Decolonial Myths and Demi-gods of the Tropics: The More-than-Human Worlds of Manasa and Olokun

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Abstract

In response to the current age of the Anthropocene, Posthumanist studies explore multispecies’ entanglements and encounters in order to move away from the colonial binaries that separate humans from the environment. Adding to these studies, this paper explores the role of mythology in decolonising the Western-centric strategies of narration. Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* and Rita Indiana’s *Tentacle*, envision the relationship of the human with other species against the deepening climate crisis, bringing to the fore the often-discounted discourses of cultural myths. In *Gun Island*, Manasa, the quintessential nagini is a folk deity of fear-based Nature worship from the Bay of Bengal, and an outsider to the established pantheon of Hindu gods. The Yoruba deity, Olokun, and his/her incarnations, move across the three time periods in *Tentacle* emerging as the saviour of the Caribbean islands. The novels reinterpret and re-evaluate the tropical Indigenous myths to implement alternate approaches of knowing and being in the world. This article seeks to explore how posthumanist and decolonial perspectives in these mythologies create new alliances that stretch across space, time, and species, symbolising the relationality of all life. The paper delves into the power of the mythical deities to highlight the existence of an interconnected network of human and more-than-human realms.

Keywords: Decolonisation, Myth, Demigod, Anthropocene, Climate Crisis, Posthumanism, more-than-human, Manasa, Olokun, Bengal, Caribbean

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Decolonising the Tropics

Living in the speculative times of the Anthropocene and its consequences, it is inappropriate to claim that colonialism has culminated and can be historified. The effects of colonialism still pervade and perpetrate the logic of objectification and subjugation. Settler colonialists ravaged the globe, considering nature and the land as inert forces to be conquered and consumed. With little regard for the long-term effects, they considered "new" countries as places with boundless resources to plunder. The nonhuman ecosystem was relegated as an object to be mastered and exploited (Césaire, 2000, p.42). Centuries of violence, racism and discrimination associated with histories of colonial appropriation and objectification point to the reality that not all humans necessarily qualify as humans and that animals and the environment frequently count as insignificant things (Schulz, 2017a). Coloniality, in this perspective, is one of the defining aspects of modernity — its "darker side" (Mignolo, 2009, cited in Schulz, 2017a). Ever since the dawn of the modern age, the world has been guided and directed by the Western knowledge tradition that has taken root across the globe through colonisation. Colonial rule began in the early seventeenth century with the discovery of trade routes and several European powers engaged in imperial expansion around the world. The tropics became a site of concentrated colonial activity. Hundreds of years later, the tropics are still burdened by the vestiges of colonialism and numerous countries have adopted the strategies of their erstwhile colonial masters exploiting humans, other species, land and water.

The present era calls for framing and formulating novel counter-epistemologies to acknowledge the local and the particular in an effort to unravel colonialism and its exploitative relationships. According to Mignolo (2009), ideas of "de-colonial thinking and doing emerged from the sixteenth century on as responses to the oppressive and imperial bent of modern European ideas projected onto and enacted in the non-European world" (p.39). Decoloniality, for Mignolo, is a twofold concept. On one side, it points toward the analysis of coloniality, the underbelly of modernity. On the other, it alludes to building decolonial futures (2009). Climate crisis, being a complex issue of modernity and coloniality, seeks a reliable resolution that can arguably be achieved only through decolonial ideologies and actions. With the threat of human-caused mass extinction and an approaching climate apocalypse, humanity is trying to grasp the intricate interactions between nature and society (Morton, 2014, p.258; Swyngedouw, 2011, cited in Schulz, 2017a). Hence, it is imperative to analyse the new human epoch, the Anthropocene, through a decolonial lens, especially as it pertains to the previously-colonised regions of the world.

The unequal and uneven distribution of detrimental anthropogenic activities alerts us to the inadequacy of the homogeneous representation of ‘humankind as the new
geological agent’ to delineate the crisis of the Anthropocene (Malm & Hornborg, 2014, p.64, cited in Schulz, 2017b). It places human beings and their experiences above nature, other species, or the universe as a whole. Moreover, the prevalent crisis of the Anthropocene epoch is a strong prompt to dispel the prevalent myths of technoscientific idealism and linear economic growth. There is a need to relinquish modernity’s tendency to idealise and fixate on specific forms of science and technology, to despise other knowledge systems, and to address its ignorance of the vast plurality of people and species on earth (Neckel, 2021). Modern colonialism remains stuck in the Kantian Categorical Imperative where humans are considered superior to all living things in using the resources of the planet. Kant’s philosophy is anthropocentric, endorsing the absoluteness of human reason. It leads to the belief that humans have intellectual autonomy and moral agency, and that human history is a story of progress (Özerkmen, 2002, p.174).

Such a Western epistemology prioritises climate imaginations that are deeply entrenched within philosophies of human mastery that recast nature as a dormant, material substrate, relevant only in the ways it is beneficial to (some) humans (Chao & Enari, 2021). This exclusionary vision silences the voices of non-Western and Indigenous communities of the tropics and beyond. In response to these exclusions, other worldviews that reveal the interconnected realities across species, time, and generations are required. Hence there is a pressing need to place the climate crisis within overlapping and plural spatiotemporal frames that arise from particular cultural understandings rather than universal or linear monolithic projections (Anderson et al., 2018).

