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Portraying Planetary Crisis in the Post-colony: A Study of Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches*

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Abstract:
This paper endeavours to explore the planetary crisis vis-à-vis post-colonial politics in the light of Janice Pariat's novel Everything the Light Touches (2022). In the first section of the paper, I shall attempt to trace the historical roots of planetary crisis following Amitav Ghosh's nonfiction The Nutmeg's Curse (2021). Ghosh argued here that the root of the climate crisis went as far as the 17th Century. He described colonialism as a process that not only dominated human beings but also subjugated and muted "an entire universe of beings that was once thought of as having agency" (Ghosh 190). Ghosh finds it ironical that post-colonial countries like India have adopted those settler colonial models and are implementing these models on their own people, especially the forest dwellers. The second section of this paper will consider the role of literatures written by authors from post-colonial countries like India in the context of this planetary crisis. In doing so, this paper will take a close look at Pariat's 2022 novel Everything the Light Touches to show how the echoes of state sponsored exploitation in the form of extraction of uranium against the wishes of native people can be traced back to colonialist and capitalist models adopted by the settler colonial masters. This paper will conclude by exploring the potential of postcolonial novels to go beyond this Western binary between human and nonhuman world to portray the later as a living being whose existence is not contingent on human wishes.
Keywords: Planetary crisis, Post-colony, Colonialism, Amitav Ghosh, Janice Pariat.

"…the climatic changes of our era are nothing other than the Earth's response to four centuries of terraforming…" (Ghosh, 2021, p. 83)

Amitav Ghosh, through both his novels and nonfictions, has made a significant contribution to the discourse on climate change. His first major intervention comes in the 2016 book *The Great*

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Derangement where he, in order to explain the inability of contemporary culture to deal with climate change, argued that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 121). Although in this very book he tried to resist the tendency of commentators to interpret the climate crisis exclusively in terms of futurity, his 2021 book *The Nutmeg's Curse* fully developed his thesis that the root of the climate crisis goes as far back as the 17th Century. Ghosh traces a historical continuity in the exploitation of natural resources that begins with the European colonizers but is later continued by the neocolonial elites in the postcolonial nation states that play a crucial role in creating the climate crisis or the planetary crisis that the planet is facing today. This paper focuses on the particular case of Northeast India where the governing elites both from the state of Meghalaya and mainland India are colluding with a public sector undertaking Uranium Corporation of India Limited to extract uranium from Mawmalang, Meghalaya, India. For this study, I have chosen Janice Pariat's 2022 novel *Everything the Light Touches* as the primary text. This paper aims to show how this extractive policy adopted by the governing elites of both the state and the centre can be traced back to colonialist and capitalist policies to exploit resource rich native landscapes. Uranium in this case comes a as "resource curse" to the indigenous forest dwellers of Mawmalang that causes a large-scale devastation to the flora and fauna of this region the impact of which was felt for a long period of time. Following Pariat's novel *Everything the Light Touches*, this paper also delves deep into the potential of postcolonial fiction to present not merely the exploitation of nonhuman native space but also to go beyond this Western binary between human and nonhuman world to portray the later as a living being whose existence is not contingent on human wishes.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* forcefully changes the direction of climate change research by taking into purview the impact of empire and colonization on the planet. Using the metaphor of a nutmeg, he shows how the history of climate change is implicated with history of colonialism. Countering the general perception on the climate crisis, Ghosh, in a Zoom interview to PTI from New York, stated:

> In general, when we think about the climate crisis or the planetary crisis, we always think of it in terms of the future, we think of ourselves as being in a completely new era. But in fact, this era is completely rooted in the past. The continuities are so clear...going back as far as the 17th century. These continuities are completely clear to anyone who takes a good look. (Radhakrishnan, 2021, para. 2).

More specifically, Ghosh refers to the colonization of the Banda islands in 1621 by the Dutch East India Company as the starting point of planetary change in a negative sense. He also discusses at length the causes of the genesis of the crisis.To the question "Why has this crisis come about?", Ghosh succinctly offered answer in an interview to *The Guardian*:

> Because for two centuries, European colonists tore across the world, viewing nature and land as something inert to be conquered and consumed without limits and the indigenous people as savages whose knowledge of nature was worthless and who needed to be erased. It was this settler colonial worldview – of just accumulate, accumulate, accumulate, consume, consume, consume- that has got us where we are now. (Ellis-Petersen, 2022, para. 8)

