with some provisions, after probably slipping out in search of external aid. A group of settlers is encircled by policemen in their motorboat; Nirmal finds himself in the middle of the tragedy and cannot avoid sharing his emotional commitment to the cause. The refugees assert here their status of *dispossessed*, a cry that mirrors Nirmal's own feelings as a displaced urban subject living in the Sundarbans, who is now able to understand and identi-

fy with the settlers' anxiety "because of his lifelong struggle to find an effective political and artistic voice" (Jaising 2015, 71-2):

> Surely the settlers would turn back now? In our hearts we prayed they would. But what happened instead was something unforeseen: the people in the boat began to shout in unison, "*Amra kara? Bastuhara*." Who are we? We are the dispossessed!
>
> How strange it was to hear this plaintive cry wafting across the water. It seemed at that moment not to be a shout of defiance but rather a question being addressed to the very heavens, not just for themselves but on behalf of a bewildered humankind. Who, indeed, are we? Where do we belong? And as I listened to the sound of those syllables, it was as if I were hearing the deepest uncertainties of my heart being spoken to the rivers and the tides. Who was I? Where did I belong? In Calcutta or in the tide country? In India or across the border? In prose or in poetry?
>
> Then we heard the settlers shouting a refrain, answering the questions they had themselves posed: "*Morichjhãpi chharbona*." We'll not leave Morichjhãpi, do what you may.
>
> Standing on the deck of the bhotbhoti, I was struck by the beauty of this. Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave.
>
> I joined my feeble voice to theirs: "*Morichjhãpi chharbona*!"
>
> […]
>
> At first it seemed the policemen might have decided to look the other way and let the boat pass.
>
> That their intention was utterly otherwise became clear when the motorboat wheeled around in the water. Picking up speed, it came shooting toward the wobbling nouko with its boatload of passengers and provisions. It rammed the boat square in the middle: in front of our eyes the timbers flew apart. Suddenly the water was full of struggling men, women and children. (Ghosh 2005, 254)

Ghosh seems to suggest that the traditional idea of belonging cannot account for the social complexity of the Sundarbans estuarine ecosystem. Huggan and Tiffin have investigated upon the fights over land between European and indigenous settlers in the colonies and the anxiety resulting from the overshadowed awareness of land expropriation and the suppression of local knowledge by the normalising act of legal narratives of possession.[4] According to them, possession does not imply belonging: the evicted refugees live in a perpetual state of home and not-at-home which is a paradoxical consequence of the possibility of dwelling without any perception of feeling at home. Entitle-

4 See Huggan, Tiffin 2015, 98-9.

ment to one's land encompasses the tensions between emotional possession and laws governing ownership which, in a postcolonial state, create a conundrum that violently puts the citizens against the political forces. Subaltern people are "residual presences from a precapitalist era" (Nixon 2011, 164), whose rights to the soil are overwritten by the logic of private property; the land does not belong to them and to "dwell in movement" constitutes an unacceptable contradiction since it does not directly improve the "civilizational spectacle of the nation" (164). Drawing from nature's observation, Nirmal realises how transformation is a dominant force also for the society of the tide country, challenging the idea of static boundaries or fixed identities: the developmental agenda of the nation-state is short-sighted because it ignores the ever-changing relationship between humans and their surroundings, as Jaising remarks too (Jaising 2015, 67, 75).

Such a misleading developmental narration, while advocating for tiger protection, mirrors a Western approach to ecological problems like tiger extinction: it calamitously considers endangered ecosystems and animals as disconnected from the livelihood of local peoples who are simultaneously put at risk. The non-human world is seen as a priority over the life of subaltern groups targeted by their own governments with the cooperation of international organisms. The West Bengal Government perpetrates a strong operation of mass eviction over the group of refugees, who demonstrated their cohesion eventually reclaiming their stateless exceptionalism by asserting their "dispossessed" status. This drastic removal campaign is conducted employing off-duty policemen and criminal gangs: murders and rapes on a massive scale are among the consequence of state-mandated brutality against the dispossessed. The tiger, hunted to near-extinction especially during colonial times, stands in the common narration as antithetical to men's appeals, following neocolonial presumptions which envision environmental justice and conservation as separated from social justice and in conflict with the concerns of indigenous people.

