Non-Human Energy Agencies as Major Protagonists in Amitav Ghosh's Works of Fiction and Non-Fiction

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***Abstract*— In this paper an attempt will be made to study how Amitav Ghosh weaves his stories around the energy dynamics that has shaped the colonial history and is still working behind the neo-colonial powers. The energy moves in Ghosh's works operate to demonstrate how human society and it's politics is totally dependent on the sources of energy. How energy materialized empires in the colonial past and continues to empower the nations of 21st Century. He shows energy regimes being constructed by natural resources and non-human forces like opium, teak, oil, crops, tides, storms, etc. Connections are built to link politics to extractivisim captures how the nations fall when their energy-sources are over-exploited.**

In the Ibis trilogy, The Hungry Tide, Gun Island and The Glass Palace, Amitav Ghosh builds the cause and effect relationship between imperial history and climate changes being executed through the dynamics of energy regimes — narcotic, hydrological, vegetal and fossil — showing that empires are built on energy and for energy. Climate crisis empires' legacy, and literature its narrative aid.

Across fiction and nonfiction, Amitav Ghosh connects empire, capitalism, migration and the climate crisis - showing that the Anthropocene is not nature's accident but the narrative, economic and military logic of energy histories getting shaped since colonial period. Through his literature the concept of energy humanities calls for moral reframing and indicates at moral and narrative failure of the human race. Thus, the study will help to predict the future of the energy-human dynamics and scope for activism and action-oriented approach to mitigate the infamous legacy of energy driven empires in the form of climate crisis.

Keywords; **Energy, Empires, Climate Crisis, Literature, Humanities, Extractivism, Natural Resources, Non-human Forces.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Humanities is a faculty that focuses on studying human society through literature, history, philosophy, arts, and languages, aiming to comprehend the dynamics of the various elements like beliefs, values, norms, institutions (family, government, education) that run the human society. Humans have always been on a prowl to make their lives easier and more sophisticated. Once the basics need of food, clothing and shelter got satisfied human beings explored more and more options to further empower themselves. Among these options we may talk about the natural resources that have been the sources of energy in various forms. Water, wind, wood, coal, oil, labour-power of animals and humans etc. that have been some of the vital sources of energy since the beginning of the human civilization have led to the advent of energy regimes. These regimes have played significant role in deciding the dynamics of the elements of the society mentioned above. So, it becomes obligatory to study how does energy in various forms capacitates humans to change their own society as well the entire creation on this planet.

Culture, imagination, and narrative in the society are created and shaped by the energy regimes existing in that particular time period. Energy Humanities examines how energy regimes shape the society directly or indirectly. Amitav Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy (Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, Flood of Fire) and novels like The Glass Palace, Gun Island, and The Hungry Tides narrate detailed, well-researched account of how during the British colonial regime, sources of energy like teakwood, opium, labour-power, etc. empowered them to reign over large parts of the Indian Subcontinent. In these novels of historical fiction Amitav Ghosh enacts an energy turn in the literary imagination by showing that empires, capitalism, and even human subjectivities are built on extractive energy systems — and that non-human energy agencies in the form of natural resources become the deciding forces in the power struggles amongst the energy empires.

II. DISCUSSION

Starting the discussion about how the non-human energy agencies work as major protagonists in

Amitav Ghosh's works of fiction and Non-fiction we will go with Ibis Trilogy (Sea of Poppies, River of Smoke, Flood of Fire). This series of three novels revolves around opium as a protagonist that decides the geopolitics during the colonial era for major parts of the world. Energy trapped in opium can be viewed from different dimensions. It gave power to the European Colonists to expand their trade and earn more and more profit on one hand. And on the other hand, its cultivation and consumption drained people of not only their resources but their identities making them slaves to opium and the colonial powers.