At this juncture when new epistemologies on human-nature relations are gaining prominence, this paper looks into the value of myth and mythical narratives in effecting a transformation to a convivial planet amidst the ecological crisis of the age. It delves into an exploration of the inherent powers of the mythical demigods, Manasa and Olokun, manifested through entangled consciousness, ontological plurality, liminality and syncretism that converge in building a more-than-human world in the novels Gun Island (2019) and Tentacle (2015). In moving between the past and the present, these two novels navigate the space between myth and modernity.

We begin with a discussion of how Indigenous myths are important anti-colonial tropes, before embarking on an exploration of the myths of Manasa and Olokun within the two novels to uncover their decolonial tendencies effected through posthuman multispecies' entanglements and encounters. Delving into the novels is to simultaneously trace back and forth through the long histories and futures of colonialism, trade, industrialisation and modernisation that have created the age of the Anthropocene. We conclude that the novels each effect a decolonising of
Western-centric strategies of narration through the myths and deities of Manasa and Olokun.

**Myth as Anti-Colonial Trope**

“Myth is the ‘Story’ humanity is telling itself to make sense of it all” (Redtail, 2022). In ancient myths, the Divine was inextricably linked to Nature and its unexpected forces. However, with the Enlightenment age, myths were denigrated as worthless and dysfunctional old-world tales. The disenchantment of the world was the agenda of Enlightenment (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). The separation between the Divine and Nature widened with the advent of monotheistic religions which were spread by colonial forces. Consequently, mythological discourses started to emphasise the absolute categorical difference between humans and all other life forms.

At the centre of Western epistemology is the creation myth, an anthropocentric and androcentric tale marking the beginning of Genesis in the Bible (Thompson, 2019). The creation myth with its male god who dominates the universe and creates a mortal man in his likeness, brings into being a patriarchal culture where everything stems from man. The serpent, frequently associated with the Devil or Satan, plays the only active part of animals in the story (Thompson, 2019). Here, the animal is unquestionably the villain. The category of ‘animals’ to imply ‘non-human hominids’ is evidence that this pervasive belief still permeates Western culture, and has spread around the world.

The expulsion of Indigenous myths, the emergence of instrumental reason, the gradual estrangement of humans from nature, and the spread of monotheism and colonialism, were the forebears of modernisation – the bureaucratic, technologically-dependent world devoid of mystery and surprise (Josephson-Storm, 2019). All were to affect the world today, the era known as the Anthropocene and its climate crisis, which is entangled with anthropocentrism.

Recent challenges to anthropocentrism include Haraway’s posthuman work, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (1997). In the book, she decentres the human, calling for a new kinship with non-human “others”. Extending the prerogatives of empathy, recognition and responsibility to non-human agents including plants, animals, cells, microbes, and the planet as a whole, she mobilises a larger sense of community. The notion of the more-than-human world similarly shows this inherent relationality of the world, and extends it to spiritual realms.

Decolonising the Anthropocene and anthropocentrism involves a deep engagement with dominant Western knowledge and practices, transgressing them in order to bring
forth a re-enchantment of the world through pluralist conceptions of epistemology and ontology (Schulz 2017a). Hence the discourse of decoloniality is epistemological and geographical, arising from the belief systems and the physical features of specific areas which were previously colonised. Decolonial thinking extends beyond Western and Eurocentric thought in order to connect with concepts that have been neglected and derided as "traditional, barbarian, primitive, mystic" (Mignolo, 2011, p.46). This is mostly manifested through the anti-colonial trope of myth, often finding an expression in traditional religious and ritualistic practices of specific places and their environments, lands and seas.

Aimé Césaire, coined the term “tropicalité as an anti-colonial concept that subverted and reverted the colonial agenda.” This “radical reconceptualisation of the tropics” shows the ways in which the tropics, as the world’s region of intense colonisation, speaks back to the temperate zone with its ‘temperate’/‘rational’ colonising philosophies (Lundberg et al., 2021, 3-4). Césaire, calling upon experiences of his native Martinique, also argues that the “true manifestation of civilization is myth” (1996, p.120). Wilson Harris and Derek Walcott similarly opine that unless the Caribbean (re)invents its mythologies, colonisation will be indestructible. Harris, subverts the colonialist norms of narrative fiction in his own novels, (see Harris, 1961), questioning the apparently obvious through the employment of both Western (Greek) and Caribbean myths and reworking them to act as their own transforming and mediating tools “between partial sy

Despite the processes of eradication; myths and legends, some of which date back to prehistoric times, live on in the practices of Indigenous peoples, and have permeated modern popular culture. They are now called upon for decolonial thinking. In this regard, the re-enchantment of the world through myths plays an important role in decolonising the anthropogenic climate crisis – moving discourses away from neocolonialist technical fixes, and bringing to the fore human-animal deities which suggest more-than-human worlds, and who enter climate fiction stories.