The siege goes on for many days, even after being declared illegal by the High Court. On arriving once again in Morichjhãpi, Nirmal realises how the blockade has affected the lives of the settlers. Starvation has shaped Kusum and Fokir's body, while many others are dead due to contaminated water. It is a moment of apparent calm before the final clash and Kusum, in her last reported words, affirms all her lack of faith in such conservation measures that affect the life of the poor:

> [They say that] "This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world". Every day, sitting here with hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words over and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so

> much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their name? Where do they live, these people? Do they have children, do they have mothers, fathers? As I thought of these things, it seemed to me that this whole world had become a place of animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and the soil. No one could think this a crime unless they have forgotten that this is how humans have always lived – by fishing, by clearing land and by planting the soil. (Ghosh 2005, 261-2)

She seems aware of the ecological reach of the struggle, as her figure in Nirmal's journal combines fable and moral drama. The fiction of 'national progress' is once again revealed as a mere abstraction: development, as Huggan and Tiffin maintain, is a rhetorical issue which aims at the preservation of the middle-class society requiring the sacrifice of subaltern people. The episode shows how "environmental issues cannot be separated from questions of social justice and human rights" (Huggan, Tiffin 2015, 54) and, on a wider perspective, "ecological disruption is co-extensive with damage to the social fabric" (54), as development implies "top-down forms of economic management" (54) reflecting the neocolonialist imperatives of global corporate commerce. In the novel, the postcolonial state perpetrates coercive allocation and management of natural resources that are versions of 'ecological imperialism'[5] with its disastrous effects, provoking a cultural-and-ecological crisis which erodes the social structures that make pluralism possible and hits marginalised societies already excluded by the centralised machinery of the state.

4 "Slow Violence", Deep Time and the Shadow of Climate Change in *The Hungry Tide*

I will now try to read the blending of environmental and postcolonial issues regarding the notion of "slow violence" as presented by Rob Nixon. With this section, I wish to offer a reading of *The Hungry Tide* which brings the ecocritical and political dimensions we have previously outlined on a deeper level, well rooted in discussions on climate change and contemporary environmental threats. Nirmal, whose trajectory in the novel has been traced above, encompasses along his pages both historical dimension and geological perspectives, evoking the all-transformative agency of the tide country and anticipating, in some lyrical and foreboding passages of the novel, the devastating effects that natural phenomena might bring about in the tide coun-

5 Crosby 1986, quoted in Huggan, Tiffin 2015, 54.

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try. I would like to suggest that the history of the Morichjhãpi Massacre could be framed as a comparable narrative as those analysed by Nixon in his exhaustive 2011 work of literary criticism, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. By doing so, The reality of climate change will be employed to address the effects of slow violence in a novel, *The Hungry Tide*, which does not tackle the climatic crisis openly but dedicates much attention to the history of those refugees who are caught in a volatile and environment and may be presented as a foreshadowing of today's climatic migrations.

Slow violence, Nixon explains, is a form of violence that eludes eye-catching definitions in an age dominated by the spectacularisation of the facts in the economy of media communication. It unfolds over years, decades, even centuries sometimes, occurring gradually and out of sight in a vortex of delayed destruction dispersed across time and space. It is by definition neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive (Nixon 2011, 2), and its calamitous repercussions can be detected across a range of temporal scales. It has an exponential character and it commonly affects "those people lacking resources" (4), whose unseen poverty confers them the status of "disposable people" and makes them the perfect target of slow violence. The poor are way more likely to experience the proximity of environmental threat, which endangers their lives in different ways. Among the most common forms of environmental violence against the poor, Nixon talks about toxicity, resources depletion, petro-imperialism, megadam construction, neocolonial tourism, corporate deregulation, and antihuman conservation practices; these forces, he says, "disproportionately jeopardize the livelihoods, prospects, and memory banks of the global poor" (5).

Slow forms of environmental catastrophes operate by displacements, as places are rendered inhabitable since the effects of the "violent geographies of fast capitalism" (7) imply temporal, geographical, symbolic, and technological displacement:

> For if the past of slow violence is never past, so too the post is never fully post: industrial particulates and effluents live on in the environmental elements we inhabit and in our very bodies, which epidemiologically and ecologically are never our simple contemporaries. (Nixon 2011, 8)

Slow violence poses a number of representational challenges for writers and activists who face the difficult task of giving shape to formless threats, whose "catastrophic acts […] are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects" (10). Casualties of environmental violence are normally part of a system which does not consider them as such; indeed, they are disposable and expendable for a broader project that usually involves processes of forced industrialization.

