

# Doing Environmental Criticism from Where We Are<sup>i</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper rereads canonical authors of literature in English to highlight issues centering on the environment in their works as well as recent writers who write out of a conviction of environmental injustice, and from perspectives informed by environmental concerns. It suggests how we can redraw our curriculum and teach proactively in the classroom by viewing authors and texts in the light of ecocritical insights derived from Green Cultural Studies and postcolonial ecocriticism in addition to pioneering writers who stressed ecocritical consciousness and the dangers of pollution, climate warming and environmental degradation in the age of the anthropocene. The paper discusses briefly selected writings of Jonathan Swift, Herman Melville, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Allen Ginsberg and Arundhati Roy, and ends with some examples of recent ecocritical poetry from the American poet Robert Hass and Bangladesh's Kaiser Haq.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene; eco consciousness; environmental criticism; environmental literature; green cultural studies; postcolonial ecocriticism

## I

One of the most important things I learnt from Edward Said's *Orientalism* when I first came across it way back in 1980 is to read and teach literature, especially literature in English, from where I am, or as Said implies, from one's location. This means for me looking at literary texts written mostly in English as a Bangladeshi academic who lives in the capital city Dhaka in 2018. Bangladesh, as all of you here know, is an awfully crowded deltaic country, doing reasonably well economically at this time, but continually coping with manifold problems—not a few of them environmental. At the moment, in addition, our fast depleting natural resources are particularly overtaxed by the influx of thousands and thousands of Rohingya refugees from the Arakans, who have either taken shelter in temporary sea-beach camps in the south-east of the country or have built improvised settlements by burning down hillside forests that cover the landscape.

Dhaka, the city in which I have lived for all but eight years of my life, once so full of lakes, canals and greenery is now with its over 15 million people one of the most crowded as well as polluted cities in the world, if one judges only its air quality. Indeed, my audience here may find it hard to believe this claim, but in at least one survey this has been found to be worse than Delhi's. Travelling to work every day is continuously exasperating for me as I have to deal with incredible traffic, unending cacophony of

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sounds and swirling dust. I have the car ac on in all seasons, to escape these things as well as the exhaust fumes toxifying the air. On days when the weather is on the cool side, I have tried to leave the car and walk, but in most places the footpaths are dirty or full of potholes and perilous for pedestrians. In them, people keep shoving each other aside to go forward; often beggars and homeless individuals make walking even more difficult. On occasions, I take rickshaws, mostly driven by people from other parts of Bangladesh to this difficult city because of river erosion, caused either by monsoonal floods or release of upstream water at that time. Increasingly, I see in the streets, however I travel, something I would hardly see a couple of decades ago: indigenous people going to their workplaces or coming back from them, displaced and leading marginalized lives and doing niche jobs in the city.

What is worse is that weather-wise, Dhaka is getting more and more unbearable by the year. This winter, we had only 3 to 4 days of really cold weather, but when I was growing up in the 1950s and 60, winter days, when you shivered into bed and out of blankets, would last for no less than a month. Last October was the hottest one in living memory, and the monsoon is getting increasingly miserly in its outpourings, which is just as well since an hour's rain on some city streets flood them completely because of the non-existent or clogged drainage systems. Rivers, on the other hand, have been drying up, and salinity has been creeping upstream.

The over four hundred years old city of Dhaka owes its origin to two factors: originally this part of East Bengal was favored by traders partly because of its central and elevated location, and partly because the four rivers that circled it made movement of big boats and small ships relatively easy. Now the Buriganga, the most important of these rivers, is so polluted that you have to retreat to the deck of an air-conditioned launch (if you can afford it!) or hold your nose for miles as you watch ugly, crowded docks and roads give way to factories that soon yield to brick fields. For the first few miles downstream on this river from Dhaka, the Buriganga is blackish to blackish blue in color; the only exception being the peak monsoon weeks when the water may revert to its natural color. Most of the other city rivers have been filled up by land-grabbers and have shrunk to skinny streams.

I also have to say that going out of Dhaka, any which other way you want to, is very off-putting. From where I live to the airport, only 10 kilos away, may take anything from one to three hours. All the roads leading out are choked and bumper to bumper traffic is the norm most of the day. And the dust and grime and industrial pollution is unbelievable any option you take.

I daresay things are not very different in Delhi, but also in the other parts of India most of you in the audience are from, although India is lucky to have her railroads as a viable option in many cases. Googling "Kashmir", "Dal Lake" and "pollution" in tandem as I wrote this part of my paper, I found the following captions in the first page: "Srinagar's Iconic Dal Lake is Battling Pollution for Untreated Sewage"; "Thirty years of Dal Lake Pollution"; "Dal Lake a Polluted Pond"; "Who is Polluting the Dal Lake. The Untold Story" and "Pollution Chokes Kashmir's famed Dal Lake." For good measure, I typed "Srinagar and "Pollution" and came up with a story that came on-line "two hours ago" (today is March, 11, if you want to know!): "Pollution Hits dangerous levels in Srinagar

During Winters”; “Polluted City of Srinagar”, “Kashmir’s air is Pristine, right? Wrong?” “Vehicular Pollution Worsening Air Quality in Srinagar”. I should add that this Google page has images that could have been easily taken from Dhaka, for though we have nothing comparable to Dal Lake, we have a quite large reclaimed lakefront called Hatirjheel that has been reconstructed for smoother traffic flow as well as recreation for citizens, but that in parts reeks of sewerage, and at times of the day can have its air quality in an alarming state.