The British financial system was heavily dependent on the opium trade. The trade helped these colonisers to fund their wars and the wars in turn would help in bringing back more profit. The opium trade with China had given such huge returns to the Britishers that loosing China as an opium market was unacceptable to them. Although made opium trade illegal within its boundaries Western powers primarily Britain was not ready to step back. It led to the Opium Wars between China's Qing Dynasty and the Britishers. China was forced to open its land for foreign trade. It lost its territories like Hongkong to British occupation.

This trade had caused social and economic problems in China as Chinese people were becoming addicted to opium causing social decay. Their economy was weakening due to the draining of their silver reserves. Opium became a sign of wealth and opulence for some, but it ruined many lives. It impacted productivity as the opium addicts became incapable of both rigorous metal and physical work. Opium was not only a commodity but an imperial energy source to that influenced the culture and lifestyle of the places where it was sold.

Thus, Ghosh successfully shows how the empire's political sovereignty rests on addictive energy circuits. He narrates the entire story of opium as a product right from its plantations in the British colonies across Indian Subcontinent to its shipping to China. He realistically portrays the movement of indentured labour from India to places like Mauritius for working on the plantations over there. How everyone associated in some way or the other with opium gets affected.

Ghosh weaves a story to show how life of *Deeti* an Indian woman from a peasant family is entangled around opium. She is married to opium-addicted Hukam Singh and herself is dosed with opium and becomes a victim of rape on the very first night of her marriage, which is orchestrated by none other than her mother-in-law and brother-in-law. The purpose behind this is to hide the impotence of her husband due to opium consumption and to impregnate her. Later her husband dies and she is forced to undergo *sati*, but she is rescued by *Kalua* with whom she secretly marries and enrols as an indentured labourer on the Ibis. This is a vessel that becomes a symbol of slavery, escape, exile and trade for different people at the same time.

> As the author writes, "She looked at the seed as if she had never seen one before, and suddenly she knew it was not the planet above that governed her life: it was this minuscule orb – at once bountiful and all-devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful. This was her Shani, her Saturn.
>
> When Kalua asked what she was looking at she was looking at she raised her fingers to his lips and slipped the seed into his mouth. Here, she said, taste it. It is the star that took us from our homes and put us on this ship. It is the star that took us from our homes and put us on this ship. It is the planet that rules out destiny" (Ghosh, 2008, pp. 451-452).

There are several others on the *Ibis* who belong to varied strata of the society like Neel Rattan Halder, a Bengali zamindar who loses his land to the opium trade debts. He is wrongfully convicted and transported on the *Ibis* by the British officers. To mention the one who was in pursuit of profit through illicit opium trade was Mr. Benjamin Burnham the British opium trader and owner of the ship *Ibis.* He was the face of the colonial bureaucracy and military force that oil the flow of narcotic capital.

Ship Ibis looks like a mobile economy with labour, opium-cargo, and colonial law. New social relations and transformation are structured by trade routes pursued by these opium cargoes. One of the characters Bob Nob Kissin's has a unique experience, as author writes,

> "the Ibis was not a ship like any other; in her was a vehicle of transformation, travelling through the mists of illusion towards the elusive, ever-receding landfall that was Truth" (Ghosh, 2008, pp. 422-423).

Ghosh uses the ship as a platform where unused energies of labour and opium mix and match and

converts the ship into an energy-node that diverts these energy resources towards colonial profit. This colonial profit then became the capital for power leverage and the engine of control and social ruin in the very colonies from where it was earned.

Another character affected by the opium was Bahram Modi a central character in River of Smoke, the second book of the *Ibis Trilogy.* He is an ambitious Parsi opium merchant who seeks to establish his own identity and business in the opium trade detached from the control of British colonial power. But he dies under mysterious conditions in canton when the Chinese crack down on the opium trade.

When Bahram was leaving Canton in one of the last chop-boats carrying foreigners he came across the fields where surrendered opium was being destroyed. This was an unbearable sight for him as Ghosh writes,

> "Looking at them now, he remembered the storm in the Bay of Bengal and how he had endangered his life for those precious crates; he remembered the months of effort it had taken to assemble that enormous consignment and the hopes he had invested in it" (Ghosh, 2011, p. 544).

