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Demi Wilton

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Demi Wilton

In his 2019 novel, *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh reflects upon the consequences of decades of international political inaction in relation to climate-related human movement. Set in the Sundarbans, a vast area of mangrove forests in the Bay of Bengal, the novel portrays extensive out-migration of the region's isolated agricultural communities along traditional migrant corridors into Northern Africa and Southern Europe. Characters observe that the signs of an impending mass exodus due to climate change have been present for many years. Rafi, a seventeen-year-old fisherman, relays the observations of his late grandfather:

> There was much that he didn't want to teach me. He'd tell me that I didn't need to learn what he knew because the rivers and the forest and the animals are no longer as they were. He used to say things were changing so much, and so fast […] that one day I would have no choice but to leave.[1]

Despite the region's long anticipation of out-migration, however, *Gun Island* depicts few structural or protective measures to ensure safe, organised movement for Sundarbans refugees. Life-threatening tropical storms, sea level rise, soil salination and their knock-on effects upon the area's agricultural economy push Rafi, and thousands like him, from the archipelago into Italy, where they are drawn into exploitative labour circuits. Like their real-life counterparts in the Sundarbans today, the migrants in the novel are criminalised as they enter foreign nations and encounter manifold abuses from both human traffickers and border guards.[2]

In an interview from 2020, Ghosh stresses that *Gun Island* is a 'book about our current reality', in which, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, an average of twenty-three million people per year across the last decade have been displaced by environmental impacts.[3] Though environmentally-driven human movement is extensive, there are few legal protections for those persons displaced by ecological disaster or the effects of anthropogenic climate change (informally termed 'environmental' or 'climate refugees'). At present, those displaced internationally due to climate change are likely to be branded illegal migrants, which places them at a heightened risk of 'vulnerability, social exclusion, and criminalization'.[4] Ghosh critiques the lack of urgency for better redressal of the imbricated

challenges posed by climate change and migration, asking why 'this reality is occluded for so many of us'.[5] Born in Kolkata, West Bengal, to a family Ghosh describes as 'ecological refugees long before the term was invented', the author reflects that those who have first-hand experience of climate-related threat are regularly omitted from conversations regarding their futurity.[6] He asserts:

> Scientists and experts are not the only people who've noticed that the climate is changing. If you talk to farmers and fishermen anywhere in the world, you'll see that they too have noticed that the climate is changing. The reason why we listen to scientists rather than say, fishermen or farmers, or women who have to walk five miles to fetch water is that they can't make their voices heard.[7]

Ghosh's observation of the absence of communities at the frontline of climate change from conversations on environmental refugeehood critiques the technocracy of contemporary climate governance. In doing so, he provides a salient starting point for an investigation into a growing wealth of literary-cultural responses to environmental displacement produced by thinkers from regions experiencing the first and worst impacts of climate change. As global warming accelerates the redistribution of communities across the globe, an increasing amount of research is being performed under the banner of climate-related mobility. This knowledge production, critics have pointed out, is largely fostered and governed by an elite 'expert' scholarly and political community, drawing boundaries around what is 'thinkable' in relation to climate-driven human movement.[8] Often termed 'the minimalist' position on climate-related displacement, conservative mobility discourses are produced and reproduced in expert circuits of knowledge production that consider migration as irreducible to climate change.[9] As a result of this classificatory difficulty, those who promote a minimalist perspective perpetually call for further research on the topic of environmental displacement, delaying pragmatic and legal responses to the issues posed by the effects of environmental degradation on human movement.

This article opens with a brief review of these technocratic approaches to climate governance, against which I argue that varied forms of knowledge are necessary components of mobility politics that aim to account for the local needs and values of the manifold populations around the world experiencing environmental instability. Accordingly, I offer a reading of West Bengali climate fiction, analysing how such literature foregrounds local histories and epistemologies as central to understanding the unique nature of the loss and trauma that West Bengali communities are undergoing due to climate change. Specifically, I will draw upon Ghosh's earlier work of climate fiction, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and Prayaag Akbar's dystopian imaginary, *Leila* (2018). Through an investigation of the texts' depictions of historic West Bengali migrant states of exception – encountered through allusions to the 1979 refugee massacre at Morichjhãpi and the 1947 Partition of India,

respectively – I argue that contemporary environmental displacement is bound within West Bengal's recent memory to the construction of migrant illegality and the resultant traumatic rights abuses that such legal exclusion enabled.[10] To this end, I will draw upon Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of 'bare life', a term that refers to the existence of people who fall outside of the law, yet who remain subject to it and who might be killed with impunity.[11] *The Hungry Tide* and *Leila*, I suggest, offer a critique of how top-down, reluctant mobility governance overlooks the locale-specific memory of migrant illegality and trauma in West Bengal; their foregrounding of historic mobility trauma calls for flexible, local, culturally-sensitive governance of climate-related movement and offers a wider warning of the human costs of legal exclusion in times of large-scale displacement.