Mythical Demigods: Human-Animal Relationality

In their climate fiction novels, Amitav Ghosh and Rita Indiana, explore the Anthropocene dilemma through multispeciesism. Each narrative shows the forging of new bonds across species through religious myths in which the protagonists are human-animal divinities who reveal interdependencies on a planetary level. Gun Island, published in 2019, echoes serendipitous and coincidental events with an asymmetrical rationale, gaining control through the ways and means of the Hindu/folk

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1 While speciesism is the human-held belief that all other animal species are inferior; multispeciesism, is a creative counter move towards a positive re-imagining of non-speciesist worlds.
snake goddess, Manasa, who is worshipped around the areas of the Bay of Bengal. *Tentacle (La mucama de Omicunlé)*, published in 2015,\(^2\) follows threads drawn together through the tentacles of the androgynous deep sea orisha\(^3\) Olokun, at the core of diasporic Afro-Caribbean cosmology. Differing from eco-fiction employing mainstream climate theories, these two narratives are closely tied to Indigenous lands, peoples, and the regional religious deities of Manasa and Olokun. These religious myths and their demi-gods offer a way in which to understand, and present, the interconnectedness of humans and ‘more-than-humans’\(^4\) in order to mitigate the crisis of the Anthropocene.

The notion of the "more-than-human world" posits an environment in which borders between species are blurred and dualistic distinctions between humans and other humans, animals, machines, spirits, plants and elements, no longer hold true. According to Haraway (2003), this represents the necessity to embrace the new responsibility that humans now hold as a component of a wider, heterogeneous whole, and to establish a posthumanist ethics (Braidotti, 2013). The subjectivity of the demigods — half-human, half-animal posthuman hybrids — penetrates universal consciousness dismantling the anthropocentric enigma and creating a more-than-human world. There is a growing accord among many scholars\(^5\) that the complexity of relationships ‘beyond the human’ and the situatedness of humans in the symbiotic web of life, cannot be adequately described by a dualistic understanding of nature and humanity as distinct and monolithic entities (Kohn, 2013). Adopting this stance marks a major deviation from the dominant Eurocentric climate imaginaries with their leitmotifs of a homogenous and linear spatiotemporality.

The backdrop to *Gun Island*, is the retelling of the seventeenth-century Bengali folk epic, ‘Bonduki Sadagar,’ translated as ‘The Gun Merchant’ of divine anger and fate. Ghosh, through the image of the snakes of the deity Manasa, draws together numerous threads of environmental crises and the subsequent migrations of humans and animals throughout history, and across the length of the novel. The roots of the folk epic of the Gun Merchant and Manasa can be found in Bengal's earliest memories; it most likely originated among the Indigenous inhabitants of the area and may have been inspired by real historical characters and events. There are still archaeological

\(^2\) Tentacle was originally published in Spanish as *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015), and translated into English by Achy Obejas in the same year.

\(^3\) Spirits known as orishas play a significant part in Yoruba religion. Originally from West Africa, the belief in orisha spirits have spread with the Yoruba diaspora into the Caribbean, Brazil and America and are found in religions such as Santeria and Vodou. In western thought orisha are demonised, and in popular culture gothicized as ‘voodoo’. See Montgomery on decolonizing gothic ‘voodoo’ (2019).

\(^4\) The phrase “the more-than-human world” was the subtitle of David Abram's much celebrated book, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), which is influenced by Balinese shamanism, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy, and ecology. The term has been picked up in anthropology, social sciences, environmentalism, the humanities and science and technology studies. It refers to contexts where various species and processes interact creating an interconnected web of life.

sites that are connected to the merchant and his family that are dispersed throughout Assam, West Bengal, and Bangladesh (Ghosh, 2019, p.14). The setting of Tentacle is in the future of 2027 Santo Domingo, when the Caribbean Sea has become “a dark and putrid stew” (Indiana 2018, p.83). This “dystopian seascape,” mirroring the breakdown of the symbiosis between humans and other species, spawns the narrative. The story embodies metaphysical elements of Taíno spirituralism and West African Yoruba syncretism through the “universal consciousness” (Herrero-Martín, 2019) of Olokun. The redemptive vibrancy of the Yoruban orisha spirit encompasses historical and contemporary connections between the maritime environment and human structures of power enveloped in the complicated spacetime of the Caribbean.

