

Unveiling the Anthropo(s)cene: Burning Seas, Cinema of Mourning and the Globalisation of Apocalypse

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*Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/Clean from my hand?
No; this my hand will rather/The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.*

William Shakespeare, Macbeth

In 1995, the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival went to Theo Angelopoulos's haunting epic *Ulysses' Gaze*—now considered a major classic of late modern European cinema. In the opening scene of this film, a placid, pale blue nineteenth-century topsail schooner floats leisurely somewhere off the coast of Greece. This uncut long take—often habitual with Angelopoulos—connects the dying, mid-twentieth-century minutes of a forgotten Greek filmmaker with 'A', an emigrant film director, who undertakes an Ulyssian journey across the war-torn, war-tense landscape

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of post-Communist Balkans. His journey plots the film. In the same year, continents apart, a despondent, estranged couple, short of hope in a violent world, retreats to the sea somewhere on the eastern coast of India hoping, mistakenly, that the sea would offer them one last chance at reconciliation, only to be pulverised by an apocalyptic dénouement. This is the story of Aparna Sen's *Yugant*.¹ Widely different in languages and culture and perhaps also as works of art, the two films mourn the dying of light in a planet tiptoeing on the edge of irreparable transformation. Both end on a note of miserable tragedy, undone by catastrophic losses. The films manage to provoke an intellectual and contemplative claim towards understanding ecologically immanent spaces—the Danube in *Ulysses' Gaze*, the Bay of Bengal in *Yugant*—as symptomatically under the weight and weather of fin-de-siècle triumphalism of the ‘end-of-history’ version of global capitalism.

In fact by the mid-1990s, world cinema, in a major way, was already responding to the doom-and-bust of globalisation. A critique of globalisation as a universalist rhetoric—full of bullying Americana and unmindful of localisms —was already emerging from various zeitgeist perspectives. Fukuyama and the World Bank, the GATT treaty, contestations over natural resources, spectres of ecological catastrophe, Communism’s retreat from the global public, the Yugoslav Wars and the restive Gulf region, and the multinational nature of market-driven corporate profiteering, were together signifying lasting changes to the global economic and political order. On the one hand was the all-pervasive authority of multinational empires; on the other, the spectacular hyper-technologisation of civilisation. Cultural practices too, had to strategise their responses. The pair of films above should be seen as representative of two very different practices but merging at the common apex as powerful tragedies, tragedies that connect disparate corners of this new, epistemic epoch. In other words, these two films, along with several others of that period—*The Truman Show*, *Ermo*, *Underground*, *Happy Together*, *From The East*, *Irma Vep*, *Lessons of Darkness*, *Goodbye Lenin* and *Babel*—should be seen not just as responses to the effects of globalisation but also as connected by their collective sense of displacement, loss and mourning.

What draws me to the film in question, Sen’s *Yugant*, is not only its self-conscious participation in the ongoing discourses on globalisation, either in India or in the West. What draws me rather is the film’s early

¹ ‘Yugant’ literally means end of an era. The official English title of the film is *What the Sea Said*.

and prophetic exposition of the idea of the Anthropocene, to which the sciences and critical humanities disciplines have only recently turned.² An Indian independent filmmaker of considerable repute, Aparna Sen's two early films, *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) and *Parama* (1984), with their evocation of the margins of middle-class life in Calcutta, were also seen as sharpened instruments of provocation. Rightly so, they are now considered significant milestones of their time.³ With the exception of two telefilms, Sen made just one feature film *Yugant*, between *Parama* in 1984 and her first commercial success, *Paromitar Ek Din (House of Memories)* in 2000. The latter is a watershed in her career thanks to its receiving an enthusiastic popular response and it marks the beginning of a comfortable and prolific period.

Yugant hence arrived at a period that could be called a relative low point in her career. An unfailing narrative of the sea, *Yugant* traces its descent by exploring the topographic, ecological and cultural possibilities inherent in anthropologically non-denominational spaces like the beach and the sea. The film's popular and critical response has remained, likewise, muted. But the intellectual, polemical value of the film has only increased over the years, thanks to its surprisingly prescient and apocalyptic visualisation of a brutal world order and because it finds increasing traction in an afterlife that resists generic distinctions.

This chapter will attempt to revisit the film from a 20-year distance and evaluate its cultural and polemical value as one of the earliest responses to both globalisation and the Anthropocene from the Global South. To that end, the discussion will be less concerned with the aesthetics, techniques and cinematic richness of the film and more with its discursive strategy as a narrative of the sea, its cultural effect and its contextual nonconformity.

²The Anthropocene has been defined as rapid, anthropogenic changes to the climate, land, oceans and biosphere signifying the possibility of a new geological epoch that is defined by human action and capacity to bring major and irretrievable shifts of unseen scale, magnitude and significance to the environment, particularly in the context of the Earth's geological history. For a detailed understanding of the concept, see Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Alan Haywood and Michael Ellis, 'The Anthropocene: A New Epoch of Geological Time?' *Philosophical Transactions: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences*, 369:1938 (2011): 835–41.