Climate-Related Displacement and Expert-Led Knowledge Production

Following a series of landmark intergovernmental reports in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the concept of climate-related displacement was thrust into the political and public spotlight.[12] Environmental scientist Norman Myers, for example, predicted that 150 million environmental refugees would be 'produced' by 2100 with the intensification of climate change. In their 1990 report, the International Panel on Climate Change asserted that environmental impacts on human movement might be the gravest known threat that climate change poses to mankind.[13] Despite the exigency with which discussions of climate-related displacement entered the political and public imagination, three decades later, little progress has been made towards a qualifying framework which could provide legal recognition and protection for those displaced by climate change. Though climate-related movement remains a high priority for governments around the world, definitional complexities have hampered both national and international policymaking, leading to confusion over whether 'climate refugee' is an identifiable category that could be awarded protective rights.[14] As Benoit Mayer notes, it is 'practically impossible' to extricate migratory push-factors specific to climate-related mobility from other causes of displacement.[15] Drought, sea-level rise and freak weather occurrences are as likely to affect the economy or security of a region as they are to disturb its environmental status quo. Migration is also unlikely to be unidirectional and/or permanent in many circumstances, requiring complex data sets to model human movement accurately.[16] It remains clear, however, that, with or without formal acknowledgement, climate change is set to have a significant impact on patterns of human mobility. As Gregory White summarises, 'the methodological and terminological challenges' present in current legal discussions of environmental refugeehood do not refute the evidence that sea level rise, global warming and altered precipitation patterns are likely to affect human migration and demand a co-operative international response.[17] The potential result of such prevarication in the face of increasing environmental displacement is the consignment of environmental refugees to bare life. As Katherine E. Russo and Ruth Wodak have noted, 'climate-induced migrants/refugees may be defined as "exceptional migrants"

since their very definition has entered political, institutional and legal discourse but does not entail the recognition of rights granted by international legal frameworks'.[18] Conceptual dilemmas thus threaten material consequences for those who live in regions most affected by climate change. Inaction leaves such communities open to significant environmental risk and the force of international law (without its protection) should they decide to flee their homes.

This incompatibility between semantic and pragmatic understandings of climate-related displacement is not only pivotal to understanding the political prevarication surrounding human mobility in our warming world but also to comprehending why certain knowledges about mobility are excluded from leading conversations on these issues. The difficulties inherent in distinguishing people who move for climate-related reasons from those who move to escape economic hardship or conflict encourage the continued deferment of practical responses to environmental displacement through recurrent demands for further research into climate mobilities. In a meta-critique of knowledge production and climate-related movement, Sarah Louise Nash has neatly described the cyclical pattern of policymaking and investigation surrounding climate-related displacement:

> Research is drawn into policymaking through knowledge products or is even commissioned in an effort to inform policy; policy draws on available knowledge products and supports calls for more knowledge; knowledge products draw on research, and are used to provide a rationale for further research, and are relied on heavily in policymaking.[19]

This circuitous mode of knowledge production, Andrew Baldwin and Giovanni Bettini assess, results in the existence of an 'epistemic community of experts and researchers, bound together by a shared set of assumptions about the nature of human mobility in the context of climate change' and produces and reproduces the expectation that 'expert knowledge' is the foremost priority in governing climate-related displacement.[20] The UK's 2018 *Foresight* report provides a recent example of this, asserting that 'it is almost impossible to distinguish a group of "environmental migrants"' from economic migrants or refugees as defined by the 1951 Geneva convention.[21] It argues that 'enhanced understanding [of migration] at all levels' would be a more realistic and useful goal than the introduction of 'environmental refugee' as a legal status.[22]

A growing wealth of scholarship from the environmental humanities has spearheaded the call for change in relation to these issues, demanding revised approaches to knowledge production surrounding environmental catastrophe and human movement. In particular, criticism has focused upon the exclusivity of the body of people who dominate mobility negotiations and the effects that this has on the authority of 'non-expert' actors invested in the

outcomes of the debate. For Baldwin and Bettini, the existence of a closed community of scholars and policymakers in this field has created distinct 'boundaries around what can and cannot be said about a specific area of knowledge' and has distinguished 'sometimes formally, sometimes tacitly, the parameters for legitimate speech'.[23] Nash agrees and observes four key boundaries at work in the processes of legitimising and delegitimising knowledge of mobility, loss and damage. She theorises that these four boundaries exist to govern *who* is qualified to talk about mobility and climate change; *where* such work can be legitimately carried out; *how* legitimacy is awarded; and *what* is acceptable to speak about on the topic of displacement and climate change, with regard to the ideational connotations that such speech might carry. Nash finds that the work of researchers from the global North, carried out almost exclusively within universities and political circuits from the same regions, dominates policymaking and has the largest influence on the practical management of environmental mobility.[24] 'One startling omission' from these conversations, she observes, are 'the voices of the people whose mobilities are/may be affected in the context of climate change'.[25] A symbiotic relationship might be inferred between the representational exclusion of those most likely to be affected by climate change from the creation of knowledge products on environmental displacement and the omission of these communities from formal mobility protections.