Representing the non-human realm, Manasa and Olokun venture to restore lost connections with the non-human world stretching over time, distance, and species, illuminating the interconnectedness of all life in nature. The snake that writhes all over Gun Island and at times strikes the characters, symbolises Manasa, the quintessential nagini. Slithering over boundaries, physically as well as morally, snakes in Hinduism are liminal creatures on the borderline between animals and the anthropomorphic categories of beings (Haq, 2015). The snake goddess's spiritual and sinister presence (Manasa is generous to her devotees but harsh to those who refuse to worship her) negotiates the divide between humans and other species, thereby asserting the myth/novel as a proposition on posthuman multispecies entanglement. Being the supreme ruler of snakes and other venomous creatures, she guards her human followers against snake bites, acting as an arbiter between humans and these creatures. She also has the power to torment humans who refuse to worship her with visitations of venomous creatures. Manasa becomes an assertion of critical posthumanism addressing multispecies entanglement. She is the central metaphor, spreading her hood as the novel progresses, at times like an evil demon blazing with anger and resentment. In Tentacle, the androgynous deity Olokun, plunges the reader headlong into Yoruba mythology with “the oldest deity in the world, the sea itself” (Indiana, 2015, p.21) as the focal point. Olokun is a deity of the Yoruba pantheons and revered by the Edo people throughout the southern coastal areas of Nigeria, and by the Fon of the neighbouring coastal region of Benin (Badejo, 2008, p.489, cited in Herrero-Martín, 2019). A giant Caribbean anemone, the tropical species of Condylactis gigantea, adorns the cover page of Tentacle invoking the ambivalent

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6 The Taíno, were the Indigenous people of several islands of the Caribbean. Their elaborate system of religious beliefs and rituals involved the worship of Zemi, ancestral spirits carved in sculptures. Although believed to have been exterminated by colonial contact, many of their descendants identify as Taíno and continue to practise their ancestral culture.

7 In the Hindu traditions as well as in the associated Buddhist and Jain faiths, Naga (feminine Nagini) are serpents deified as divine spirits and frequently portrayed in scriptures and on shrines and temples.

8 There is an interesting resonance between aspects of Tentacle – with its nuclear catastrophe, Anthropocene climate crisis, and its giant tentacled anemone – and the futuristic cli-fi essay by Jake Boswell set in a post-apocalyptic Pacific atoll. He calls upon Donna Haraway’s Chthulucene Epoch which embraces the complex tentacularity of life, and Lovecraft’s horror deity the Cthulhu (Boswell, 2021).
form and temporality of Olokun, the enigmatic and indomitable water spirit. This strange anemone, rooted in one physical location, has its tentacles reaching out in various directions and different moments of the past and into the future. The anemone presents the tripartite incarnations of Olokun that move across the three time periods in the novel, finally emerging as the saviour of the Caribbean islands. The Manasa and Olokun hybrid forms corporeally affirm that humans and non-humans “are in this together” (Braidotti, 2019, p.37). They defy totalization and take on an unsettling plurality that reveals the limits of scientific rationality over the natural world.

The introduction of the demigods occurs through the main protagonists in the two novels. In Gun Island, Dinanath Dutta, aka Deen, an antiquarian book dealer in Brooklyn, is the central character unravelling the epic tale of the Gun Merchant. During an annual visit to his birthplace, Kolkata, he runs into a distant relative who recounts a tale that is familiar to him but is an unusual version. It is the story of a trader named Chand Sadagar and the goddess of snakes and other venomous creatures, Manasa Devi, that has been handed down over the generations through Bengali folklore. The tale describes Manasa Devi's attempt to lure Chand Sadagar as a devotee of her cult, and his stubborn rejection of her. Deen's relative addresses Chand Sadagar as ‘Bonduki Sadagar’ translated as the ‘Gun Merchant’ which surprises Deen to the extent that he thinks it is a figment of his imagination. The peculiarity and the strangeness of the term incite his interest to discover the origins of ‘Bonduki Sadagar’, which takes him on a quest across the globe before he can piece the puzzle together.

In Tentacle, the plot unwinds through Acilde Figueroa, a prostitute on the streets of post-apocalyptic Santo Domingo, who later in the novel is assigned as a maid to Esther Escudero, a santera priestess in the Santería religion, and an advisor to President Bona. It was prophesied that Esther’s followers would protect the house of Yemayá—the mermaid goddess of the ocean and omnipotent mother in Yoruba — and hence also named Omicunlé. Esther is the protector of the treasured anemone that survived the devastating tsunami which led to nuclear contamination of the seas due to the spillage from the reservoir of weapons. The anemone is an essential element in the coronation of Omo Olokun. As identified by Esther, the former prostitute Acilde is destined to be the next Omo Olokun, the one who “knows what lies at the bottom of the sea” (Tentacle, 2015, p.83). Like the anemone’s habitat underwater which is “the

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9 Manasa is steadfast in her desire in gaining human devotees in order to establish her authority as a goddess in the mainstream Hindu pantheon.

10 Santería is a religion of the Afro-Cuban communities that arose from the diaspora of the Atlantic slave trade (16-19th C) as a consequence of syncretism between the Indigenous Yoruba religion of West Africa, and the Roman Catholicism which was the only legal religion of Cuba during Spanish colonialism. Santería worships orisha deities which are equated with Catholic saints. From Cuba, Santería spread to neighbouring islands and the continent of America.