He was devastated and wanted to escape from the reality that was hard to come at terms with. On reaching his vessel Anahita he found his escape from this situation only through opium which proved to detrimental and fatal. And this left his family into financial disaster pressing his wife to defy the traditional norms of widowhood and to travel to China to reclaim her husband's wealth, clear his name, and find his illegitimate son.

There is both implicit as well as explicit mention of ecological ruin due to opium monoculture in the story at various stages. It destroyed soil, water tables, peasant life where it was grown and can be cited as an early blueprint of fossil-capital logic that governs today's world.

This logic was very well elaborated in River of Smoke which brings into picture Canton opium trade and the Chinese port scenes. The Canton commercial houses set up by the foreign traders lead to the formation of Fanqui Town, where opium is unloaded from the ships, stored in warehouses and further traded with the Chinese. This trade started facing resistance as the Chinese administration headed by the Qing Dynasty saw opium's effects on social fabric.

Neel reads from the Chinese Commissioner's letter to Queen Victoria,

> "Ever since the port of Canton was first opened, trade has flourished. For some hundred and twenty or thirty years the natives of the place have enjoyed peaceful and profitable relations with the ships that come from abroad.
>
> But there is a class of evil foreigner that makes opium and brings it for sale, tempting fools to destroy themselves, merely in order to reap profit. Formerly the number of opium-smokers was small; but now the vice has spread far and wide and the poison has penetrated deeper and deeper. For this reason we have decided to inflict very severe penalties on opium-dealers and opium-smokers, in order to put a stop forever to the propagation of this vice" (Ghosh, 2011, p.543).

Ghosh contrasts the tightly knit ethically conscious Chinese social fabric with the profit crazy opium traders, coolies and shipowners who are all entangled into opium flow that reshapes families back home, landscapes and law of the place they travel from and to.

In the last novel of the *Ibis Trilogy* that is *Flood of Fire* Ghosh depicts the scenes of wartime, and very aptly pens naval conflicts that sound like coming up straight from the real opium war and its aftermath. The violence of war is financed and rationalized by trade and commerce, revealing how opium energy helped militarize nations like Britain. The Chinese as the opponent and the Indians as human-resource in the war get drained of their energy.

Through a discussion between two important characters, Mr. Burnham and Zachary Reid, former being a significant ruthless British opium trader and later being a young American speculator in opium futures, the author points out at the logic behind the military expedition sent to China.

> He writes, "This venture, Mr. Burnham proceeded to explain, was itself an opportunity of unmatched dimensions. Not only would vast profits be created when the markets of China were opened to the world, but the expedition would also establish a new pattern of war-making, in which men of business would be involved in the entirety of the enterprise, from the drafting of

> strategy to dealing with Parliament, informing the public, and providing logistical support……commerce would be applied to the full and the emphasis throughout would be on minimising losses for Great Britain, of money as well as life" (Ghosh, 2015, p. 282).

In all the three novels, Ghosh traces how a single commodity (opium) reorganizes landscapes and social hierarchies. This is nothing short of classic extractive logic that has widely prevailed in the past few centuries of the previous millennium.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Amitav Ghosh draws a real-life picture of the local people of Sundarbans whose lives are closely entangled with the tidal Energy. The author tries to bring together time periods stretched across a timeline of hundred years. He shows how the equations between the natural forces like tidal energy and human limits have not changed much. While narrating the story he focuses on how the people in and around Sundarbans have always been vulnerable to these forces, but still they were settled here. For example, Sir Daniel Hamilton had successfully set up a cooperative society in the first part of the twentieth century.

The Sundarbans has always been a tidal-powered world where water, mangroves, storms and tigers determine human life. Nilima, one of the main characters helps the widows in Lusibari by starting Badabon Trust as it's common for men to die while fishing in that area. Nilima's husband Nirmal who died quite a years ago was involved with the settlement on the island called Morichjhapi after his retirement. Nirmal's nephew Kanai comes to know about his efforts from his notebook in which he had mentioned about Kusum a victim of the tidal devastation in the area.