Not for nothing has Amitav Ghosh, my favorite South Asian novelist, written that timely and very thought-provoking 2016 book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, as if to tell us directly through its 200-plus pages what he has also tried to communicate in his recent fiction: what are we doing to our environment and to ourselves in this process is extremely troubling; sustained damage control measures have to be adopted if we are to avoid apocalypse. Have we gone mad to have polluted the air, the water, the soil, the country, the region, continents and planet earth thus, he implies? He notes in his introductory pages that the part of Bengal his family originated from had river erosion that could alter lives and that there is something cyclical in nature’s vagaries, but he has no doubt that he lives and writes at a time when “the accelerating impacts of global warming have begun to threaten the very existence of low-lying areas like the Sunderbans” that Bangladesh and India share, and that is the setting of his 2004 novel, *The Hungry Tide*. He is also certain that “these problems have far wider implications” (8). Reflecting on a freak tornado that he experienced in Delhi in 1978 and superstorm Hurricane Sandy that invaded the east coast of New York in 2012, he imagines that we are entering an era of such weather phenomenon that will become the new normal along with “flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, spells of unprecedented heat, sudden landslides, [and] raging torrents pouring down from breached glacial lakes” (33). One thing is certain to Ghosh; while such freakish climatic phenomena could have been once attributed to supernatural happenings, they can now be tracked down to “cumulative human actions” (41). In particular, Ghosh stresses the way global warming caused by emissions has become a contributory factor to such phenomena. These happenings lead to the choice of Ghosh’s title for his work: he would like his readers to realize “how deeply we are mired in the Great Derangement: our lives and our choices are enframed in a pattern of history that seems to leave us nowhere to turn but towards our self-annihilation” (149).

Ghosh writes like a novelist, but of course he is an anthropologist by training and has read widely and intensively in the burgeoning literature of climate change. Early in his book he quotes Dipesh Chakrabarty’s observation in what Gosh calls a seminal essay, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, where the Indian historian reflects on the implications of global warming in recent times and in the light of globalization and phenomena such as the greenhouse effect. He notes that anyone thinking about the subject will agree that we seem to have come to a point when “the climate...and the overall environment” have reached “a tipping point at which disaster seems to be looming for humans who have by now made themselves geological agents of catastrophic change (206) in the new “geological epoch” of the “Anthropocene” (207) through “large scale use of fossil fuels” (208). Chakrabarty adduces a number of key thinkers on the

subject of climate change in this era. They all believe that it has supplemented the previous one that has been called the Holocene. These thinkers pinpoint its advent in eighteenth century's enlightenment advances and choices made then by the newly scientifically empowered, planetary environment-changing agents. Chakrabarty observes that such thinkers have no doubt that if the cataclysmic changes induced by science on our world since then have got us into a fix, "it is also clear that humans cannot but refer to the idea of deploying reason in global, collective life" (210). No point in wallowing in self-loathing then or letting ourselves be overwhelmed by anxiety. Learning from what Chakrabarty calls "deep and recorded histories" (213) and doing collective critique on the part of humans are possible ways out for them. For us academics he suggests the task is to rise above "disciplinary prejudices" and to adopt interdisciplinary, universalist perspectives on what after all is "a shared catastrophe" (218). Leading thinkers on the subject of climate change, Chakrabarty implies, believes that if eating greedily from the fruit of knowledge has got the human race into this mess, "knowledge and reason" can also provide "humans not only a way out of this present crisis but a way of keeping us out of harm's way in the future" (219). Quoting Gadamar in the section on the last of his four theses, Chakrabarty adduces the need for "historical consciousness" as "a mode of self-knowledge" and a way of inducing "reflections on one's own and otherhistorical actors' experiences" (220). Ultimately, Chakrabarty declares, we need to adopt a "global approach to politics without the myth of global identity" (222).

While Dipesh Chakrabarty's magisterial essay, "The Climate of History: Four Theses" has profound relevance for anyone trying to comprehend the manifold implications of climate change on humanity's collective thinking about its existence on planet earth, his follow-up 2012 essay, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change" has much more specific implications for those of us in the "fourth world."<sup>iii</sup> Focusing in this later essay on the approach thinkers in our part of the world have to take to the conjoined phenomena of "globalization and global warming" (144) in the era of the Anthropocene, Chakrabarty now tries, à la Homi Bhabha, to specifically relate such phenomena to the "new subaltern classes of the global capitalist order" (147). This is the world of the marginalized and the floating populations of the world—indigenous people, illegal migrant workers, asylum seekers, refugees—all trying to survive and register their claim to be in their new states any which way they possibly can in the wake of globalization, state failures, and environmental disasters on local as well as national and global scales. Chakrabarty stresses that climate change is a major factor contributing to their predicament.

What can we in the humanities do in this situation? Chakrabarty's answer is precisely to focus on how humans can imaginatively record and reflect the debilitating consequences of globalization and climate change on the environment in their writing and image-making to raise consciousness about our collective predicament. He instances the work of the Australian social and environmental historian Tom Griffiths's history of the Antarctic, where we can see "the metaphoric capacity of human language and visual records" to bring the consequence of global warming on ice formations to the attention of readers (152). Chakrabarty also cites the instance of the oceanographer and expert in geophysical science David Archer's book *The Long Thaw* as an example of the way we

can “translate geological units into human scales” (153). Shrewdly, Chakrabarty notes that while we cannot ourselves pinpoint “the impact of geophysical force” on our material existence (153), “through art and fiction” we can extend our understanding also to those who in the future may suffer “the impact of the geophysical force that is the human” (153). The task of the postcolonial intellectual/writer, Chakrabarty declares in his concluding sentence, is to “register” the profound change in the human condition” (155) induced by climate change so as to put us all back in the path of progress through thinking about the adoption of corrective measures. In other words, we in the humanities still have our traditional role, which all of you will surely agree is to raise consciousness of the present and future generations through the teaching of literature in English.