In *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh defined colonialism as "not merely a process of establishing dominion over human beings; it was also 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 – animals, trees, volcanoes, nutmegs" (Ghosh, 2021, p. 190). What is remarkable about this definition is that he posits these "mutings" of non-human spaces along the same line as humans which, according to him, are "essential to the processes of economic extraction" (190). Closely linked with the process of muting and economic extraction of nonhuman beings is the idea of terraforming which is presented by Ghosh as another significant aspect of European colonialism. This aspect of colonialism was

prevalent in the years of colonialism. Although the term "terraforming" comes from the domain of science fiction, it is, according to Ghosh, "an extrapolation from colonial history" that is applied on a much larger scale. Whereas terraforming in science fiction was used to mean to create neo-Europe, it is now used in the sense to create neo-Earth. The concept that has its origin in settler-colonial model borrows heavily from the rhetoric of colonialization in imaging nonhuman living "space as as a "frontier" to be "conquered" and "colonized."" (Ghosh, 2021, p. 54).

Ghosh argues that terraforming does not limit its colonizing tendency to humans merely, but rather it colonizes and subjugates nonhuman living world also. This process of subjugation is a violent one that doesn't stop short of using warfare as a method. However, this method is a conflictual one that uses a different kind of warfare. Ghosh has elaborated this technique of "warfare" by stating:

> But terraforming required a different kind of war in which environmental interventions and nonhuman entities played a central part…Wars of terraforming were thus biopolitical conflicts in which entire populations were subjected to forms of violence that included massive biological and ecological disruptions. (Ghosh, 2021, p. 55-56)

As has already been noted that Ghosh sees climate change as historical continuity that does not fail to take into purview the neocolonial practices which are also responsible for creating the crisis. He finds it a "terrible irony" that although post-colonies are now politically free from the European colonial powers, they are "repeating, and even intensifying, the processes of brutalization that were set in motion by Europe's colonial conquests" (196) on their very own people in the name of modernization. Ghosh specifically spoke about India where, "over the last three decades, the beliefs, practices, and livelihoods of forest peoples have come under attack as never before" (196). He wrote:

> In hideous mimicries of the settler colonial treatment of Indigenous peoples, more and more forest areas have been opened up to the mining and tourism industries, sometimes with the support of exclusionary conservationists, who advocate the removal of forest dwellers in the name of ecology. Forest peoples' sacred mountains have been desecrated, their lands have been swamped by dams, and their beliefs and ritual have come under the attack as "primitive superstitions"- exactly the terms once used by colonial administrators, scientists, and missionaries. (Ghosh, 2021, p. 196)

The only difference between the colonial masters and post-colonial governing elites lies in the reckless speed with which post-colonies like India have adopted and implemented those settler colonial models on the indigenous people. Ghosh goes on to write: "It is the tremendous acceleration brought about by the worldwide adoption of colonial methods of extraction and consumption that has driven humanity to the edge of precipice" (Ghosh, 2021, p. 196).

It is in this context of the complexity of the planetary crisis in a post-colony like India that I shall discuss the role of post-colonial literatures. In "Postcolonial Fictions of the Anthropocene", Judith Rahn (2021) argued that postcolonial literature, due to its origin in non-Western literary traditions, has the potential to challenge the Cartesian dualisms and go beyond the "traditional hierarchical structures" so that an intermingling between the humans and nonhumans is made possible (Rahn, 2021, p. 235). The relationship between humans and nonhumans comes "as an inter-connected system of entanglements". Nonhuman environment with its flora and fauna is no longer seen merely as a backdrop to human drama but the nonhumans come "as independent agentic formations" (236). Following DeLoughrey and Handley, Rahn asserts that "postcolonial literatures lend themselves particularly to worldmaking with nonhuman forces, not least since this represents a "process of recovery, identification, and historical mythmaking" which is made possible by materiality of the environment itself" (Rahn, 2021, p. 235). She also shows how the negotiation between the nonhuman environment and literatures from the Global south act as "a countermovement to traditional Western binary understandings of life on earth as either human or nonhuman" (235). Rahn goes on to comment on the potential of postcolonial literatures in detail:

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> Creatively recovering both the land itself and cultures that have kept a precarious balance between colonial subjugation and clandestine local perseverance, they showcase alternate modes of imagining life on earth. Envisioning nonhuman forces, they go beyond (Western) humanistic notions of dominance over the natural world and highlight the nonhuman as escaping traditional Western means of meaning-making. Rather, the nonhuman is presented as a force in its own right that shares spaces with the human but is not necessarily subject to human desires. (Rahn, 2021, p. 235)

This paper, for the benefit of discussion, will limit its focus on a particular novel titled *Everything the Light Touches* written by Janice Pariat. This novel consists of four tales told by four different characters from different time and spaces. In this paper, however, I shall be focusing only on the first tale of "Shai" which also happens to be the last tale of the novel. "Shai" is the story of the eponymous woman Shai who originally hails from Shillong, Meghalaya, but is educated in Delhi, India. She makes a journey to the remotest part of Meghalaya called Mawmalang which is devoid of any modernizing facilities. Disconnected from the entire world, she discovers her real self which is also accompanied by the discovery of the reality of the place. This discovery entails her knowledge about the uranium rich soil and the resistance of her people to Uranium Co-orporation of India Limited's attempt to extract uranium.