Kusum's son Fokir, whose sustenance depends on fishing in the estuaries lives and dies due to the energy that flows through various non-human agencies existing in his surroundings. Humans in this novel are not authors of destiny but tenants of an energy-driven estuarine system, where nature's kinetic power overrides human engineering and state rationality. Fokir was a simple fisherman but had more knowledge about the area and its marine life than the people from the Forest Department. When Piya a cetologist came to study Gangetic and Irrawady river dolphins that live in the area, it was Fokir who helped her out to locate them. But unfortunately on one such trips they got caught in a storm on an island near Garjontola and Fokir dies after he's hit and crushed by something large. The novel portrays a unique Anthropocene picture where ecology and its energy elements like tides and storms play the role of protagonist and humans are incident.

Piyali River & tidal descriptions in The Hungry Tide sets the scene of an ecosystem governed by hydro-energy. The coexistence of water, land and forest that overlap each other in unknown ways creates various possibilities of survival and death for the people living in the area. The hydro-power of the region becomes an energetic actor that decides and dictates human plan.

Kanai Dutta, a central character in *The Hungry Tide* is a wealthy Delhi-based translator who visits Sundarbans to handle his late uncle Nirmal's affairs in the very starting of the novel reads from a paper written in Bengali script,

> "…. There are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometres inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear underwater, only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily – some days the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sandbanks where there were none before. …….When the tides create new land, overnight mangroves begin to gestate, and if the conditions are right they can spread so fast as to cover a new island within a few short years…..And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as bhatir desh – the tide country – except that bhati is not just the "tide" but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the bhata. This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in falling that the water gives birth to the forest" (Ghosh, 2004, pp. 7-8).

Kusum and her son Fokir possess Indigenous ecological knowledge which help them with techniques to adapt to the unpredictable conditions of the tidal region. Their lives gets attuned to currents and seasonal flows and train them to negotiate with powerful natural phenomena that affect their lives unprecedently. Amitav Ghosh weaves his story

giving due credit to the such knowledge that helps to live in harmony with the energies of the natural word. Human engineering and state planning fails in face of a cyclone's destructive force is demonstrated by what happens at Morichjhapi island. Political and social hierarchies go upside down in the moment when kinetic natural energy reorders everything that is manmade.

Sometimes conservation efforts fire back and even the most scientific techniques fail to stand against the unprecedented workings of the energetic landscapes. Ghosh strongly makes the readers believe that tidal forces manage lives and local needs.

In the end the author leaves no option but to recognise the non-human agents where characters like Fokir a native and Piya a foreigner reckon with the energy hidden in the estuarine forces. The novel's resolution emphasizes humility before tidal systems. The ending refuses human sovereignty, insisting that tidal energy shapes futures and ethical obligations.

The issues of climate refugees in the Gun Island shows migration as a climate-energy fallout. When the climate of a place intensifies due to rising sea level, frequent cyclones, heat stress and other challenging climate issues, it drives mass involuntary movement of people and capital. This can be apparently viewed as the products of centuries of fossil capitalism. Fossil fuels as sources of energy can thus be seen as agents of climate change and resultant mass migration. Europeans came to Asia for trading in resources, leaving behind humongous ecological footprints and that in turn became a reason for the subalterns to travel to the west in search of livelihood because their own land is not able to sustain them.

When Deen travels to Venice to research further on the Gun Merchant, he discovers that many Bangladeshis are being employed as illegal migrant labor. Their hazardous journey across the Middle East and Africa and the strong, even militant opposition to their presence in the city by Italian authorities form a major segment of the second part of the novel, contrasting with the Gun Merchant's past, prosperous journey to Venice.