In this vein, scholars have pressed for a shift in the governance of climate-related displacement, criticising the tendency of mobility experts to identify the same issues repeatedly, without reflecting upon how this knowledge might be practically employed. Benoit Mayer posits that calling for more knowledge on displacement is an aimless task, without an idea of how such knowledge might advance policymaking.[26] Nash concurs, arguing that 'different knowledge' is key 'to opening up the boundaries of the thinkable' in relation to climate-related mobility, 'to include previously overlooked perspectives and marginalized voices'.[27] This is not only, as suggested above, to encourage progress in an area of policymaking that has been notoriously resistant to change, but also to ensure that the changes implemented are representative of the needs and values of each community affected. As Petra Tschakert and others have noted, 'a grounded, context-specific lens that makes visible what people themselves value and in turn what they deem to be tolerable outcomes from climate change' is missing from contemporary politics.[28] It is in response to this, then, that my study turns to two such examples of 'non-expert' climate-knowledge, to consider what might be gained by moving beyond the epistemic boundaries currently at work in mobility politics. I deem the works of fiction considered in this article to be generative and authoritative foundations for such a task, insofar as both authors originate from West Bengal and have attested in interviews and written publications to their first-hand observations of the climate-related degradation of large swathes of India.[29] The knowledge encapsulated within these texts is, of course, neither scientific nor empirical.[30] Instead, I consider it 'local knowledge', defined by Dvora Yanow as 'contextual knowledge' that 'develops out of experience with the situation in question'.[31] The novels of this study

offer experiential knowledge of the effects of climate change on Indian communities and the local loss and trauma that results from repetitive large-scale displacement.

Environmental Displacement and States of Exception in Contemporary West-Bengali Fiction

Like much of Southern Asia, West Bengal has experienced a disproportionately large share of the early effects of climate change, compared with the rest of the world. In the central Gangetic region of the state, increasing aridity threatens significant water shortages.[32] Meanwhile, the rising tides around the Sundarbans in the South have led to coastal erosion and soil salination, with increased storm severity and frequency forcing the displacement of communities with alarming regularity.[33] Through literary depictions of the ongoing effects of climate change, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* consider the loss, damage and displacement experienced by inhabitants of both West Bengal and wider India at present, and speculate on their consequences for the future of the region. However, as the novels look towards a future characterised by scarcity and increased human mobility, they also reach backwards to the state's recent past, in which the forced separation of Muslim and non-Muslim communities following the Partition of India in 1947 led to significant unrest and human rights abuses. In what follows, I will examine the ways in which *The Hungry Tide* and *Leila* offer concern through their respective imaginaries of displacement that a state of exception produced by ill-governed climate mobility might lead to the repetition of traumatic relations between refugees and the nation-state. A wealth of scholarship has considered how Partition led to the consignment of many communities to bare life. Romola Sanyal, for example, has highlighted how Partition-dispossessed persons were excluded from state-governed relocation schemes, yet subject to legal action when they appropriated empty dwellings or land for shelter.[34] Hosna J. Shewly, meanwhile, describes the ongoing existence of Partition-produced enclaves, spaces 'geographically located in one country but politically and legally belonging to another in which […] everyday life is characterized by exclusion from legal rights'.[35] Given this context, my reading of these novels posits that non-locally attuned governance of climate-mobility in West Bengal risks compounding cultural trauma in a region where many inhabitants, or their ancestors, have experienced rights abuses as a result of the vulnerability produced by state abandonment.

Intergenerational Experiences of Bare Life in Amitav Ghosh's Sundarbans Fiction

Like *Gun Island*, Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is set in the Sundarbans, colloquially referred to as the 'tide country'. Though the author has stressed that the two works should not be read as sequels to one another, their shared characters and the extension of mutual plotlines between the books encourages

their reading as companion pieces, with a sustained narrative recognisable between them.[36] Whereas the more recent novel provides a literary depiction of the extensive out-migration of vast numbers of Sundarbans inhabitants due to climate-related change, *The Hungry Tide* shifts between a 2004-present and a 1970s-past to highlight the interrelation of current and historic instances of environmental displacement in the region. The 2004 component of the novel alternates between the third person heterodiegetic experiences of Kanai, a successful translator from Delhi, and Piya, an American cetologist of Indian immigrant parents. Kanai and Piya witness sea level rise, resource depletion and a devastating storm during their visit to the archipelago. Islanders in the novel attest to the longevity of the environmental problems confronting the Sundarbans. One asserts:

> Age teaches you to recognize the signs of death. I could see those signs everywhere […] The birds were vanishing, the fish were dwindling and from day to day the land was reclaimed by the sea. What would it take to submerge the tide country? Not much – a miniscule change in the level of the sea would be enough.[37]

Through allusions to environmental degradation, Ghosh engages with the processes through which Sundarbans citizens have, as Brandon Jones assesses, 'taken centre stage in climate change discourse on climate refugees'.[38] However, the dispersal, throughout the novel, of epistolic first-person excerpts from the diary of Kanai's late uncle, Nirmal, insists on a longer and more complex relationship between the region and refugeehood than contemporary mobility discourses recognise. Beginning with the occupation of the Sundarbans island of Morichjhãpi by Partition refugees in 1979, and ending with their brutal massacre, the diary explores how displaced Sundarbans citizens became a burden to the nation-state and were murdered, accordingly.

The massacre at Morichjhãpi was a product of decades of poorly-managed, state-manipulated human mobility, aggravated by environmental adversities. Following the Partition of Bengal in 1947, an influx of displaced people into West Bengal overwhelmed the government's capacity for resettlement.[39] These refugees from the east of Bengal flowed into the region in great numbers, including the eastern-most islands of the Sundarbans, and felt that their natural place of resettlement was West Bengal.[40] The state, however, had different designs for relocation. In 1957, the Union Minister commissioned the Indian National Development Council to ready Dandakaranya, a sparsely inhabited area in central India, for the permanent resettlement of excess refugees.[41] Dandakaranyan land was the very opposite of the marshy fields the Sundarbans refugees were familiar with. Thousands of the newly resettled families struggled to grow crops and many missed repayments of their state loans.[42] In 1978, following the election of the Communist Party Marxist (CPM) to office, the refugees were emboldened to flee Dandakaranya. The minister of West Bengal's Left Front, Ram

Chaterjee, had previously encouraged refugee settlement in the Sundarbans; shortly after gaining power, however, the CPM had dramatically reversed their support for this policy.[43] 30,000 refugees exited central India to settle upon Morichjhãpi under the protection of the Western-funded 'Project Tiger' conservation programme.[44] Declaring the island to be part of the guarded 'Reserve Forest', the government set up blockades to prevent food and medicine from reaching the refugees, starving many to death before a Calcutta High Court order was able to rule against this inhumane treatment.[45] Despite this, refugees persisted in remaining on the island and, between 14 and 16 May 1979, were forcibly evicted and massacred by the police with the assistance of Muslim gangs.[46] Though no official death statistics were released, locals attest that only a quarter of the refugees survived the onslaught.[47]

By re-imagining the ways in which Partition refugees were excluded from legal protections during both their forced relocation to Dandakaranya and subsequent murder at Morichjhãpi, *The Hungry Tide* highlights and critiques the Indian state's production of a legal impasse for some of its most vulnerable citizens. As historians have described, refugees at Dandakaranya were detained like 'prisoners of war'.[48] *The Hungry Tide* picks up these carceral themes, describing the conditions of resettlement as akin to a 'concentration camp […] [where] refugees were surrounded by security forces and forbidden to leave' despite poverty and disease being rife.[49] Ghosh's invocation of the concentration camp-like nature of Dandakaranya underlines the inversion between life and death in the resettlement programme – a condition central to a state of exception, as theorised by Agamben. Prior to their escape to the Sundarbans, however, the refugees at Dandakaranya are not at imminent risk of murder at the hands of the state and might be best considered to inhabit, instead, what Achille Mbembe, in his seminal book *Necropolitics* (2019), has termed a 'death world': where legal 'obligation' to lives deemed to have 'meager' worth is negated.[50] As Thom Davies distinguishes, 'death worlds' are not characterised by the 'highly visible or spectacular killing of genocide or execution but rather a slower, stealthier, and less obvious form of brutality'.[51] *The Hungry Tide* signifies the indirect murder of the refugees of Dandakaranya through its extensive descriptions of the broken agricultural promises made by the state; 'the earth', writes Ghosh, 'was so red it seemed to be stained with blood'.[52] It is following their escape from the resettlement camp into the island of Morichjhãpi that the refugees of the novel are transformed from inhabitants of 'death worlds' to *homines sacri* in Agamben's sense – persons who might be killed without punishment.[53] *The Hungry Tide* alludes to real-life incidents as it lists the disproportionate force employed by the state and military as they move to quell the occupation of Morichjhãpi, recalling that,

> all movement in and out of Morichjhãpi was banned under the provisions of the Forest Preservation Act. […] Section 144, the law used to quell civil disturbances, was imposed on the whole

> area […], tear gas and rubber bullets had been used, boats had
> been sunk, people had been killed.[54]