## II

Delivering the keynote address to you all in this beautiful campus of the University of Kashmir, I too feel deeply concerned about our collective predicament. My location, let me repeat by way of summary of my first section, is that of a teacher of literature in English, teaching syllabi consisting almost entirely of English and American texts. I am also a postcolonial scholar, reading these texts in the context of our history, and someone who teaches them to students in a bid to raise their consciousness about being human in our time, where issues connected to transnational movements, neocolonialism, globalization and global warming have lately come into focus, calling for urgent attention. And finally, I am someone who has in recent decades been teaching the new literatures in English as well as canonical texts and writing about them in the light of my awareness of some key ideas circulating in theory as well as environmental criticism for well over half a century now.

I was first introduced to one of the pioneering texts of environmental criticism in an American composition book that I was using as a TA in the early 1980s at the University of British Columbia. There, I came across the exquisitely written, profound, but disturbing opening chapter of Rachel Carson’s 1962 book, *Silent Springs*. Carson, a marine biologist by profession, evokes in it a blighted landscape reflecting the consequences of the unthinking use of DDT and other pesticides in her prefatory chapter, “A Fable for Tomorrow”. Later, in the book itself, I came across the very telling epigraph she used for it, Albert Schweitzer’s prophetic utterance: “Man has lost the capacity to foresee and forestall. He will end by destroying the earth” Almost at the same time I read Leo Marx’s seminal 1964 work, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* where he assesses the often adverse impact of the advent of technology on the American landscape through selective readings of the works of writers of what has been called the American Renaissance, that is to say, the mid-nineteenth century.

Carson and Marx were truly pioneers, for it took at least two more decades, and more awareness on the part of intellectuals across humanities and social science disciplines as well as scientists, to realize the full and continuing extent of the unwanted changes mankind was inflicting on the environment year after year through mindless industrialization, unplanned expansion and aggressive mining of the earth’s resources. By the 1980s, environmental criticism, or ecocriticism, or if you want to be even more au courant, Green Cultural Studies, had gathered a lot of momentum in English departments in the west. And how could we, in our part of the world, lag behind on such an issue?

In subsequent decades we have had endless papers, books and anthologies devoted to the subject. What I now propose to do is sum up some of the insights and trends that one can see in outline and discuss briefly the foci of environmental criticism. I will be doing all this, needless to say, with a view to establishing the parameters of what is announced in the subheading of our conference as “The Promise of Ecological Criticism”.

As far as I can tell, Lawrence Buell, of Harvard University, has been among the most prolific as well as comprehensive documenters of the emerging trends of the environmental literature and criticism movement, along with Ursula K. Heise, of Stanford. I will therefore lean on a few of their recent review essays to indicate the nature of the trends in the subject and the course the green movement has been pursuing. In a 2006 paper reviewing the field that she published in the March 2006 issue of PMLA, Heise presents the relevant questions we have to ponder on thus: “In what ways do highly evolved and self-aware beings relate to nature? What roles do language, literature, and art play in this relation? How have modernization and globalization processes transformed it?” (504). And then she rounds off her questions with the one that I am sure the organizers of this conference had clearly in their minds in initiating it: “Is it possible to return to more ecologically attuned ways of inhabiting nature, and what would be the cultural prerequisites for such a change?” (ibid).

Heise observes that to realize the full promise of Ecocriticism, we have to be not merely devoted to “the scientific study of nature”, but also need to prioritize “the scholarly analysis of cultural representations”. Underlying such analysis, she suggests, should be a bid to uphold the “political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world” (506). Heise also draws attention to two subfields of ecocriticism that are worth underscoring if we in English departments are going to work out the full extent of the possibilities of conjoining literature and the environment: “deep ecology”, which “foregrounds the value of nature in and of itself, the equal rights of other species, and the importance of small communities” (207) and “social ecology”, which is where we take our focus away from the wilderness and pay sustained attention to questions of environmental justice, thereby realizing the value of considering nature “primarily in its human uses” (ibid.) After all, there are lived landscapes that we can rue as well as pristine ones that we can rhapsodize over; how can environmental criticism privilege the former at the expense of the latter? However, it seems to me that one need not preclude the other—how can one learn to see the extent of the lack or degradation if one does not have an ideal situation in mind? It is of course important to shift the emphasis from an exclusively aesthetically inclined absorption with nature to what Heise calls “more communal engagements with a natural world”, that is to say, one “conceived as always intertwined with human existence” (508). We can also view pastoral or thoughts of Eden as an escapist mode for people who have a surfeit of things and leisure to linger over the wilderness lovingly. On the other hand, rural people may see the places they inhabit as spaces fraught with memories of a life of deprivation, but the key here is to realize through our ecocritical endeavors that nature has given us a lot that we need to appreciate and preserve. But, of course, we must concern ourselves with difficult or degraded landscapes where people have to live their lives day after day and habitats that need urgent attention and must be the focus of ecocriticism as well.