The novel has been described in the Indian Express by Udbhab Seth (2022) as "a form-malenge of prose, poetry, diary entries and letters that has told a story to underline one thesis above all: in nature, everything is connected". But, the first narrative does contain passages which show the author's profound knowledge of the postcolonial issues that mark her as well our protagonist's hometown Meghalaya:

> After Independence, when the people of these hills found themselves swallowed up by Assam, with nothing much in common with the plainspeople apart from newly drawn national borders, they fought for their own state. Meghalaya. A Sanskrit name given to a place that spoke no Sanskrit. The Home of the Clouds. (Pariat, 2022, p. 9-10)

The novel also talks about the disastrous impact of partition on nomadic tribes like the Nongïaid in Northeast India who, before India got its independence or sometime after it, had multiple homes. The Nongïaid were given lands and were forced to settle in a specific place, in order to get citizenship, by the Indian government. But they did not accept the offer made by the government and as a result of which they perished. Pariat questions the very idea of the nation states when she writes:

> A nation is such a fixed thing, don't you think? Its borders, arbitrary at best, suddenly imagined as having been in existence for all time . . . It was even more complicated to impose such a thing in this region, the northeast, with its numerous independent chiefs, of whom few, if anyone at all, wanted to join India . . . Add a nomadic tribe to the mix, and it was too much for the government. They couldn't handle it. (Pariat, 2022, p. 437)

The protagonist of this section, Shai, during the time she stayed at the place, gradually comes to know about the uranium rich landscape of Mawmalang and UCIL's attempt to extract it and its impact thereof. This tale depicts in detail the disastrous consequences of extracting uranium. One of the native characters in this section of the novel says: "…we noticed our birds were dying. Our cows and dogs going mad, our bay trees wilting, our fishes floating. Then our people started bleeding" (Pariat, 2022, p. 63). References are also being made to the violent transformation that both the landscape and riverscape underwent as a result of the uranium contamination. In the Ranikhor river thousands of "fish were found dead. Belly up and floating" (Pariat, 2022, p. 65). This devastation caused by the uranium extraction comes vividly in the words of Kong Spelity who has been described in the novel as "a woman of rare and ferocious fire- vowing to protect our land" (Pariat, 2022, p. 63). Spelity whose character is based on a real life woman says:

> Since they started digging," she says, "we've lost many members of our clan, to

> mysterious illnesses, and even now we suffer. There are some who can tell you of skin diseases, epilepsy, and ulcers, and other illnesses that have no name. Many women are barren, unable to conceive. (Pariat, 2022, p. 455)

It takes the local Khasi people of Mawmalang some time to fathom the slow violence caused by the uranium extraction. Khasi Students Union (KSU), with their screening of the documentary *Buddha Weeps in Jadugoda* to the native people, contributes significantly to this understanding:

> We learned that they thought the uranium in their land a curse. That radioactive waste is hard to contain. It runs like water, sits like stone, and rises in the air as dust. And even if it's "safely" stored, in our hills the rain can break through rock, the winds rattle our sturdiest pines, and earthquakes carve the ground into canyons. We learned that this thing kills slowly. (Pariat, 2022, p. 63)

It is very interesting to note that these indigenous people persistently refused to give "that radioactive waste" its proper name uranium. One of the native characters says, "No, and even now we have no name for it save the one they gave us: yellowcake. Why would we name what we didn't need?" (Pariat, 2022, p. 62). This is significant because in rejecting the language of the capitalist extraction they are also rejecting its promotion of ecologically destructive tendencies.