Evoking legal rhetoric, the novel foregrounds how those on the island were subjected to the laws of the nation-state, without protection from the unbridled force of the government, leading to the deprivation of their most basic human rights. By contrasting the forms of bare life experienced by the Partition refugees before and after their escape from Dandakaranya, *The Hungry Tide* laments the paucity of alternatives for the environmentally displaced, both past and present. Trapped in a failing ecosystem by border guards, the refugees are faced with the choice of remaining in a 'death world' of environmental failure or risking an illegal venture into an unwelcoming region.[55]

The lack of viable solutions to the refugees' plight is not produced within a political vacuum in which the non-observance of land titles quickly results in a death sentence. Indeed, throughout Partition, displaced persons regularly became squatters, having been involuntarily ousted from their homes. Instead, as the novel demonstrates, the dehumanisation witnessed in the refugees' consignment to bare life is tied to the economic interests of those who ordered the massacre. Shortly before her murder at the hands of Muslim gangs and CPM militia, Kusum, the focaliser of refugee experience within Nirmal's diary, asserts that:

> The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit here,
> helpless, and listen to the policemen making their
> announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence,
> was worth less than dirt or dust.[56]

The Hungry Tide's registration of these events employs comparisons between the displaced and non-human entities, indicating a blurring of the refugees' status as citizens and biological entities, when viewed from the materialist perspective of the state. Following Aristotle, Agamben observes a distinction between *zoē* and *bios,* between 'mere life' and 'the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group […] prefigured in the citizen'.[57] Bare life, Agamben posits, is a zone of 'irreducible indistinction' between these conditions, decided by the sovereign power when a state of exception is enacted.[58] In this muddied, pecuniary comparison between the Dandakaranyan refugees and the terrain that they find themselves upon, the novel signals the root cause of the refugees' transition into *homines sacri.* The interests of the wealthy shareholders in Project Tiger supersede the refugees' already paltry right to life.

This fictional re-imagination of the historical massacre is rendered particularly poignant when it is drawn into comparison with the contemporary climate refugee experiences depicted within both *Gun Island* and *The Hungry Tide.* The similarities between the past and present narratives reveal the

cumulative trauma of repetitive cycles of environmental displacement and its misgovernance for the novels' West Bengali characters. A lack of legal protection for those most at risk from climate change results in both the death of Kusum's son, Fokir, when a large storm strikes the archipelago in *The Hungry Tide*, as well as the capture and imprisonment of her grandson, Tipu, by human traffickers as he seeks to flee the region in *Gun Island*. Like its prequel, *Gun Island* accentuates the willingness of governments around the world to 'turn a blind eye' to the suffering brought about by climate-related loss, as long as it is economically advantageous to do so.[59] The novel describes how Tipu and other refugees were packed by traffickers into an 'old truck […] like cows or goats'.[60] This butchery metaphor not only connotes the dehumanisation of the migrants but foreshadows their transition from victims of the human trafficking industry into the products of an activity even more macabre: organ harvesting. Rafi describes the horrors that await the refugees in a connection house in the Sanai where large groups of refugees were routinely held captive by traffickers. The house primarily functions as 'a hub for the trade in human organs'.[61] Nancy Scheper-Hughes has theorised that the body trade is the ultimate realisation of the divorce between *zoē* and *bios*, through its reduction of a person into their basest bodily functions.[62] Tipu's capture by organ harvesters serves as a fitting manifestation of his transition from neglected citizen to mere life (*zoē*). In this, comparisons are created between the trauma experienced by Tipu's grandmother as she was condemned to a brutal death on Morichjhãpi, in as much as both she and Tipu are exempt from the safety of legal recourse. The intergenerational nature of these tragedies speaks to the lack of agency and security gained by refugees in the period between Partition and the present. Through their depiction of a multi-generational, transhistorical pair of narratives on human movement, *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* highlight the ways in which non-locally attuned approaches to climate resettlement are not only likely to re-ignite displacement-related trauma in the region but also to contribute to the repetition of such suffering by delaying protections for the region's most vulnerable people. 'We are the dispossessed', the novel's refugees chant as the militia descends at Morichjhãpi to quell their resistance.[63] Ghosh implores that they are heard, as climate change threatens to re-enact crisis in West Bengal.

Partition, Exclusion and Resource Shortage in Prayaag Akbar's Leila

Like *The Hungry Tide*, Prayaag Akbar's debut novel *Leila* offers insight into the relationship between historic violence, present climate uncertainty and future human mobility through its consideration of the reassignment of large portions of the Indian population to impoverished and rightless conditions. It addresses these concerns in a markedly different form to *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, however. Whereas Ghosh's fiction attempts to document the effects of climate change on present-day life in West Bengal by observing preliminary out-migration into Europe, Akbar's *Leila* explores environmental change through its construction of a dystopian future in which global

warming has compounded existing political tensions, leading to the separation of India along socio-religious lines. The narrative is set in an unnamed city in India following a 'water crisis'.[64] The novel describes extreme drought in the language of a 'long summer',[65] during which the nation's socio-topographic layout has been altered irrevocably.[66] People pool into slums as farms are abandoned; little will grow 'but grey-brown scrub'.[67] Nationalist support breeds in the wake of the resulting scarcity, consolidating power into the hands of 'the Council', who uphold that a radical purification of the nation is intrinsic to the restoration of its affluence and power. The novel follows the journey of the first person autodiegetic narrator and focalizer, Shalini, as she searches for her daughter, the eponymous Leila, who was seized by the Council's militia from her family's home at the age of three as punishment for her parents' insubordination to the new regime.