In his 2011 essay, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends,” Lawrence Buell distinguishes like Heise two different periods of ecocriticism, differentiating between what he calls “first wave” and “second wave” ones. The initial impetus, he notes, was towards “deep ecology”, something that had “mystical-holistic dimensions” (90), while the emphasis of the latter is to see environmental perspectives as “a product of historical circumstance and acculturation” (ibid.). Buell suggests that a positive aspect of first-wave ecocriticism was to foster “bioregionalism”, that is to say, to promote one’s attachment to the ecological region one is heir to and to have a sense of place, particularly articulated in one’s literary traditions. But the down side of “deep ecology”, as Heise has also noted, is to have “privileged rural and wild spaces over urban ones” (93). In contrast, and as Heise has also stressed, “second wave ecocriticism” has taken in “the metropolitan landscape” and the “built environment” (ibid.). Buell points out how this second phase has also expanded its focus geographically and culturally, taking in extra-western worlds, and moving away from exclusively Eurocentric and/or North-American perspectives on environmental issues. It is in that direction that we saw by the turn of the last century the emergence of postcolonial environmental criticism, which surely has to be our particular focus in this conference.

Buell devotes most of his review essay to discussing other second wave ecocritical issues in some detail. He sees increasing preoccupation in this phase with “public health environmentalism” (24) and a reduction in emphases given to wild or open spaces. He indicates that a consensus is emerging that we need to turn our thoughts more and more to literature dealing with “compromised, endangered landscapes” and “marginalized minority peoples and communities” everywhere (97). Such a preoccupation is visibly evident in postcolonial environmental writing; indeed, reflecting on recent activity in ecocriticism, Buell detects “an astonishing surge in postcolonial ecocritical studies” (99) and literature. He cites, in this context, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* as already a “canonical text for postcolonial ecocritics” (100) and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s essay laying forward four theses on humankind’s earth-altering role in the post-enlightenment period as a “brilliant short polemic” on the subject. Buell also sees in the second phase a growing preoccupation with the impact of the continuing human assaults on the environment and on nonhuman forms of life in our time. He further gestures at ecofeminism, ecocultural studies, animal studies and other related areas that have sprung up in the process of the expansion of the parameters of ecocritical thought.

In the third essay I want to consider here titled “Literature and Environment”, Buell combines with Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber to present for readers of *The Annual Review of Environment and Resource* a paper titled “Literature and Environment”. This to me is one of the most comprehensive surveys of the field that I have come across. Since it overlaps in many ways with the individual surveys by Heise and Buell I discussed earlier, I will concentrate in the remaining parts of this section of my address only on areas not covered in those surveys that are taken up for brief discussion in this essay. It begins by emphasizing that ecocriticism has at its roots the assumption “that the arts of the imagination and the study thereof—by virtue of their grasp of the power of the word, story and image to reinforce, enliven, and direct environmental concern—can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of ecodegradation that afflict planet Earth today’ (418). This essay also

significantly affiliates ecocriticism with the “environmental humanities”, that is to say ethics, history, religious studies, anthropology and humanistic geography” (ibid). No doubt the point of ecocriticism—and conferences like this one, I may add—is to make us sensitive to how imaginative writing can lead to greater awareness and concern about what we have been doing to our planet in our single-minded pursuit of progress. But also salutary in this paper is the observation that the natural sciences and literary studies should not necessarily be at loggerheads and can look forward to complimenting each other in manifold ways. Another important development discussed in “Literature and the Environment” comes under the heading of “indigeneity”. Here the three co-authors direct our attention to how one needs to become what they call “indigenous cultural-literate ecocritics” learning from indigene stories and myths as well as their experience of “environmental injustice” and acts of “environmental resistance” (429).

I would not like to conclude this section by giving you the impression that the origins of ecocritical thought and its evolution and manifestations are to be exclusively linked to western thought. As one of the many proofs that we could all provide from our own tradition of thinkers on the subject of environmental degradation in the age of the Anthropocene, I would like to now discuss Rabindranath Tagore’s 1924 essay, “The Divinity of the Forest.” This was originally a speech that he delivered at a tree planting and ploughing ceremony that he organized in Shantiniketan. It begins with an account of how grassy green landscapes covered the bareness of earth in an earlier phase of the creation of the earth, and how plants and vegetations sustained the life lived by human beings as well as other life forms in a green world until urbanization led to desecration of the blessings given bountifully by the divinity of the forest. The consequence, Rabindranath avers, is that by the time he was delivering his speech, climate change had made North Indian summers unbearably hot, since greedy humankind, not content with the divinity of the forest’s largesse, seemed to be bent on ravaging nature mercilessly. As a result of such wanton destruction of the bounty of Banalaxmi, North Indians had made themselves immensely vulnerable by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the percipient Tagore’s travels to, and knowledge, of other parts of the world had convinced him that “mankind’s all-consuming greed” was creating problems for the human race worldwide and not only in India.” He cites the consequences of destroying “large tracts of forests” in America, as evident in the “swirling sandstorms” being recorded in contemporary climate history and fast disappearing arable land. The already acutely sensitive ecocritical Tagore writes: “The avaricious human race has destroyed the forests and made itself vulnerable in the process. We have eliminated the very trees and plants whose function it was to purify the atmosphere and revitalize the soil” (203). And it is as an act of reparation that he had introduced the tree planting and ploughing ceremony in his beloved but threatened Shantiniketan. Or as he puts it, “To discharge our duty towards earth and to salve its wounds we have also arranged this festival of tree plantation” (206).<sup>iii</sup> Surely, it is not too fanciful for us to claim that we too have met here at the organizers’ initiative since we in the humanities and the social sciences, and particularly in literature departments, feel in our time and in the spaces that we inhabit that we must also do our duty by embracing ecocritical critique and raising consciousness amongst ourselves and this and the coming generations of students across disciplines to think of ways of balancing progress with environmental preservation.