Deen is one of the main characters who visits the Sunderbans in West Bengal to unravel the mystery of a seventeenth-century merchant, Bonduki Sadagar. Ghosh reframes migration not as a sociological crisis but an after-shock of energy-driven carbon history.

In the Opening of the novel there are indication towards climate-linked weather anomalies. For example, strange sea-birds and unusual weather that spark the Deen's investigation. Small, uncanny shifts in weather and fauna can be read as symptoms of larger climate disturbances. Ghosh links local oddities to global carbon histories, framing ecological change as the narrative engine of human displacement.

Migration scenes with refugees and their routes being discussed gives accounts of migrant journeys across seas and cities. This Movement of peoples is depicted as an energetic consequence of environmental change. Floods, salinity and economic collapse push people out of their native places into new circuits. Migration becomes an aftershock of fossil energy-powered transformations rather than solely political choice.

By depicting industrial and port scenes Gosh uses the fossil economy backdrop describing the equation amongst port-workers, fossil-fuelled machinery, and urban consumption.

Urban infrastructures like shipping, diesel engines, storage places are rendered as the mundane but decisive apparatus of modern life. Ghosh foregrounds these as the energy-driven material means by which new vulnerabilities are produced.

The narrative in *The Glass Palace* illuminates how colonialism functioned as an energy projects exposing the entanglement of British empire, its extraction policy, and fossil-fuel power play. European extractivist and unequal energy flows were central harbingers of the energy crisis being faced globally today.

Rajkumar, the protagonist in the very starting of the narrative is informed by a young shipmate named Matthew that,

> "The English are preparing to send a fleet up the Irrawaddy. There's going to be a war. Father says they want all the teak in Burma. The King won't let them have it so they're going to do away with him.
>
> Rajkumar gave a shout of laughter. 'A war over wood? Who's ever heard of such a thing?'" (Ghosh, 2000, p.15)

The novel quietly maps the transition from pre-industrial, organic energy systems practiced across Burma, India, and Malaya to European colonial ways of fossil-fuel driven modern world. Ecology, labour, empire, and human relationships have been reshaped through this shift. Energy regimes form the hidden

infrastructure in the novel although the novel is not explicitly about energy.

A Royal Proclamation was issued under the King's signature for the Burmese public and was read by one of the characters Saya John in the novel amongst few people at a food stall. This was as follows,

> "To all Royal subjects and inhabitants of the Royal Empire: those heretics, the barbarian English kalaas having most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction of our religion, the violation of our national traditions and customs, and the degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our state" (Ghosh, 2000, p.15).

The British enterprises of teak logging and shipbuilding were supported by the Burmese teakwood. Colonisers converted the teak plantations of Burma into naval power for its territorial expansions and commercial advantage. Teak became a strategic material and Ghosh makes visible through his novel how a vegetal resource becomes an energetic building block of the British empire.

Not only teak even oil from the oilfields of Rangoon has played a significant role changing the power dynamics in Burma (Mayanmar). King Thibaw, Queen Supayalat and the royal family is exiled to India by the Britishers. Rajkumar is of Indian descent and as an orphan at a young age gets associated with the Burman royal family. Later he gets involved in recruiting Indian laborers for oilfields run by the British at the time. This gives him an opportunity to make good fortune and later uses the capital from this venture to establish his own successful timber business in Rangoon.

Oil emerges as an incipient geopolitical prize, rearranging land claims, labour flows, and imperial priorities. Discovery of oil leads to state intervention and build -up of corporate power, marking energy as a driving force behind history.

Ghosh depicts the foreign activities surrounding the oil extraction in Burma accounting it as Rajkumar's experience and writes,

> "…He noticed a couple of foreigners, white men, walking from well to well. From that time on, whenever he returned, there were more and more of these men around the slopes, armed with instruments and surveyors' tripods. They were from France, England and America, and they were said to be offering the twin-zas good money, buying up their pools and wells" (Ghosh, 2000, p. 123).