11 In the Yoruban sea divinology Omicunlé (the mantle that covers the sea) is the daughter of Yemayá—the Yoruba ruler of the ocean. Omicunlé safeguards the sea creatures, and in the novel she is the keeper of the only remaining anemone, which is crucial for giving birth to the incarnations of Olokun.
ancestral home of all living things” (Barnett, 1953, p.79), Olokun’s realm as an orisha deity is also vast and largely incognito, existing in the interstices of spacetime. Her coronation bestows her with the ability to travel back in time and save the world. It also enables her to change sex, and thus fulfils a desire she has had since a child. As Olokun, Acilde becomes male, and with the aid of the anemone, exists over three different eras posing as three different individuals through multiple transformations.

Olokun’s Tentacles

The storyline in Tentacle, while expanding time to multiply the opportunities for averting the contamination of the sea due to the nuclear catastrophe following the tsunami, also raises concerns about the effects of capitalist exploitation on the region's spacetime. Beneath the Dominican coast is the basement reserve containing biological weapons (which President Bona had promised to protect for a foreign regime). The tsunami ruptures the bunker, turning the water into a gravesite of reefs and marine fauna. However, even before this tragedy, the anemones – those "common ecosystem architects, creating microhabitats for intricate assemblages of linked species" in their native settings (Brooker et al., 2019, p.2609) – are threatened by the bleaching of corals and the hunting of "exotic" species. Possessing the abilities of marine orishas, these anemones are believed to have bequeathed the spirituality of Afro-Caribbean communities — particularly those from West Africa. The anemone that Esther Escudero keeps in a jar is one of the last of its kind, a symbol of species extinction that represents the catastrophic diminution of biodiversity in the Caribbean Sea brought on by environmental degradation and climate change. The fear of an impending global environmental catastrophe and the deteriorating human-nonhuman ties is symbolised by the anemone (Deckard & Oloff, 2020). The amphibious coronation of this magical anemone upon Acilde, initiates him into the cult of Olokun, where the “now” spans large swaths of otherwise distinct eras.

To forestall the disastrous events leading to the eco-ravaged Caribbean, Acilde leaves the dystopian future and travels back in time — a journey that splits his consciousness. Acilde takes on the personas of a pirate from the 17th century named Roque, and an Italian philanthropist named Giorgio. Emerging through a subterranean portal of anemones in the year 1991, the philanthropist persona, Giorgio, patronises the ‘Sosúa Project’, an artists' residency collective at the end of the twentieth century. The proceeds from the project fund his wife Linda’s initiative to implement a marine biology lab towards the preservation of coral reefs to safeguard the island from future tidal waves. The lab is the altar for Olokun, an environmental call to action, and an achievement of the fragmented consciousness of Acilde existing in the past before the tragedy had struck the Dominican Republic. It is during the opening ceremony of the lab, that Giorgio also achieves the ultimate objective of his mission which is to forewarn
the young Said Bona, and future President, against accepting biological weapons from Venezuela. Argenis, one of the artists in the project, is stung by sea anemones while snorkelling in the Playa Bo reefs off the north coast just outside Sosúa and therein likewise inherits the ability to move back and forth through time. After being stung by the anemone, he is able to initiate a link to his alternate life as a castaway who was taken in by a band of buccaneers in Sosúa four centuries earlier. Acilde-Giorgio, intervening simultaneously in the past and in the future, sets off the chain of events that retracts the chemical spill and eventual extinction of marine life.

The simultaneity of the incarnations of Olokun, existing in different time frames, bears a close connection to Caribbean poet-historian Kamau Brathwaite’s theory of “tidalectics,” which he describes as an analytical method based on “the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic…motion, rather than linear” (Mackey, 1995, p.14). The universal consciousness of Olokun reflects a comprehensive space representing the vastness of the Caribbean Sea yet nevertheless being tidalectically incorporated in the Caribbean bodies of Acilde-Giorgio and Argenis. The tentacles of the anemone, the metaphorical representation of the Olokun, and its movements, call attention to the ways in which tidalectics may be fathomed. While the descending movement connotes the Middle Passage across the Caribbean Sea and the slaves who have perished in those watery depths, the ascension invokes deliverance from the historical trauma of colonisation (DeLoughrey & Flores, 2020). In constant motion, the tentacles of the anemone point to an unsettling future, exploiting the porousness of past, present and future realms of time, the fluidity of transsexuality, and the connectedness of the universe as a whole.

Connections can also be drawn between the Olokun myth and the deities of East India, particularly the multi-armed goddess Kali, “who throws a psychical bridge from destruction to creation and has archetypal resonances with many cultures, most importantly with Anancy, the trickster spider from African folklore” (Harris, 1970, p.31). The tentacles of the Olokun, facilitating negotiations between space and time to resuscitate the Caribbean seas, finds its theoretical equivalent in the Kali figure, “the Goddess of Death, [who] devours all, including time itself, thus renewing her promise of fulfilment and regeneration” (Stephanides & Singh, 2000, p.39). The arms of Kali and the tentacles of Olokun strike similarities with the many limbs of a spider, often associated with Anancy, “revered as the god of metamorphosis and gateways” (Harris, 1970, p.31).