### III

In the third part of my presentation I would like to concentrate as much as I can in the time left on how as literature teachers we can reread canonical authors to highlight issues centering on the environment in their works as well as admit recent writers to our syllabuses who write out of a conviction of environmental injustice and from perspectives informed by environmental concerns. While activism outside the classroom is an option we all have, redrawing the curriculum and teaching it with the light shed on such authors and texts with ecocritical insights is something we can always do. I will discuss briefly first thus the selected writings of Jonathan Swift, Herman Melville, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Allen Ginsberg and Arundhati Roy, and end with some examples of recent ecocritical poetry from the American poet Robert Hass and Bangladesh's Kaiser Haq. Let me concede before I begin discussing these authors and their works that my choice is quite eclectic here, but I would suggest that when you teach courses on environment and literature or key writers and their works, you can make up your own list as well, and depend on your fields of specialization and interest, as I have done in what follows. In other words, first look at what you know best and you will find what you want, for writers have been articulating their concern about environmental concern for a long time now. And also, scout new writing too!

I want to first draw attention to *Gulliver's Travels*, the Swift text all of you have read and many of you have taught or are teaching and then his poem, "A Description of a City Shower." It is in Book III of *Gulliver's Travel*, when Gulliver is in the Flying Island of Laputa, that we can see how people in power can use their knowledge of science to disrupt the climate perversely, preternaturally, Swift has placed his Gulliver in the Age of the Anthropocene! Thus in Chapter Three we see the Laputan King not merely "raise the island above the region of Clouds and Vapors" but also take measures to impact adversely on the climate, for instance, by preventing "the falling of Dews and Rains whenever he pleases" (164). This is one of the many instances of the uncanny in the text, for haven't we seen in the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, military might being used to oppress a country in ways that involve deliberately impacting adversely on its environment? A little later in the same chapter, we see the King's manic measures to control the island over which his flying one has arbitrary powers when Gulliver narrates how the monarch has the Laputan landmass "hovering" over the town and its environs below so that he can "deprive them of the Benefit of the Sun and the rain, and consequently afflict the inhabitants with Dearth and Diseases" (168). The fact that Swift's Irish anti-colonial anger is lacing his satire at this point makes us doubly aware once again of how uncanny his projections are, if we only remind ourselves of our own history of colonization, such as when Bengal experienced repeated famines because of British imperial machinations. We can also remind ourselves of that episode in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history when an ideology of neo-imperial domination, fuelled by the mastery of military technology, allowed the United States of America to make the life of the Vietnamese people miserable by disrupting their weather systems and destroying forests with chemical warfare and carpet bombing.

I will refrain from any extended discussion of Book IV in this vein, but would like to tell you that this has perhaps been made redundant by the Egyptian scholar Mohammad

Shaaban Ahmed Deyab's paper, "An Ecocritical Reading of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*." Let it suffice here for me to relate to you briefly Deyab's argument that in the voyage to the land of Houyhnhnms, Gulliver replaces his "anthropocentric attitude" towards other animals with an "anthropomorphic one" (290). He then lets his disdain for them be replaced with an admiration of an animal that has always been close to humankind for centuries, but that people far too often tend to treat slightly or unthinkingly. Deyab further argues that in many ways Swift anticipates the foci of Animal Studies in making us sensitive to the truth that animals have language systems of their own and are quite capable of reasoning and feeling like humans do. Indeed, Deyab argues, Swift wants us to see a reconciliation of man and animals through Gulliver's increasing "emotional and spiritual" attitude to the Houyhnhnms (292).

As for Swift's poem, "A Description of the City Shower," one reads it easily as an example of a poem that is witty and funny, but clearly he is also bent on showing urban pollution in early eighteenth century England as a fact that most citizens are having to contend with. The stink of sewerage pervades the atmosphere in the opening part of the poem even before the storm's onslaught on the denizens of the city; its first gust then mingles with the city dust to make the life of any passersby miserable. But once storms break out, the environmental pollution urbanites experience on a daily basis becomes doubly apparent to those stranded in them. Or to quote the last part of the poem at length:

Now from all parts the swelling kennels flow,  
And bear their trophies with them as they go:  
Filt of all hues and odors seem to tell  
What street they sailed from, by their sight and smell.  
They, as each torrent drives with rapid force,  
From Smithfield or St. Pulchre's shape their course,  
And in huge confluence joined at Snow Hill ridge,  
Fall from the conduit prone to Holborn Bridge.  
Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,  
Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,  
Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood.

Obviously, the stink of the city sewerage has become overwhelming because of the storm. The consequence of urbanization, clearly, is air and water pollution, compounded manifold by the stray garbage and refuse of the kind that we in our part of the world are only too familiar with. Once again, I find the Dean uncanny here because I remember travelling regularly in old Dhaka at the peak of the monsoon season a decade or so back when I would see and smell such things regularly. Swift, in other words, is not just intent on making his readers laugh at a city scene after a shower; he is narrating the kind of urban environmental degradation that has become a part of life for early eighteenth century Londoners and that is still a fact of life for many of us in our part of the world even now.

As for reading Melville ecocritically, it won't surprise you that a lot of that has already been done in this vein as far as *Moby-Dick* (1851) and a few others of his more famous fictional works are concerned. Also, how can any admirer of the novel not remember its

brilliant opening pages where the depressed Ishmael enters Manhattan and wanders through it with the thought running through his mind, “Are the green fields gone? What do they here?”<sup>iv</sup> As Elizabeth Schultz points out in her excellent essay, “Melville’s Environmental Vision in *Moby-Dick*”, the novel depicts humankind and whales in a relationship of “an intrinsic and irresistible interdependence.” Melville, she emphasizes, is very sensitive to the mindless destruction of whales even though he may be quite taken with the romance of whaling, and even if he enthuses at times about voyaging on a whaling ship. Thus we can remember Chapter 105 of *Moby-Dick* where he raises a question that is clearly troubling him: will the whale as a species perish? His answer is that like the fabled elephants of Siam it won’t,

Wherefore, for all these things, we account the whale immortal in his species, 15  
however perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents  
broke water; he once swam over the site of the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle, and  
the Kremlin. In Noah’s flood he despised Noah’s Ark; and if ever the world is to be  
again flooded, like the Netherlands, to kill off its rats, then the eternal whale will still  
survive, and rearing upon the topmost crest of the equatorial flood, spout his frothed  
defiance to the skies.