³For further discussions on Sen's cinema, see Sayandeb Chowdhury, 'Postal Failure: Aparna Sen's 'The Japanese Wife' Disappoints', *Moving Arts Journal*, published online 19 May 2010. <http://www.themovingarts.com/postal-failure-aparna-sens-the-japanese-wife-disappoints/> [accessed January 20, 2015].

THE FILM IN WHICH THE SEA CATCHES FIRE

Yugant sets the tone with a quote from the *adiparba* or the opening chapters of the epic *The Mahabharata*: ‘The end of the days of glory are over,’ Bedavyasa says to the mourning Satyabati, ‘the planet is past its prime. Now, days of sin are going to come.’⁴ The title of the film and its contemporary evocation of *end of time* are hence evidently indicated through the invocation of the epic, which is a mediation on life, time, death and eternity, as all epics invariably are.

Yugant is set in the early years of the 1990s, months into the Gulf War. An estranged couple meet several months after their separation at a faraway, forlorn beach on the Indian east coast. This is the same beach and rest house that the couple had honeymooned in 17 years previously. They have in recent years fallen apart, grown increasingly strangers to each other and have left Calcutta, their conjugal city, to settle in Bombay and Cuttack respectively. The man, Deepak, a late-forties advertising executive, is quietly aware of what he calls the superficiality of his profession and is mildly fatalistic about the continuity of life on an increasingly fragile planet. He lets a streak of existential torment run through his veins. He has always been a phlegmatic observer of the business of life, managing to tread softly even on his own trials, especially with his wife. When he arrives at the beach house we find him even more unencumbered, having left his comfortable job as a reputed copywriter to concentrate on finishing his work of fiction. In short, he has learnt, over the years, to let go.

The woman, Anusuya, has gone the other way. When we meet her, she is a noted performer of the traditional Odissi classical dance form, running her own academy, whose current fame rests on years of struggle and prudent compromises that come naturally to an artiste seeking patronage for her art. From a youthful woman of the past, she has grown into a hardened professional who is deeply committed to her craft; unhesitant in exploiting contentious ideas as long as they can be put to use in her art.

In the opening scene, as Deepu picks up Anu, as they refer to each other, from the railway station and head towards the beachside guest house, the fragile, edgy nature of the relationship is hinted at, while we are sensitised to the heaviness of lapsed time between their last visit to this town, their days of living together and the forced acceptance of their current state of isolation. Anu and Deepu seem to have made the plan of

⁴ *Yugant*; 00:48–00:54.

re-invoking the idyll of their honeymooning past to make one last attempt at salvaging their present. Yet, they have reached a period in life in which they cannot overemphasise their hope of reconciliation. They can only hint at their own conditions to understand if there is still room for the two of them together in each of their lives. The film's Bergmanesque disposition is obvious and defines the film's premise.

The narrative never explicitly reveals either the final circumstances of their separation or the pre-conditions of their present assignment. Hence the couple do not reveal any desired outcome from the seaside return. What we see instead is a gradual unravelling of their relationship over a period of time: a relationship of two urbane, educated, admirably sensitive human beings who have grown apart from each other over the years, unable to find a common, conjugal space of habitation. The narrative uncouples the couple from any extended familial surroundings and resists any temptation to expand into a social drama that contextualises their conjugalit. Even in the flashback scenes, when their strained conjugalit is dissected, the narrative foregoes the obligatory choric voices. The only other significant presence is that of Anu's brother, an eco-activist, who is murdered by a capital-political cartel in a neighbouring state while resisting the building of a riverine dam. Even if this is not a unique premise, it is certainly rare in Bengali, albeit Indian cinema, to de-socialise and depopulate conjugalit and instead examine it as a consensual coda of two individuals' temper, temptation and torment.

The film is structurally, though not chronologically, divided into the present moment of estrangement, the near past of conjugalit and the identifiably innocent past of romance. The middle section is punctuated with discord and diatribe, precocious abortions, sudden setting-in of impotency, agitations over mutually exclusive ambitions, steady disintegration of relationship, gradual usurpation of entrenched middle-class moorings and so on. The sea connects the cinematic present time with memories of the honeymoon, both having been spent at the same beach resort. As they arrive at their destination in the present, the couple expects the sea's powers to wash away the distance that has ballooned between them. The expectation is not articulated till the end, but only hinted at, not least through the fact that the same sparse beach was their honeymooning destination 17 years ago. As the day in the present unfolds, the film travels to the past to hint at a distant and innocent time when the sea, as a narrative and scopic motif, provided the equivalent of a romantic idyll. The sea's easy resonance with a sense of the romance is explored through

flashbacks of Anu's leisurely bathing, her impulsive choreography on the beach and their bonding over a swept-away conch listening to the sounds of the sea inside it. In these scenes of the past, Deepu remains at a distance from the sea, anxious about Anu's easy charity with the ocean while himself being intimidated by its expanse.

But as the present day unfolds, it becomes clear that the sea has failed to either calm or seduce them. They stay at a distance from the water's edge, merely watching its apparent, immanent immutability. Later in the day, Deepu is startled by Anu's matter-of-fact abandonment of the sea's charm, a rejection he initially blames upon Anu's reconfiguration of herself into a humourless, asexual workaholic. But Deepu is also attuned to a dystopian possibility: what if the sea itself has changed?

