

Weekly Notebook 3

Notebook 1: Hungry Tide & Posthumanism pt. 1

Posthumanism is a significant motif in the *Hungry Tide* which is indicated by the inordinate amount of power the environment has over its people. The violence of the Sundarban islands toward its inhabitants challenges the notion of the human-centered planet in which nature is subjugated by humans. By presenting nature in this way, Amitav Ghosh is referencing the ways in which objects are often viewed as passive and moldable when in fact they have an innate power of their own.

In her essay *The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter*, Jane Bennett argues that people in power are given the privilege of being thought of as subjects (active, conscious, powerful) while other people are relegated to objecthood.¹ This can be seen in the way that the government treats the refugees of Morichjapi in the novel, as if they are disposable trash to be thrown away. Bennett explains that objects aren't valued for their quality and are thus short-lived and easily discarded - such as single-use plastic and trash.² The men living on the islands have very high mortality rates so much so that their wives preemptively dress in white widow garments. By calling attention to the ways in which nature can fight back against humans, Ghosh is referencing what Bennett calls "thing power," which she defines as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle." She references thing power in relation to "black power [and] girl power," thus drawing an explicit connection to

¹ Bennett, J. (2004). *The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter*. *Political Theory*, 32(3), 347-372. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4148158>

² Ibid

humans who have been diminished to objecthood and have come together in order to reclaim their power.³

This declaration of objecthood can be seen in the passage from the *Hungry Tide* where Kusum is explaining to Nirimal the dehumanizing ways they are being treated by the police, she says “The worst part was not the hunger or thirst. It was to sit there, helpless, and listen to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt of dust.”

In the novel, the refugees are being forced away from their land in the name of conserving the animals of the forest. The inhabitants of Morichapi are being harassed by other people and by their environment as well. By doubling the reversal of power in the novel by focusing on both the battle between humans and other humans and between humans and nature, he is complicating our expectations about who or what has power and in this way, leaves us with loose ended ideas about postcolonialism and environmentalism that cannot be neatly tied up at the end of the novel.

Notebook 2: The Hungry Tide & Posthumanism pt. 2

Another expression of the posthuman themes in *The Hungry Tide* is the way in which time becomes an ethereal concept within this unpredictable landscape and nonlinear narrative. A

³ Bennett, J. (2004). The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter. *Political Theory*, 32(3), 347-372. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4148158>

great example of this is when the narrator describes the autonomous power of the mangroves, “...the specialty of mangroves is that they do not merely recolonize land; they erase time. Every generation creates its own population of ghosts.” In this way, the mangroves symbolize the various inhabitants of the tide country islands who “recolonize” the land and make it their home; building on top of land that has belonged to others before them. The trees are described as resilient, tough and pervasive throughout the novel, which could just as well be descriptors for the people who inhabit the tide country.

When reading that passage I thought of Korikancha, the ancient Incan temple which became the structural foundation for a Catholic church after the Inca were colonized by the Spanish around 1535.⁴ However, after a massive earthquake in 1950, the Spanish church partially crumbled to reveal the Incan temple, whose architecture proved to be sturdier than that of which the colonizers built on top.⁵

In a similar way, structures of the past linger in Lusibari. When S’Daniel and his crew are sailing past the tide country islands, one of his crewmen points out “the ruins of an old temple and a mosque.” He explains that people once inhabited the islands but were driven away by the harsh environment. This prompts S’Daniel to wonder aloud, “if people lived here once, why shouldn’t they again?” He proceeds to build (or attempt to build) a kind of postcapitalist utopia on top of the temperamental land of the Sundarbans. After S’Daniel dies, it looks as though his ideals die with him and things start to unravel once more. When Nilima comes to the island, she is able to salvage what is left of the infrastructure S’Daniel left behind. These are both instances

⁴ Korikancha / Church & Convent of Santo Domingo. (n.d.). Retrieved November 8, 2019, from <https://www.theonlyperuguide.com/peru-guide/cusco/highlights/korikancha-church-convent-santo-domingo/>.

⁵ Coricancha Information. (n.d.). Retrieved November 8, 2019, from https://www.peru-explorer.com/cusco/korikancha_information.htm.

of building on top of an already existing history and the past resurfacing despite human and nonhuman efforts to cover it up.