On explaining the dynamics of displacement, Nixon talks about the superimposition of an 'official landscape' upon a 'vernacular one' (17): by doing that, the socioenvironmental struggles of a community are severed from the accumulated cultural meaning, surrendering to a construction of an uninhabited landscape. As stated previously, in *The Hungry Tide* different narratives of place from below try to oppose to the fallout brought about by developmental agendas whose primary beneficiaries live elsewhere. This is the case of the refugees who become *conservation refugees* as soon as the West Bengal Government forces them to find a new land while seeking to provide finite resources for the touristic few.[6] Nixon is categorical with his lashing against neoliberal ways of consumption that internationalize profits and externalize risks: although the barriers of free trade have been pushed down, neoliberal policymakers have erected even higher barriers which segregate "inordinate wealth from inordinate poverty" (20).

Given the apparent lack of representational resources of a group of people who struggle for survival, Nirmal's role in The Hungry Tide is essential to make the threat accessible, helping "counter the layered invisibility" (16) to the history recesses. It is a strong act of redefinition capable of opening up "connective avenues" (23) between environmental and social justice and new forms of globalization "from below". A fictional engaged writer, like Nirmal, opposes the silencing history of land theft, forced removal and coercive labour. Through his journal, he undertakes a work that counters the distancing network of free market resource development, "a rhetoric that displaces onto future generations […] the human and ecological costs of such development" (26). Interestingly, Nixon explains that physically-displaced people hold, on the one hand, "an official, centripetal logic of national development" and on the other "a terrifying, centrifugal narrative of displacement, dispossession and exodus", an evacuation from land and from public awareness that reflects the tensions between culturally-constructed and geological threats (152).

The consequences of environmental politics of devastation resonating along time and space are evident in the legacy of the refugees of Morichjhãpi. Ghosh's work offers a dramatization of occluded temporal relationship on a transnational space, opposing the particular/local element to hegemonic forces of conservation that create private profit by blaming local populations for the way they manage natural resources. Corporate colonialism employs distancing strategies

6 Idea taken from Nixon 2011, 18: "Too often in the global South, conservation, driven by powerful transnational nature NGOs, combines an antidevelopmental rhetoric with the development of finite resources for the touristic few, thereby depleting vital resources for long-term residents".

to impose the 'foreign burden' upon local forms of resistance, taking advantage of "neoliberal lawlessness in cahoots with corrupt, legally immune local politicians" (56). The ebbing and flowing of transnational capital impact on the rural subsistence communities on a suspended, concealed time which only exists "in the penumbral realms of the *longue durée*" (62): the recourse to deep time, a rhetorical element which is present along Nirmal's diary, is a necessary strategy to reclaim the settlers from the state of invisibility and amnesia constituting, according to Nixon, "the dialectic of ordinary disaster" (65).

Reading *The Hungry Tide* in the time of climate change puts forward interesting challenges regarding the notion of deep time. Concerns over Western environmentalism and the threatened subaltern lives of the poor widen the discourse of displacement in a longer temporal perspective "capable not only of understanding the history of colonialism, environmentalism and globalization that conditioned events like the Morichjhãpi Massacre, but also of anticipating the increasing agential challenges climate and geology will pose in cases of forced migration in South Asia" (Jones 2018, 642). Owing to the menace of rising sea level in the Sundarbans region, it should be noted that the dynamics of climate change could have been present on Ghosh's mind while drafting the novel. Deep time and climate change can be read here with the same lens we have used above to describe slow violence: its actions far exceed any historical notion, a longer temporal perspective should be adopted to address issues of conservation and claims over nature. A broader perspective is employed by Nirmal to depict Lusibari to the eyes of a young Fokir, Kusum's son: he narrates episodes from the colonial past of the region, a journey into the past back to the "worst storm of all" (Ghosh 2005, 203), that of 1737. On such occasion, "a wall of water twelve metre in height" (204) shocked the tide country at the same time when an earthquake destroyed thousands of dwellings in Kolkata. Immediately after, Nirmal overcomes the historical dimension of the environmental disaster in the Sundarbans sinisterly revealing that "a storm will come, the water will rise, and the *bãdh* [i.e. the embankment] will succumb, in part or in whole. It is only a matter of time" (205). The fragility of the land is put in direct contact with a perspective that goes beyond history, representing humankind at the mercy of and active participant in the long enduring geological and climatological forces; Nirmal seems to aspire to "consciously reconcile modern colonialist responsibility for human violence and environmental exploitation in South Asia with the accidental consequences of stratigraphic encroachment and global climate change" (Jones 2018, 645).