Leila may not be set in West Bengal explicitly – though, as Kerryn Goldsworthy notes, similarities between its unnamed setting and the West Bengali capital of Kolkata are manifold – yet, any reader familiar with the troubled past of Akbar's birthplace will recognise that allusions to a quelling of political division through geographic division are informed by the events of Partition that took place across the historic regions of Bengal and Punjab.[68] In the novel, the nationalist government splits India into sectors according to the predominant caste and religious identity of each area's inhabitants to foster stability between clashing communities, terming the newly reconstituted nation 'Purity One'. Shalini describes the erection of 'silent grey walls' that constitute an 'enormous maze' within the confines of Purity, between which guards stand posted, only allowing the most influential people to pass into communities other than their own.[69] Those without the necessary permissions exist at the mercy of the totalitarian government, whose 'inscrutable power' purportedly serves to realise the freedom of a long-colonised people[70] – 'the flowering of an ancient consciousness' returning to those who seek to self-govern according to their religious beliefs.[71]

Through these historic allusions, the novel binds climate-related scarcity to civil unrest, imagining how environmental change might provide fertile ground for a state of exception to be enacted by a conservative government. Though Purity One revokes many freedoms for Indian citizens, such as drinking alcohol, eating meat, wearing makeup, and free marriage, it also promises an end to the hardships of environmental breakdown. Joshi, the ideological thinker behind Purity, takes to television to condemn the homelessness and suffering of 'good people', suggesting that the separation of society into religious factions is people's 'chance' to 'free [themselves], at last, from these ghastly visions'.[72] This dystopian future, in which divides akin to those experienced during Partition are re-enacted, offers concern that times of emergency heralded by climate change might lead to an intensification of divisive politics and imbalanced suffering in a world of fewer resources. Though the region has suffered through such changes once before, the allure of bygone times allows for the seed of nationalism to germinate – as, indeed, we might

recognise in India today in the popularity of the Modi government and the rise of Hindu nationalism.

Acknowledging the allure of conservative ideology in times of hardship, however, Akbar simultaneously admonishes it. Purity presents its re-organisation of society as a mode of concern, a biopolitical form of governance in the Foucauldian sense, enacted through a 'technology of power […] established to address a multiplicity of men'[73] which attempts 'to improve life, to prolong its duration […] to compensate for failings'.[74] The regime is envisaged as a top-down form of care to prevent discontent, imperfect for everyone, but better for many. A civil servant tasked with the indoctrination of dissenting women from Purity describes how:

> Things were worse before the walls […] people fought with each other, burned each other. Not just about women. Over who will get government money. Who will get jobs. Fought over everything. We were like animals. With the walls we have order. We will finally have peace.[75]

Indeed, Shalini observes how privileged sectors benefit from such large-scale societal overhaul. She describes a new residential complex inside the sector for Kamrupi Brahmins that offers respite from the water crisis ravaging the nation, through 'glittering emerald lawns. Indoor and outdoor pools. Private temple […] Twenty-four-hour power backup, twenty-four-hour water'.[76] Such communities are few and far between, however; only the most respectable receive such privileges. In this, the state justify their machinations along biopolitical lines: inclusion is purportedly granted through purity; exclusion through impurity.[77] The very name of the regime nods to this structure.

Despite the government's pretence at concern, Akbar's allusions to inequality throughout the novel suggest that the forms of power at work in the reformed society align more closely with Agamben's biopolitics than Foucault's. Inclusion within Purity One's society is predicated on the exclusion of others, who live 'on the margins of social, political, juridical and biological representation' and offer 'an admonitory warning to the ontological basis of the modern political subject'.[78] In her astute reading of precarity in contemporary Indian fiction, Dolores Herrero identifies Agambenian structures within the novel's imagination of the climate change-swollen slums: the 'slummers', Herrero argues, 'may be physically alive, but are symbolically and politically dead'[79] and 'pitted against "a clean, healthy and visible world" that makes sure that this partition is never questioned'.[80] The leaders of Purity One term those excluded from society 'the unfortunates', a phrase that becomes synonymous with iniquity and vice.[81] The brutal politics of punishment that the state deems fit to bring down upon its most vulnerable citizens are overlooked by those grateful to be protected from such measures, however temporarily. In a harrowing scene, Shalini watches as a peon is pulled from the home of his employers and beaten for their purported crimes.