But I can’t help wondering: if he were here, would Melville have the same confidence about the survival of whales in our time? Nevertheless, what I want to draw attention to briefly here is to Melville’s flawed but fascinating 1852 novel *Pierre* written the year after his monumental narrative of whaling. In it he depicts New York as a nineteenth century version of Dante’s “City of Woe”. Even though Melville was ironic about uncritical celebration of the countryside in the earlier chapters of the novel set in the Berkshire countryside and about effusive romantics who fail to take in the pathetic condition of the rural and sentimentalize them in banal ways, he is much more critical about how humans are degrading urban habitats in this work.

In Chapter 24 of Melville’s 1855 historical novel *Israel Potter*, titled “City of Dis” pace Dante, he has his weary protagonist enter a London that is a complete contrast to the green landscapes of the New England that Israel was born into. The city Israel comes to is a complete mess; the Thames is shown in the novel as a river “polluted by continual vicinity to man, curdled on between rotten wharves, one murky sheet of sewerage.” (207). Its bridges are crowded and traffic on it—much like Dhaka’s, let me interject at this point— is stalled or “spasmodic in its surges” (ibid). Melville writes in the novel about a completely polluted world: “whichever way the eye turned, no tree, no speck of any green thing” could be viewed (208) and looking above one could only see “the sun was hidden; the air darkened”. Industrialization and urbanization have combined to degrade the landscape seemingly completely. No wonder Melville’s narrator has intimations of apocalypse, seeing in London Biblical cities that had, so to speak, self-destructed to a point till the Creator had decided to destroy them completely—cities such as—“Herculaneum, Pompeii, or the Cities of the Plain” (208).

But of course, *Pierre* and *Israel Potter* are not that well-known as is *Moby-Dick*. Many of you here might be thinking instead of “Bartleby the Scrivener” which is a much anthologized and occasionally taught work. In this story set in a Wall Street office

(though New York is not identified as the setting in the story), Melville seems to be gesturing at the soul-destroying urbanization and the all-consuming tentacles of capital that have led to buildings that are, as the otherwise callus lawyer narrator of the piece puts it, “deficient in what landscape painters call ‘life’ ” (60). It is easy, for sure, to see one of the causes of Bartleby’s decision to say “no” to what is going on; outside his room one could only see “grimy back-yards and bricks...which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light” (67). In a world without greenery, how could the soul be salvaged and how could humankind avoid self-destruction at the end? Bartleby is clearly protesting against such tendencies and is an early dissenter to capitalism’s assaults on the world in the name of progress.

Charles Dickens in *Hard Times*, a novel published at almost the same time as *Israel Potter*, and other novelists of the period in their works, were also reflecting intensely in their fictional imaginings on the apocalyptic scenes around them. Such scenes lead at least a few of them to muse about the ultimate fate of cities and life on earth ecocritically. How, then could poets too not be there with them in their solemn takes on industrial progress? If the early nineteenth century was the time of romantics and what we can now call “deep” ecological reflections on degraded urban landscape, and full of their tender thoughts about the solace offered to humankind by green, un sullied landscapes, by the turn of the twentieth century it was the turn of the modernist poets to resort to apocalyptic musing about the symptomatic nature of contemporary urban pollution in a vein that will remind us, once again, of Heise and Buell and their category of “second wave ecocriticism.”

I am thinking, here, as you have surely anticipated, of T. S. Eliot’s “Unreal City”, where it is not only the First World War and rampant sexuality, but also a landscape marred by polluting humans that are providing intimations of apocalypse to the depressed narrator of *The Waste Land*. Who does not remember the unforgettable descriptions of the kind of river pollution that is still so disheartening to the thinking mind whenever we come across them in real life that evoke lines such as “The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers, Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends/Or other testimonies of summer nights” in Canto III of the poem? Or who, given the situation we are in now, and our knowledge that we are in the age of the Anthropocene, and given the consciousness generated in us by the second wave of environmental criticism, can but be affected anew by the implications of Eliot’s poem read ecocritically to what we keep seeing in still picturesque Dal Lake and the once beautiful Buriganga riverscape time and again? These are the lines of *The Waste Land* that I now have in mind:

The river sweats  
 Oil and tar  
 The barges drift  
 With the turning tide  
 Red sails  
 Wide  
 To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.  
 The barges wash

Drifting logs  
 Down Greenwich reach  
 Past the Isle of Dogs.

London, Delhi, Srinagar, Kathmandu, Dhaka—we have been by degrees degrading the world's landscapes relentlessly; it this knowledge that we need to accentuate and communicate through our teaching and writing if we are to find a way of putting literature, the environment, and the well-being of the planet in the same frame at this time and for future generations.