Teak and oil have contributed in developing colonial infrastructure like railway, for construction and running of rail lines and steam engines. Rail and steam are depicted as technologies that convert distance into governable territory and further accelerate extraction, troop movement and administrative reach, effectively folding landscapes into imperial circuits of power and capital.

Consequences of such activity include dispossession of Burmese peasants due to land loss, indenture, and migration to plantations. Local communities get uprooted to supply labour for plantations and ports. Ghosh traces how extractive demand for teak, and oil forces social disintegration and new labour regimes. After teak and oil, it was rubber whose demand was increasing as a commodity of the new age. The author writes,

"The B.F. Goodrich company had sent representatives all the way from Akron, Ohio, urging the planters of Malaya to plant this new crop. This was the material of the coming age; the next generation of machines could not be made to work without this indispensable absorber of friction. The newest motor cars had dozens of rubber parts; the markets were potentially bottomless, the profits beyond imagining" (Ghosh, 2000, p.182)

Wartime requires material supply lines and energy sources to determine military outcomes. Thus, military fortunes are tethered to material logistics of fuel, timber and rubber. Ghosh demonstrates that imperial power can collapse when its energy networks supporting its armed forces and commerce are severed.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) highlights the cultural blindness to energy producing fossil fuels. This book of non-fiction examines how increasing dependence on fossil-fuels leads to marginalization of climate change issues by shaping cultural imagination and literary form. Ghosh argues that the literature that is emerging alongside industrial capitalism and carbon-based energy regimes does not represent the scale, unpredictability, and collective nature of climatic catastrophe. This narrative limitation reflects what energy humanities scholars identify as the cultural dominance of fossil fuels, which normalizes extractivism and conceals its ecological consequences (Szeman & Boyer, 2017).

Ghosh argues that the realist novels written in the fossil-fuel era privilege the ordinary, predictable bourgeois world, thus rendering energy catastrophes "unimaginable." Modern literature is complicit in narrating about the carbon-led catastrophe culture that is becoming acceptable as some other kind of culture.

III. CONCLUSION

The role played by the non-human energy agencies in the selected works of Amitav Ghosh indicates at key energy-humanities issues spanning across 19th and 20th Century. The colonial exploitation of these agencies has expediated the ruin of both human as well as non-human. The Law of Conservation of Energy, a fundamental concept in physics, states that energy can't be created or destroyed, it can just be transformed or transferred. Based on this law we can conclude that the non-human energies have the power to transfer its agencies to the user. If the user uses it constructively, it leads to harmonious co-existence of all the living species with the non-living elements of a region and leads to its evolution for the good. But if it is misused it leads to destruction and then the energy disharmonizes the established systems. Like oil, teak, poppy seeds, water, wind etc. sustain life, but when over-exploited become unmanageable source of destruction.

Amitav Ghosh time and again reminds in his works of fiction as well as non-fiction that a balance is required to carefully handle these energy agencies by narrating majorly the stories of their misuse and exploitation by the colonial powers. He accounts how material turn into energy agencies giving power to the some and snatching it away from others. Like opium made fortunes for Britishers and destroyed the fortunes of several people from the Indian Subcontinent.

As most of the works under consideration are historical fictions revolving around these non-human energy agencies, we can decipher how they become historical engines making energy system legible protagonist in the writings as well as real world. In various plots non-human agency is restored to elements and phenomena like opium, estuaries, storms etc. Thus, the author de-centres humans and uses non-humans as protagonists.

Amitav Ghosh shows the colonies established by the colonists were nothing but energy regime and links empire to extractivism without conscience. Across fiction and nonfiction, Amitav Ghosh establishes intricate connections between empire, capitalism, migration and the climate crisis all working under extractive energy systems to access every possible source of energy. It may be human or non-human and as discussed above non-human become the protagonists, deciding the fate of the humans. The narratives taken into consideration shows that it is the trade, law and military rationality of energy histories of every age that is creating the Anthropocene and is not evolutionary or accidental in nature.

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