'Please sir, I'm a poor man', he begs.[82] Like her neighbours, Shalini hears his 'anguished scream' as she turns and retreats to the safety of her home.[83] Communities consigned to bare life in the novel – whether those exposed to increased environmental risk or those for whom murder would generate no legal repercussions – exist in *Leila* as both a cost and caution for the privileged few who maintain a tolerable existence in times of hardship at the expense of others' dispossession and exclusion.

Though speculative, *Leila*'s depiction of a near-future climate-stricken Indian political landscape insistently binds its warnings of division, violence and exclusion to present-day politics of climate mobility through its representation of widespread neo-colonial disillusionment. The instatement of a nationalist government is presented by the novel's far-right as a means to combat climate-related hardship brought about by the greed of 'outsider' 'politicians, judges, bureaucrats, media'.[84] Purity's enigmatic leader, Joshi rants that 'centuries of rule by outsiders have led to spiritual subjugation',[85] condemning 'intellectuals [who] think they know everything but […] are thinking only about Western values'.[86] Here, Akbar criticises top-down, exclusionary governance, which omits the involvement and prioritisation of a majority's needs in decisions regarding their welfare, suggesting that it lays fertile ground for radical politics and the security threats that follow. It is not surprising that citizens of the novel's futurescape are cynical towards 'intellectual' responses to the climate crisis, given the wide scale human suffering, loss and displacement that results from occidental prioritisation. Shalini recalls the human costs of such inequality in descriptions of news reports that punctured her once sheltered and trouble-free existence:

> Children leaned dazed against the walls, their lips near transparent in the glare of the camera LED. They breathed in jerky, rapid gulps and cried without tears […]. The young men interviewed didn't talk to the reporter. Instead they shouted directly at the camera. Eyes flashing, cracked lips, chests out, they stared through the screen right at you and spat their words with choked anger, asking why their families had been ignored so long.[87]

Resentment at the governmental institutions that preceded Purity ignites the climate-primed tinder of political unrest in *Leila*, leading to forced displacement, state brutality and the consignment of many communities to desiccated slums. Through its recognition of the systemic exclusion of poor communities, however, *Leila* does not simply condemn the present-day nationalist turn playing out across both India and the wider world, as long-running austerity leaves populations feeling underrepresented and dissatisfied with moderate politics. It simultaneously advises that contemporary climate politics needs to pre-empt such affairs through governance compassionate of local needs.

Conclusion

The works of fiction that I have analysed here offer locale-specific insights into the historical and culturally significant ramifications of contemporary mobility in West Bengal through their construction of narratives that bind such movement to previous forms of Partition-related loss and displacement. By comparing the present-day experience of climate refugees from the Sundarbans to those of refugees condemned to bare life at Morichjhãpi, *The Hungry Tide* laments that ill-managed climate migration might cyclically consign communities from a region still recovering from such horrors to further ordeal. *Leila*, meanwhile, compares the state of exception enacted following Partition to the emergency posed by climate change, warning that crisis may re-result in radical political solutions. In doing so, both texts warn that recent regional traumas might be re-lived if political institutions persist to ignore local-cultural values and experiences, and leave potential climate refugees rightless in their unending prevarication. I suggest, following this reading, that these associations should be at the forefront of displacement considerations in West Bengal, highlighting the need for a more flexible and co-operative framework between expert and local knowledge production. Recent tensions between climate activists and the West Bengali state regarding the controversial construction of the Rampal Power Station highlight the ongoing challenges faced by non-expert actors in the region to gain a stake in the conversations that most concern them.[88] Literature is not, of course, a substitute for policymaking or academic research but, at present, offers a rare opportunity for regions significantly affected by climate change to draw attention to the challenges they face and the disruptions and losses they fear. In this, *The Hungry Tide* and *Leila* serve both as products of experiential knowledge in their own right and as an encouragement for the inclusion of other forms of local knowledge within scholarly and political circuits concerned with climate mobilities. I offer this analysis of West Bengali novels as one example of the prescience of literature to political conversations on environmental displacement. Numerous other literary-cultural productions from communities at the frontline of global warming offer ample room for further research, which I hope will be explored in the future.

Notes

[1] Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 94–95.
[2] Molinari, "Intensifying Insecurities."
[3] Ghosh, interview by Levantesi; IDMC, Global Internal Displacement Database.
[4] Blue, "Colonial Fences," 332.
[5] Ghosh, interview by Levantesi.
[6] Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 3–4.
[7] Ghosh, interview by Levantesi.
[8] Nash, "Knowing Human Mobility," 69.
[9] Faber and Schlegel, "Give Me Shelter," 9.
[10] The location name Morichjhãpi varies slightly in translation (variants include Marichjhapi and Marichjhanpi). For the purposes of this study, I have employed Morichjhãpi as this is the spelling employed in *The Hungry Tide*. Where scholars have employed variants, however, I have included these as originally published.
[11] Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 10; Aslam, "Recovered and Restored?"; Mookherjee, "Available Motherhood."
[12] Piguet, Pecoud, and de Guchteneire, "Introduction: Migration and Climate," 4.
[13] Myers, "Environmental Refugees"; Working Group II, *Policymakers Summary*, 20.
[14] UNFCCC, *Report of the Executive*.
[15] Mayer, *Concept of Climate Migration*, 1.
[16] Faber and Schlegel, "Give Me Shelter," 4.