**Manasa’s Snakes**

While there occurs a concomitant existence of the incarnations of Olokun across diverse time periods through the liaison between Acilde and the anemone, the more-
than-human world of Manasa opens in *Gun Island* when Deen becomes entranced by the snake goddess Manasa Devi, initiating an entanglement of his consciousness with all the constituent creatures of the kingdom she commands. He is inspired to visit the historic shrine of Manasa in the mangrove forests of the Bay of Bengal in order to document it before it is ruined by rising waters, for the deltaic islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they’re disappearing before our eyes (Ghosh, 2019, p.25). While at the shrine, Tipu, his young travelling companion, is bitten by a king cobra and experiences strange premonitions as a result. A minute amount of venomous “something” (Ghosh, 2019, p.79) is released into Tipu during the king cobra’s strike, which rapidly eats his body, causing physical unease in Tipu and hazy visions that later in the story come true. “All at once his [Tipu’s] body began to twitch and shake...like those of a dreaming animal” (p.80). And when Rafi, the caretaker of the shrine, tried to suck the poison out, he became “like a wild creature...an odd bond seemed to have arisen between them; it was as if the venom that had passed from Tipu’s body into Rafi’s mouth had created an almost carnal connection” (p.80). This chaotic episode affects Deen’s mindscape rendering him in a state of stupefaction in the encounter between the human and non-human. Later, after returning to Brooklyn, Deen starts to experience symptoms of being possessed by the shrine. The constellation of personas, Deen, Tipu and Rafi, along with snakes, and the shrine, and the folktale, presents the dispersed consciousness through which Manasa builds powerful connections across temporal and spatial boundaries by taking hold of them at a physical, and metaphysical level. The snake attack serves as a prescience establishing a link between the present world, and the mythological age of the Gun Merchant and Manasa Devi, and the future unfolding story.

The main plot of the epic tale of the Gun Merchant conveys the snake goddess Manasa’s struggle to win Chand Saudagar’s devotion. Chand Saudagar, according to the legend, was a powerful member of the Gandho Banik, or spice merchant community, who was dispatched on various commercial ventures on behalf of the regional ruler in the 5th and 6th centuries. Being the patriarch of the wealthy and influential merchant society and a powerful Shaivite, he steadfastly refuses to worship the female deity Manasa, whom he considers a mere relic of Indigenous fear-based worship of Nature gods and an outsider to the established pantheon of Hindu gods. Manasa thus unleashes a series of hardships, tragedies, and trials upon him with all the wrath of a woman scorned (Chakravarty, 2022, p.69). The eponymous protagonist of the epic, the Gun Merchant, flees his home after losing his family and money as a consequence of his confrontation with the goddess. His journey is fraught with hardships as he is captured by pirates and sold as a slave, all the while being 12 Shaivite denotes a follower of one of the major traditions of contemporary Hinduism, committed to worship of Lord Shiva as the ultimate entity. The *lingam*, popularly known as *shivalingam*, is a phallic symbol and the constant icon for ritualistic practises in Shaivism. Symbolically embodied by the *lingam*, Shiva represents the supreme generative power across all cosmic levels.
hunted by the Devi. Later he is set free by his master before reaching Venice, an important commercial hub in the 17th century. During this time, with storms and catastrophic floods, the Mediterranean region is experiencing unseasonal weather that is being identified as the 'little ice age'. Finally, the merchant is compelled to head back to Bengal to reconcile with the goddess and construct a temple for her that will safeguard the nearby villages (Ians, 2019).

The Gun Merchant myth is kept alive through connections between the present time of anthropogenic climate crisis and the age of the merchant in the 17th century, during a period of violent storms, droughts, famines, plagues and other calamities. Manasa Devi sets Deen off on a similar voyage that leads him from the Sundarbans' mangrove swamps to a Los Angeles ravaged by forest fires, to a Venice that is slowly sinking. Back in Brooklyn, Deen feels unsettled after returning from Bengal and travels to Los Angeles to attend the conference ‘Climate and Apocalypse in the 17th c’ at the invitation of his friend Cinta (Giacinta Schiavon), a renowned scholar of Venetian history. However, his mental unrest continues, he becomes paranoid after seeing the city engulfed in wildfires, and his mental disposition is worsened by the strange apparitions of a snake that intermittently clouds his inner vision. The rest of the storyline of the novel is largely devoted to explaining the mysterious nomenclatures and symbols connected to the folktale and its mythological connections, and it is this duo of Deen and Cinta who remain fixated on it, tracing the merchant till the novel’s very end.

The folklore has it that after the merchant fled abroad to escape the goddess's wrath he arrived in Venice, and eventually found a retreat in a place known as ‘Gun Island’ (Bonduk Dwip) where there were no serpents. In an attempt to unravel the myth, Cinta and Deen retrace the footsteps of the merchant in the old town of Venice, ending in a ghetto that was allotted to the Jews where armaments, including bullets, were cast. Many of those merchants of the 17th century were fluent in Arabic, and Venice became “al-Bunduqueyya”, after the word bunduqueyya meaning guns, hazelnuts and bullets – items for which Venice was known in the days of trade. Through Arabic, the word has travelled to India, “where to this day guns are known as bundook – which is, of course, none other than “Venice” or “Venetian!” (Ghosh, 2019, p.143). So ultimately, ‘Bonduki Sadagar’ the title of the folklore, possibly did not imply ‘the Gun Merchant’, but rather, ‘the Merchant who travelled to Venice’. Deen investigates the myth and finds that the sojourns of the merchant were part of a larger migration explosion caused by the environmental havoc of the Little Ice Age.