Everything the Light Touches is a rare novel which animates with planetary thoughts not only of the protagonist Shai but also of the other characters that populate the first section. We find many characters from the Mawmalang village who don't view life as the binary between humans and nonhumans- a view quite antithetical to the traditional Western binary understandings. At the village, Shai feels it "nourishing" to be "amid people who cared about their land as family" (Pariat, 2022, p. 441). They don't see the land separate from themselves; their identity, even their very existence, is tied to the land. One of the minor characters, Bah Syiem, says:

> "In some ways, he says, we don't have a past. "Perhaps that is why our existence is mainly expressed through our land – he places a hand on the floor, on the hard-baked earth. "The more they try to take it away, the more we will fight. Not because we are its owner, but because we are its caretakers". (Pariat, 2022, p. 69)

What is significant here is the way they see their relation to the land; unlike the European colonizers, who had always considered land including both its flora and fauna nothing but resources to be exploited for their purposes, people at Mawmalang never considered themselves as the masters of the land. Rather, they always thought of themselves as the caretakers of the land. The relationship of these indigenous people to their land is marked by reciprocity – whenever they take something from the forest, they "make sure to leave something behind" (411). In a stern rebuke to settler colonial worldview, the novelist writes: "When you give something back, what you have been given becomes a gift, and gifts, he says, create continuing relationships. It's not like going to a shop- where you take, pay, leave, forget" (Pariat, 2022, p. 412).

The planetary living of these indigenous forest dwellers from Meghalaya was jeopardized by the colonial ideologies represented first by the Europeans, and later by the governing elites of India who unabashedly imitated those colonial policies. This can be seen in the destruction of the century old tradition of Jhum cultivation in which farmers burn the remaining portion of the crops once the cultivation process is complete and move to a different place every few years. It was stopped first by the British and later by the Indian government on the ground of being ecologically destructive. In the novel, this line of thought is countered by stating that "It can actually be good for the soil, replenishing and renewing it to a far greater degree than settled agriculture" (Pariat, 2022, p. 454). But, the interference of planetary proportions came in the form of UCIL's ambition of uranium extraction from the mineral rich land of Meghalaya. "In hideous mimicries of the settler colonial treatment of Indigenous peoples" (Ghosh, 2021, p. 196), the political leaders with vested interests from Shillong opened

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up the forests to the mining industries. What is significant here is that the resistance to uranium mining came mainly from poor forest dwellers. They directly experienced the disastrous impact of it on themselves as many members of the community died as a result of the Uranium contamination while many suffered from skin diseases, unknown illneses, an also barrenness in women. But this disaster was not limited to the humans only. It had severely affected the nonhumans, as one of the characters says: "I feel that earlier there were fish and fishlings in our rivers, but now I don't know, I don't see them anymore" (Pariat, 2022, p. 434).

The novel exhibits a curious mix of real and fictional characters, and the narrative of "Shai" is no exception. Here, the most important character to have been drawn from real life is that of Kong Spelity, "a woman of rare and ferocious fire – vowing to protect our land" (63), who has been described in the novel as "The woman who's been leading the mining resistance here all these years" (Pariat, 2022, p. 450). Although a poor woman, she refused to lease her land even though offered by UCIL so large a sum of money that so long her family line continues they will be more than well off. To endorse her action, she provides a line of argument which strikes at the very root of settler colonial ideologies which, shared by both the western white males and governing elites from Delhi as well as Shillong, treat anything nonhuman as nothing but resources solely to be exploited for human purposes. Shai encapsulates Spelity's argument when she says:

> "how selling this land would be like selling her freedom, and when it is gone, and converted into numbers, and notes, and cheques and balances, then what can it buy, really? Can it buy back her freedom? Can the money buy this flowing stream, this grass, the seasons, this waterfall, these trees? (Pariat, 2022, p. 456)

Everything the Light Touches thus successfully presents two distinct lines of thoughts. There is a group of people who, completely influenced by the colonial ideologies, have come to see the earth as an "inert resource" and who "think that the forest is dead and empty, that "nature" is there for no reason and that is mute" (Ghosh, 2021, 209). This way of thinking, albeit an offshoot of colonialist and capitalist mindset, so pervasive today that even the ordinary middleclass Indians are not untouched by it, has contributed most to the planetary crisis that is unfolding not only in postcolonial nation states but also in the entire planet. It is remarkable that the novelist Pariat does not end the novel in the pessimistic vision of a planet hurtling towards apocalypse. Rather, she presents an alternative route that the planet can take by depicting an indigenous group of people in the novel who, untouched by ths pernicious logic of settler colonialist and capitalist models, see their land neither as inert or mute but as a space that is imbued with vitalism. We can thus conclude with a quote by Judith Rahn whose words, although written about postcolonial literatures in general, remain nonetheless true in the case of this particular novel also: "Reverting logics of Western imperialism and reclaiming literary, cultural, and spacial territories, literatures from the Global South bring to the fore the creative and visionary potential that lies within reconceptualisations of human-nonhuman dynamics" (Rahn, 2021, p. 237).

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Bio-note

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