[17] White, *Climate Change and Migration*, 4.

[18] Russo and Wodak, "Representations of 'Exceptional Migrants'," 1.

[19] Nash, "Knowing Human Mobility," 68.

[20] Baldwin and Bettini, "Introduction: Life Adrift," 5–6.

[21] Government Office for Science, *Migration and Environmental Change*, 11.

[22] Ibid., 201.

[23] Baldwin and Bettini, "Introduction: Life Adrift," 5–6.

[24] Nash, "Knowing Human Mobility," 77–78.

[25] Ibid., 78.

[26] Mayer, "Constructing 'Climate Migration'," 116.

[27] Nash, "Knowing Human Mobility," 69.

[28] Tschakert et al., "Climate Change and Loss," 3.

[29] I acknowledge here the comparatively privileged position of both Amitav Ghosh and Prayaag Akbar compared to large swathes of the West Bengal population. I do not wish to suggest that these writers are able to accurately represent the manifold and nuanced struggles of a diverse climate change-afflicted region. Rather, I intend for their works to serve as an example of how local experiences, memories, and loss or upheaval serves as a necessary counterpart to expert-knowledge production. See Akbar, interview by Deckard; Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*.

[30] Literature is, of course, only one potential means of communicating local knowledge. Others such as art, activist protest – even music – might function comparably. I choose literature due to its relative ease of access.

[31] Yanow, "Translating Local Knowledge," 11–12.

[32] Ghosh, "Spatial and Temporal Appraisal."

[33] Shamsuddoha and Chowdery, *Climate Change Impact*; Loucks et al., "Sea Level Rise," 292.

[34] Sanyal, "Urbanizing Refuge."

[35] Shewly, "Abandoned Spaces and Bare Life," 23.

[36] Ghosh, interview by Harikrishnan.

[37] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 215–216.

[38] Jones, "A Postcolonial Utopia," 641.

[39] Sengupta, "From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi," 101–102.

[40] Ghosh, "Refugees as Homo Sacers," 109.

[41] Sengupta, "From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi," 104.

[42] Ibid., 106.

[43] Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement," 107.

[44] Singh, "'Nation' Within the Nation," 246.

[45] Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement," 110; Chowdhury, "Space, Identity, Territory," 669.

[46] Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement," 110.

. Sengupta, "From Dandakaranya to Marichjhapi," 104.

[47] Fletcher, "Reading the Postcolonial Island," 6.

[48] Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement," 108.

[49] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 118.

[50] Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 38.

[51] Davies, "Toxic Space and Time," 1540.

[52] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 165.

[53] Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 63.

[54] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 252.

[55] There is notable irony, of course, in the environmental legislation of the Forest Act being used to condemn environmental refugees.

[56] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 261.

[57] Downey, "Zones of Indistinction," 112.

[58] Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 11.

[59] Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 190.

[60] Ibid., 258–259.

[61] Ibid., 286.

[62] Scheper-Hughes, "Commodity Fetishism in Organs," 44.

[63] Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide*, 254.

[64] Akbar, *Leila*, 25.

[65] Ibid., 14.

[66] Ibid., 26.

[67] Ibid., 25.

[68] Goldsworthy, "Leila Review."

[69] Akbar, *Leila*, 38.

[70] Ibid., 1–2.

[71] Ibid., 44.

[72] Ibid., 45.

[73] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 242.

[74] Ibid., 244.

[75] Akbar, *Leila*, 215.

[76] Ibid., 106.

[77] Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 257.

[78] Downey, "Zones of Indistinction," 109.

[79] Herrero, "Populism and Precarity," 225.

[80] Ibid., 226.

[81] Akbar, *Leila*, 119.

[82] Ibid., 103.

[83] Ibid., 103.

[84] Ibid., 119.

[85] Ibid., 118.

[86] Ibid., 44–45.

[87] Ibid., 88.

[88] Roy, "Protest in Bangladesh."

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Demi Wilton is a doctoral researcher and university teacher in the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at Loughborough University, UK. Her research examines contemporary depictions of environmental displacement in World Literature. She is particularly interested in climate-fiction by authors from nations vulnerable to climate change, and the ways in which these works of literature respond to the notion of 'climate-refugeehood.' Demi is the Postgraduate and Early Career Officer for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, UK and Ireland. Email: D.M.R.Wilton@lboro.ac.uk