Brandon Jones, reading the novel as anticipatory of the climatic fiction genre, describes *The Hungry Tide* as dominated by the tension between a transcultural conflict involving Western environmentalism and subaltern agency, and at the same time the presence of a

planetary crisis developing on a much longer period of time under the looming presence of climate change, both of them embodied in the Morichjhãpi Massacre. Nirmal's first person journal encompasses "biographical experience, colonial history, geological shifts, biodiversity loss and tidal ecology in a mode of perception that looks both far into the past and into the future" (645). Nirmal's writing mediates our knowledge of phenomena that exceed the scale of immediate experience, an important role that fiction writing must assume in the time of the Anthropocene. Given the high level of complexity of the issue of climate change, with its economic, ethical and of course scientific implications, fictional writing can offer a critical tool for rendering the unimaginable scale of time that is nevertheless an exceedingly felt presence for the human and nonhuman residents in the Sundarbans. Through Nirmal's journal, the reader learns about the volatility of the region: in the last few years, as Jones claims, "the number and severity of cyclones have increased, tidal surges have become more extreme and the erosion of island embankments has noticeably intensified due to sea levels rising faster than anywhere on earth" (645), also stating that the entire ecosystem will face severe consequences of these rapid changes, since the changes will affect the inhabitants of the region including dense vegetations, Bengali tigers, all the aquatic life and 4.3 million people (645). Nirmal's ecological interest is evident in acknowledging the rapid changes that natural phenomenon are undergoing in the region:

> I remembered how, when I first came to Lusibari, the sky would be darkened by birds at sunset. Many years had passed since I'd seen such flights of birds. When I first noticed their absence, I thought they would soon come back but they had not. I remembered a time when at low tide the mudbanks would turn scarlet with millions of swarming crabs. That colour began to fade long ago and now it is never seen anymore. Where had they gone, I wondered, those millions of swarming crabs, those birds?
>
> […] It was as if I could see those signs everywhere, not just in myself but in this place that I had lived in for almost thirty years. The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was being reclaimed by the sea. What would it take to submerge the tide country? Not much – a miniscule change in the level of the sea would be enough. (Ghosh 2005, 215)

His words offer a description of nature in the ecological perspective of deep time. Ecological awareness, here inscribed within the backdrop of postcolonial history, does not create a totalizing narrative that suppresses the history of oppression represented in the Massacre. Nirmal's diaristic work integrates short-sighted politics of dis-

possession with the geological rhythm of the environment so that the "trans-historical mutability"[7] of nature evoked in the novel trivialises the political struggles for controlling the watery ecosystem of the Sundarbans. A different viewpoint is advocated while moving beyond "narrow nationalistic, ethnic and racial binaries to embrace an ecological perspective that is compelled by the understanding that we live […] in one world" (Kaur 2007, 127).

The Morichjhãpi refugees are displaced both on political and environmental grounds. Their newly established utopian community look at the past, along their history of political dispossession and at the same time advocate for the need to find new paradigm of resistance in a deep temporal perspective, predicting the forthcoming threats suffered by climate refugees in South Asia. In a land that accelerates the process of slow violence, climate-induced refugees ask for a new definition of society which opposes to the forced relocation processes "whose vigorously unimagined condition becomes indispensable to maintaining a highly selective discourse of national development" (Nixon 2011, 150). Narratives of unitary national ascent impose physical and imaginative displacement: it is an imaginative work of expulsion that realizes itself through police brutality, lorries, and bulldozers but finds its synthesis on an indirect bureaucratic level that "creates and sustains the condition for administered invisibility"[8] (151). 'Surplus people' and 'ghosted communities'[9] are forcibly removed and relocated out of sight, often resettled in overcrowded conditions or in scarcely productive 'empty' lands. They are developmental refugees and their trajectory, reflecting processes of slow violence perpetrated by the combination of political and environmental agents, anticipates climate-induced migratory phenomena; by representing their plight, *The Hungry Tide* bridges the gap between postcolonial and ecocritical approaches to the climatic crisis offering new resources for critical thinking in the Anthropocene.

7 Idea taken from Kaur 2007.

8 See Nixon 2011, 151: "Assaults on a nation's environmental resources frequently entail not just the physical displacement of local communities, but their imaginative displacement as well, indeed on the prior rhetorical and visual evacuation of those communities from the idea of the developing nation-state. This imaginative work of expulsion typically predates the arrival of the police, the dogs, the lorries, the bulldozers, and the engineers. Thus the direct violence of physical eviction becomes coupled to an indirect bureaucratic and media violence that creates and sustains the conditions for administered invisibility. The result is what I have called spatial amnesia, as communities, under the banner of development, are physically unsettled and imaginatively removed, evacuated from place and time and thus uncoupled from the idea of both a national future and a national memory".

9 Both definitions are widely used by Nixon 2011.

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