The destiny and connection of Deen to the shrine and the Devi, unfold in yet another episode when Deen departs from New York, again headed for Venice, to stay at Cinta's apartment while she is away, and to try and escape from the persistently
haunting visions of the snake. While on his walks through the narrow, winding streets, he has the strange feeling that the merchant too had taken this route and many of those old shops and printing presses would still have been in operation when the Gun Merchant was in Venice. He finds himself intersecting the paths of the merchant and Manasa Devi. Walking into the gallery of an exhibition, he scrolls through the pages of an incunabulum and finds himself lost in a dream, “it wasn’t so much that I was dreaming, but that I was being dreamed by creatures whose very existence was fantastical to me – spiders, cobras, sea snakes – and yet they and I had somehow become a part of each other’s dreams” (Ghosh, 2019, p.214). His encounters with these creatures transport him into a state of panic and hallucination, an image of criss-crossed lines, similar to the engraving on the walls of the shrine, flashing before his eyes. Deen’s gruesome and terrifying interactions with the animal creatures amply demonstrate the ferocity of nature exhibited through Manasa’s appearance in multiple forms, and hint at the uncertainties of climate change in the contemporary world. The bewitching spell that the merchant and his nemesis, Manasa Devi, had cast on Deen makes him realise that myth is more than a story.

**Manasa and Olokun as Liminal More-Than-Human Forms**

The preceding analyses of the two novels throw light on the alternative religious spaces of the mythical demigods, Manasa and Olokun, envisioning fluid trans-temporal and trans-spatial realms of being, and dislodging the dogmas that divide humans from other species. Interceding in the world-destroying behaviours of humans across an array of moments in time and vignettes of space, are the “actants” (Bennet, 2005) created by the dispersed consciousness of Olokun and the intrusions of Manasa Devi in the form of venomous creatures and metaphysical forces. The merchant, characterised by an independent and individualised personality, is driven to attaining personal desires and denies the more-than-human interventions. He represents humanity’s exploitative pursuit of profit in the face of ecological destruction, as well as being a forerunner of the contemporary climate refugee. It is from the same underlying principle of an incessant desire to control the planet that the seaborne systems of oppression (colonialism, empire, enslavement) in Tentacle originate – culminating in ecological catastrophe and structural inequalities inherent in the society.

The complex assemblage of human and non-human forms in the visual presentation of the mythic deities pertains to a relational ontology that leans on cross-species alliances and a geo-centred approach (Braidotti, 2006) to produce a ‘nature-culture continuum’ (Haraway, 1997, p.2003). Consigned to the deep waters, both Manasa and Olokun are popularly constituted in anthropomorphic representations. Manasa is equated to a *naga*, which designates any of the creatures – anthropomorphic from the
waist up and cobra from the waist down – who live in the patala\textsuperscript{13} and in deep waters on earth (Chakravarty, 2022, p.37). The gender of Olokun remains enigmatic, with both male and female representations of the deity considered with equal reverence. In the Yoruba kingdom, the “form used on ancestral altars is that of a female figure with the tail of a fish” (Poynor, 1978, p.179), representing the dark and alluring mermaid mistress of the bottom of the sea. The rendering of Olokun draws close to the concept of a hermaphrodite, which spans male and female, masculine and feminine, but is neither one nor the other, referring to the earlier existence of Caribbean society in liminal spaces. This, in turn, was an alternative adopted by the slaves to refute the coloniser’s attempts to construct the slave as non-human. The hermaphrodite was placed in the inbetween space of the parallel worlds from which it was excluded (Forbes, 1999).

The tentacular Olokun and the snake-adorned Manasa in the uncharted territories of terror and predatory creatures invoke the primitive origins of life itself. They “flourish in environments in which humans are unfit and cannot dominate” and disturb “a colonialist centrism structuring relationships between humans and the more-than-human world” (Alder, 2017, p.1084). The metamorphoses initiated in Acilde upon her coronation, find a mirror image in Playa Bo, the lagoon surrounded by reefs on the north coast close to the town of Sosúa. This makes Sosúa and Playa Bo the safe haven for all individuations or processes of socio-economic, ideological, political, environmental, and creative consciousness in the novel. The protected lagoon is connected to the deep ocean through a gap in the reef that is lined with anemones symbolising Olokun. The reef is revealed to be an enigmatic entrance to Olokun’s residence, “the realm of the beginning”. It is at this submarine tunnel that the three temporalities in \textit{Tentacle} meet, an epitome of spirituality and wilderness. On a similar note, it is in the marshy mangrove forests of the deltaic Sundarbans that the merchant finally builds a shrine as an icon of his devotion to Manasa. “The Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that’s exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought. What could be a better place to build a shrine to Manasa Devi than a forest teeming with snakes?” (Ghosh, 2019, p.15).