Among our foremost tasks in our profession, then, is to make use of the authors we love to teach and that students like responding to, to emphasize the environmental mess we are in, and that great writers, preternaturally sensitive to the world around them, have been articulating over time but in recent decades with greater urgency. We must thus find ways of drawing attention to such authors and their works in the classroom. But literature does not merely make us aware of how culpable we have been; we can also use it for raising consciousness about these issues. Take in this connection D. H. Lawrence's excellent meditation of his thought-provoking encounter in "Snake", a poem that I am sure many of us have admired immensely on first reading it. In it he depicts the stages through which humankind's fascination and admiration for other life forms can give way to a kind of primeval revulsion and can lead to acts of unprovoked aggression against them. In the poem the poet ultimately regrets his mean and despicable act, and the voices of the "accursed human education" he had received that had made him wary of it. Remembering Coleridge's albatross in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, he realizes that he had squandered an opportunity to build on his initial rapport with the snake. Therefore, he has now, as Lawrence puts it, "something to expiate: /a pettiness." Surely, this is what we in literature must strive to do, for catharsis has always been associated with the moral experience of reading great writing, and need not be confined to witnessing tragedy. Certainly, terror and pity are emotions we keep experiencing in our encounter with the scenes evoked in great writing again and again, regardless of genres. They must thus be evoked in appropriate contexts to sensitize our students. It is thus that a poem such as "Snake", or for that matter, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, can be taught in classrooms to make students abhor wanton acts of environmental destruction that ultimately imperil us humans as much as they lead to the possibilities of species extinction so that they, in turn, spread the awareness among others.

I will take one last example from the great tradition of British and American writing in the last century on how we can use literature to evoke environmental consciousness, but one that also invokes our own spiritual traditions. It is an example that will help me also in transiting to recent writing on the environment from our part of the world. A poet that I have always liked but whose poems I have come to teach only lately is Allen Ginsberg, and it is his "Sunflower Sutra" that I will make use of now to continue with my theme of the way we can use literature in English in our teaching and writing ecocritically, purgeus of feelings of guilt we have been amassing about environmental desecration, and help join others in other fields to find ways of deliverance from our collective predicament.

A sutra, as we all know, is a rule or aphorism, connected to eastern religious traditions; Ginsberg's poem assumes knowledge of such traditions as well as western prophetic

writing like that of Blake. The poem is set in San Francisco, where there are famous expanses of scenic mountains as well as the bay in view. Nevertheless, there are other aspects of the setting of the poem that will be familiar to some extent to anyone entering a train station in the subcontinent. Here, as in Ginsberg's poem, we have to take in the grime and the wasteland-look of parts of the railway yards constituting outlying areas of the station that often shelter vagrants and addicts. Ginsberg and Kerouac, dharma bums by choice, but both already destined to be American literary greats-to-be soon, espy a sunflower in such a setting. Or as the poet describes the scene: "The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun sank on top of final Frisco peaks, no fish in that stream, no hermit in those mounts..." But then they see a sunflower as well. Immediately, the poet is entranced, recalling in a flash "my first sunflower, memories of Blake—my visions—Harlem" of his youthful days in New York, but also the litter he saw then as well, "condoms& pots, steel knives, nothing stainless, only the dank muck and the razor-sharp artifacts". The sunflower that he views now is like Blake's "Ah Sunflower" that Ginsberg inter-textually recalls was "weary of time." We see Ginsberg's one as "crackly bleak and dusty with the smut and smog and smoke of olden locomotives in its eye." But the poet refuses to believe that nature can be permanently disfigured by such human assaults; as Ginsberg puts it: "all that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad skin, that smog of cheek, that eyelid of black mis'ry, that sooty hand or phallus or protuberance of artificial worse-than-dirt—industrial—modern—all that civilization spotting your crazy golden crown" won't mar its power to evoke beauty in the mind's eye. And that leads to his sutra, his sermon for us all so best by the squalor and the waste land landscapes we encounter so frequently in our place and time:

—We're not our skin of grime, we're not dread bleak dusty imageless locomotives, we're golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our own seed & hairy naked accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black formal sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our own eyes under the shadow of the mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sitdown vision."

And that, I believe, is the kind of sutra we must formulate from our reading of Blake, our viewing of Rembrandt's or Claude Monet's paintings of sunflowers, letting them help take us above and beyond the depressing sights that we increasingly see as a consequence of our assaults on the environment. Or if you want to see this in Blakean terms, Ginsberg posits a higher innocence we can aspire to vis a vis nature in our environmental thinking.

But to end my presentation with a few literary works from our part of the world. The writer I would like to discuss briefly first now is Arundhati Roy, so much in the news the last year for her long-awaited second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. But it is her non-fictional prose essay, "The Greater Good" stemming from her environmental activism and concern for indigenous people that I would now like to consider as a potential text for our classrooms. One can access this acerbic essay on the net in the "Friends of the Narmada" page. Roy is clearly bent on circulating it not only in book form as she did in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, but also as widely as possible. For her, the implications of the Narmada Valley Development Project have to be mulled over by all. Her writing reveals that that she believes passionately that the true cost of the Sardar Sarovar Dam is unacceptably high if we factor in the people in whose lands it was built.

She calls this hydro-electric and irrigation scheme as “India’s greatest planned environmental disaster” because of the way it forced indigenes out from their habitats. Angrily, aggressively and with great polemical power, she lambasts those who conceived the project initially, the people who built it, and the national and international agencies that played a part in conceiving and then sustaining it. Relentlessly, she underscores the follies inherent in such projects. As Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin stress in their book *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Roy “constructs” in the process what amounts to a “national allegory of statist abuse” attacking the powers that are (48) in a work that has immense literary merit. It is for this same reason that I believe that this is a very teachable text for our classrooms, but the skillful way Roy wields English prose for rhetorical purposes will be another reason to use it there.