A second way in which the past can be seen or felt in the present is Nirimal's recollection of the shipwrecks that littered the tide country channels with their hefty gray bodies only to be, with time "ground to fine silt, becom[ing] something else." About 160 pages earlier, in the passage where Kanai is just arriving to the Matla river, he describes silt in a way that almost implies sentience, "The freshly laid silt that bored the water glistened in the sun like dunes of melted chocolate. From time to time, bubbles of air rose from the depths and burst to the top...The sounds they made seemed almost to form articulate patterns, as if to suggest they were giving voice to the depths of the earth itself."

Marshall McLuhan once said that "Every new technology creates a new environment," so what if that new environment started to garner as much power as that of its origin?⁶ Material giving life to new material ad infinitum is another motif of the novel and is increasingly relevant towards the end of the book when the elements come together to create a natural disaster.

If there is anything Amitav Ghosh is trying to communicate with the *Hungry Tide*, it's that we must problematize our history in order to understand it, this includes embracing ambiguities of subject/object, colonialism/postcolonialism and human/inhuman.

Notebook 3: The Flamethrowers & Futurism

Futurism plays an integral role in *The Flamethrowers*, specifically in the way it deals with technology and violence - two of the main tenets of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's

⁶ McLuhan, M. (1967). *The Invisible Environment: The Future of an Erosion*. *Perspecta*, 11, 163-167. doi:10.2307/1566945

Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism. Rachel Kushner incorporates elements of futurism in her novel not only as a critique of the hypermasculinity and fascistic tendencies of the movement, but also to appropriate the aforementioned qualities and casting the problematic ideas in a new, contemporary light.

The first way the novel references the Futurist manifesto is through Reno's first crush and speed racer Flip Farmer. Flip's race car is painted a glossy lavender (a color often associated with softness and femininity) and is named *Victory of Samothrace*, which is cited in the manifesto where Marinetti declares "A racing car whose hood is adorned with great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath - a roaring that seems to ride on grapeshot [ammunition] is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*."⁷ It seems appropriate then that that race car, a symbol for femininity and whose namesake is an ancient Hellenistic sculpture, should end up wrecked at the bottom of a ditch towards the end of the chapter. This also connects to the manifesto where, racing through the city at a deadly speed, Marinetti crashes his car into a ditch full of black sludge only to emerge a new man who has left behind the car's "heavy framework of good sense and its soft upholstery of comfort."⁸

The Italian futurists felt suffocated by the classical art surrounding them in the great museums and architecture of Rome, and vehemently believed that the only way to break out of such a time-tested traditional mold was through violence and progress catalyzed through speed and technology.⁹ We can see this in the way Valera and his friends behave and think, decrying any word or act that might be associated with the past, such as when Valera uses the word

⁷ Author, Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso (1909). *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism*. In Harrison, Charles Editor & Wood, Paul Editor (Eds.), *Art in Theory* (146-149). Blackwell Publishing.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Author, Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso (1909). *The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism*. In Harrison, Charles Editor & Wood, Paul Editor (Eds.), *Art in Theory* (146-149). Blackwell Publishing.

“pneuma” and Lonzi chastises him for it, explaining: “That’s crap. Ancient Greece. We’re not gazing into the sewer grates of history, Valera.”

Another direct reference to the Futurist manifesto is when Valera is describing Lonzi’s disdain for the past, “Lonzi detested sloth and nostalgia...wallowing like a hog in the thick, warm mud in which...all of Italy was trapped.” Wallowing in a bog of stale time is a sentiment Marinetti writes about in the aforementioned passage about the car crash where he likens the past to a “maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water.”¹⁰

Lonzi and Valera’s gang also tick number 9 on Marinetti’s manifesto: “We will glorify war - and scorn for woman.”¹¹ These two hateful ideas are combined succinctly in the section of the *Flamethrowers* that describes everyone in the gang volunteering to fight in the war, which is adjacent to an entire passage where Lonzi likens female genitalia to something that in the future should be “a thing a man could carry in his pocket.” The book goes on to correlate war violence and sexual violence in the sentence “What had actually been in Valera’s haversack: not a woman’s vulva but grenades, a gas mask, a gun that constantly jammed.”

However, when these men actually go off to war, the majority of them (besides Valera) are immediate failures: Lonzi gets shot in the groin (a symbol for impotence) and has to return home, another member of the group crashes his motorcycle into a tree and dies, and Valera’s gun is constantly jamming. This irony can be seen as Kushner’s critique on Futurism, which was full of impractical ideals that when put into practice, had disastrous outcomes, such as the glorification of war and the objectification of women.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