\section*{Mythology in the Anthropocene}

Through mythological undercurrents, Ghosh and Indiana feature the gravity of the changing climate and the vulnerability of the Anthropocene in their works. Ghosh effectively communicates the topical issues of environmental disturbance and deteriorating human-animal ties in the Anthropocene associating it with the

\textsuperscript{13} The Hindu philosophy’s seven lowest worlds, or planes of existence, are referred to as \textit{patalas}, a word from Sanskrit. It is believed that \textit{naga} live in the water underworld.
seventeenth-century myth that iterates the power of Manasa in fortifying interspecies relations. The myth conveys the inclement weather as the wrath of the Devi wreaking havoc upon the merchant who ignores her, and therein her kingdom of creatures. This situation can be extrapolated to the present era, witnessing humanity’s overarching detachment from nature. The Gun Merchant’s tale also becomes a reference point for a relational study of the Sundarbans battered by intense and frequent climate-driven disturbances. In the myth of Manasa, the readers get a glimpse of the Sundarbans during the Bhola cyclone in the 1970s that killed half a million people along the Bay of Bengal and its Southeast Asian borders. With reference to this catastrophe, Deen hears from yet another relative, Nilima, that a small pocket of survivors rode out the storm inside the shrine, protected by Manasa Devi. Situated at the border of India and Bangladesh, which are separated by the Raimangal river, the intertidal mangrove forests as the holy location of the shrine braid together Hindu and Muslim cosmology. Hindus believed that it was Manasa Devi who guarded the shrine, while Muslims believed that it was a place of jinns, protected by a Muslim pir, or saint, by the name of Ilyas (Ghosh, 2019, p.22). The myth, with its roots in the Sundarbans islands of Bengal, extends across borders from India to Italy, constituted through the fuzzy and dynamic interplay of humans, animals, and the environment.

Mythology is also a powerful tool to deconstruct notions of time and space in Tentacle. At the heart of the mission in the novel is the salvation of the sea and its marine life instigated through the avatars living in Playa Bo-Sosúa at different, but overlapping, times. The immanent consciousness of Olokun ruptures notions of self, by creating trans-corporeal assemblages that exist in three different moments in the history of the Caribbean. In the Olokun myth, Indiana redraws the borders between science and religion, dreams and reality, culminating in the “interconnected web of life”. The orisha from the Yoruba religion is more than just a part of the protagonists’ religions and spirituality; orishas develop into distinct individuals in the novels, assuming unique traits, stories, voices, and spaces. They take on agency and interact with the realistic characters, meddling in their lives and futures. As a result, the deity takes on the role of a human and animal interlocutor who links the past and present, and many geographical locales, thereby interrupting linear temporal and spatial dynamics. Olokun displays a spiralling Caribbean time that is grounded in one location but has tentacles in the present that reach out towards various other periods in the past and future. Thus, the connection between humans and non-human environs is manifested through the orisha of West African mythology.

Dramatizing the tussle between profit and the natural world, is the merchant and the deity in Gun Island. In the myth, the goddess persistently chases the merchant to awaken him to other realities, such as the animal kingdom: “Humans — driven, as was the Merchant, by the quest of profit — would recognize no restraint in regard to other
living creatures" (Ghosh, 2019, p.159). Ghosh interprets that the word 'goddess' is inappropriate for Manasa Devi of the legend, falling short of being an all-powerful deity whose subjects submit to her orders. She serves as a mediator, interpreter, or, as the Italians say, portavoce, "a voice-carrier," between two species that do not have a common language or other methods of communication. Without her intervention, there would only be hatred and violence between humans and animals (Ghosh, 2019, p.158). Serving as the negotiator, she must have the confidence of both sides, without which her constituents would disobey if they were aware that the humans to whom she was speaking on their behalf had ignored her voice. The urgency of her search for the Gun Merchant and countering his actions are driven by this necessity.

The reorientation of the centrality from humans to the demi-gods of mythology in the narratives deepens our understanding and acceptance that we are, in essence, "human animals". The mythical world of the demi-gods confronts the supremacy of a homogenised society that places humans at its centre, by highlighting the existence of an interconnected network of human and more-than-human realms. The immensity of deep time, the immanence of nature, the fear of non-human life and non-European civilization, addressed in *Gun Island* and *Tentacle* through mythology and demi-gods, constitute a decolonised climate future of the present era. Mythology questions existing norms and knowledge systems upending the customary direction of communication from humans to the 'inanimate' universe where the action is "always" performed or imprinted upon nonhumans by humans. In light of the alarming climate change incidents that are affecting the entire world and defying common sense and modern scientific projections, it is worth reflecting upon Ghosh's assertion that "life is not directed by reason" (Ghosh, 2018, p.72). With the aid of myths of the tropics, the authors have imagined a diversified, pluralised and inclusive future, by weaving environmental and spiritual consciousness into the pages of climate fiction.
References


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