I should add that Roy’s text had great resonance for me in Bangladesh when I first read it some years ago in *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, since I have been very well aware for some time of the continuing problems Bangladesh has had to face because of the similarly ill-conceived Kaptai Dam project in the southeast of the country. The dam was built there in 1962 by the Pakistani military government in power on the advice of America-led donor agencies and its presence has been a constant cause of friction between the indigenous people and successive governments for decades now. This is because it displaced and marginalized thousands and thousands of the people who were living there, just as was the case with the Narmada project. The problem was compounded in the early 1980s in independent Bangladesh by the military despot ruling our country then, for he decided to “settle” landless people from the rest of Bangladesh there. Because they constituted a minority and lived in valleys that were flooded by the dam and because of the invasion of Bangladeshis from elsewhere at that time, the bulk of the hill people were forced to go inland or move to even more remote regions. Later, they started to resist further encroachments on their land. The consequence was an insurrectionary situation that went on for a long time and further deprivation for the indigenous people. You will remember that I talked about encountering the indigenes when walking in Dhaka or seeing them eking out an existence in niche jobs and leading marginalized life in our city, and I can therefore understand perfectly now the anger fuelling Roy’s narratives. As many Bangladeshis are becoming more and more aware of the situation, they are beginning to understand that it is high time that we listen to the narratives of the hill people, read their stories and songs, and incorporate their literature in translation in our national curriculum. This would take us in one direction postcolonial criticism has been going lately so that we can learn the importance of redressing issues related to environmental racism underlying such big dam projects in our very own part of the world as well as elsewhere.<sup>v</sup>

And so to my last example of how we can use our own writing in English as well as canonical literature in our classrooms to highlight the importance of studying literature ecocritically in our departments. Kaiser Haq has been our leading English language poet for a long time now and I want to instance two of his poems to show how they can be used to spread awareness about the environment in literary studies. The first one is from his *Published in the Streets of Dhaka: Collected Poems 1966-2006*; it is titled “bunny sen” and is a farcical and wry takes off from the Bengali modern poet Jibanananda Das’s

celebrated romantic poem titled “Banalata Sen” which evokes a woman with allusions to exotic climes and classical images of fabulously beautiful women. These are instanced as ways that can provide relief to the weary soul of the poet. In Haq’s poem the narrator inhabits a city full of “rancid restaurants” and a “toxic lake” and “bleeding rivers” and so seeks solace in “ms bunny sen of banglamotor” (22-24). But the second and last example of work from our own part of the world that can be used to sensitize our students to environmental degradation in our times and climes is Haq’s “Buriganga Blues”. You will remember that I referred to the way the river that once gave life to Dhaka in my opening paragraphs and how polluted it is now and you will realize why Haq has titled the poem thus. But let me use the final lines of his second poem to make my point again for this is what we read in them:

I decide to move on, slip feet

Into sandals with flapping soles,  
Let them drag me to the black waters  
Of the polluted Buriganga river,  
Watch the season turn.  
The rains have stopped,  
The blue sky  
Is such a pure blue  
I can only stare in disbelief (61).

Disbelief at the great derangement we have been displaying and despair at the extent of the damage we have done and continue to do to our environment in the Anthropocene age are understandable reactions once we understand the full extent of our predicament. Nevertheless, we must deploy our individual talents as well as fulfill the promise of ecological criticism as best as we can to do our part to turn things around.

I read in Yuval Noah Harari’s superb book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind* about how over time, recorded or forgotten but reconstructed by anthropologists, the human race have been responsible for “one ecological disaster” after another (82). Harari talks about a “First Wave Extinction” and a “Second Wave Extinction” and tells us that we are on the brink of “the Third Wave Extinction...which industrial activity is causing today” (ibid). But then he recalls that at a crucial time and on the brink of one of these waves, humankind and some animals survived on Noah’s Ark. Let environmental consciousness be that ark for us now.

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<sup>ii</sup> Young comes up with the phrase "fourth world" in his 2012 essay "Postcolonial Remains" where he notes that there may be debates about whether a "third world" exists or not but "a fourth world emphatically remains" (129).

<sup>iii</sup> See my essay, "Rabindranath Tagore and Eco-Consciousness" where I deal with Rabindranath's manifold concerns about the environment and many writings on the subject.

<sup>iv</sup>See the detailed analysis of the novel from the point of view of ecocriticism in Schultz, Elizabeth. "Melville's Environmental Vision in *Moby-Dick*."

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<sup>v</sup> On the subject of big dam projects and the way they displace, marginalize and at times ruin the lives of indigene, here is a poem I came across recently on the net by one of the leading poets of the United States in our time.

*Ezra Pound's Proposition*

Beauty is sexual, and sexuality  
 Is the fertility of the earth and the fertility  
 Of the earth is economics. Though he is no recommendation  
 For poets on the subject of finance,  
 I thought of him in the thick heat  
 Of the Bangkok night. Not more than fourteen, she saunters up to you  
 Outside the Shangri-la Hotel  
 And says, in plausible English,  
 "How about a party, big guy?"

Here is more or less how it works:  
 The World Bank arranges the credit and the dam  
 Floods three hundred villages, and the villagers find their way  
 To the city where their daughters melt into the teeming streets,  
 And the dam's great turbines, beautifully tooled  
 In Lund or Dresden or Detroit, financed  
 By Lazeres Freres in Paris or the Morgan Bank in New York,  
 Enabled by judicious gifts from Bechtel of San Francisco  
 Or Halliburton of Houston to the local political elite,  
 Spun by the force of rushing water,  
 Have become hives of shimmering silver  
 And, down river, they throw that bluish throb of light  
 Across her cheekbones and her lovely skin.

*by Robert Hass*