Anu and Deepu, conditioned as individuals and not only as socialised subjects, consider themselves as citizens of a global republic and, precisely because they are so, they are deeply concerned about the fate of the planet more than anything else. They have one ear ready for the elements and halfway into the film there is unfailing realisation of a stealth that seems to be gathering beneath the calm of the sea. The primordial sea, in continuous ebb and tide from the beginning of time on this planet, seems to have changed in the two decades since they have last been to this coastal settlement. The Gulf War is raging in the background and Deepu more than once hints at the possibility of it having triggered an unprecedented ecological uncanny. But we do not yet get to know the nature of the sea's sickness.

Instead, the narrative is punctuated by scenes of televised broadcasting (or pictures in print) of an ever more debilitating war in the Gulf and the resultant oil spill. Throughout the film we see television sets beaming the war in the background—silently, unprotested, undeterred—into the living rooms. Could it be that the sea, 17 years since they last came, has not only lost its transcendental powers of healing but is hopelessly corrupted by oil that has transmigrated across the seas? Could it be that the war has corrupted everything that is pure and primordial?

By the evening, after a day of expected and habitual discord and unable to find any bankable testimony to their collective well-being, Anu and Deepu are resigned to take a final walk on the beach before they retire for the day. This is also the evening when the local fishing community is celebrating the 'eternal return' of the goddess of wealth and fertility. An elderly fisherman explains to Deepu that mythically speaking, the goddess is said to be returning on such a day as a giant tortoise, signifying

her incorruptible bond with the planet of plenty. If anyone chances upon such an animal on a night like this, he/she is guaranteed to be healed of all earthly suffering.

As the evening sun sets, Anu and Deepu, dressed in pristine white, take a long walk on the beach. At a distance, the lights flicker from the revelry of the fertility festival. Slowly but surely, the two individuals fully wake up to the transformed state of the planet. Deepu, by now certain of the sea's contamination, expresses his consternation about it being stealthily pregnant with oil from the Gulf. This being the Indian east coast and not the west, the latter connected by sea with the Gulf, Anu rubbishes Deepu's fears as geographically unfounded. In resignation he murmurs: 'You are talking about geography, Anu, about geographical boundaries. But violence, violence has no boundaries.'⁵

As if to reinforce the finality of their realisation, they find that their life too has been hopelessly infiltrated by certain violence, violence unlikely to be vanquished by any prospect of either mythical or rational yearning for a better world. In a scene bordering on the surreal, a giant Galapagos tortoise is found ambling in the half-light of the stars, at the far end of the beach, momentarily unsettling Anu and Deepu's feelings of resignation. They are deeply moved but are unable to comprehend if the sight signifies any hope of even momentarily salvaging the finality of either their own condition or that of the planet.

Some miles away, the elderly fisherman, in the midst of drunken revelry of the young, expresses a dark premonition. 'I do not like the sea tonight,' he says, 'the water is heavy [...] I haven't seen this sea ever in my life.'⁶ Moments later, unable to discern any sympathetic emotion from his wife for having left his job and finding himself once again incapable of making love to her on the stark and empty beach, Deepak uncharacteristically walks into the seductive, overwhelming darkness of the nocturnal sea. At that moment, an angry young member of the fishing community, in a state of drunken disbelief at the premonition of his elderly kin, throws a torch into the sea. In an instant of climactic and catastrophic dénouement, hinting at the globules of oil hidden under its alabaster foam, the sea catches fire, leaving Deepu irretrievably lost in its vast embrace. Focusing on the face of Anu's reverberant, pulsating howl, the end titles start rolling in.

⁵ *Yugant*, 110:24–110:30.

⁶ *Yugant*, 114:60–115:10.

Had it not been for the dark, brilliant finale, *Yugant* would have been another celluloid post-mortem of urban life and conjugality under late modernity. But the apocalyptic ending of Sen's film gives it a completely different register. Against their prayers to help them overcome the endemic solipsism of urban conjugality and the faith entrusted by the local fishing community, we see the corrupted sea consuming the last vestiges of their disoriented lives, reinforcing Deepu's fears conclusively. Sen is bringing the potential violence of a conjugal relationship, a relationship of apparent equals, into sharp focus but only when it is set against the violence committed against the planet. Hence in the final scenes, through a spectral prophesy of the elderly fisherman in which stories of mythological hauntings permeate the narrative of human survival through the ages, Sen is able to displace both science and mythology by making human greed and malevolence the usurpers of everything sacred and timeless.

It would not be unjustified to read the film as an allegory of globalisation and the Anthropocene through the symbolic corruption of the sea caused by the climate destruction of oil-based imperialism. By choosing the site of the east coast beach, the film makes the sea both the motif and echo of early spectres of globalisation's arrival, its alleged stealth and furtive vehemence and the fear of effective erasure of all conceivable mythologies of self and technologies of self-preservation. The Gulf War, which famously made CNN a household name and brought war into sitting rooms as a new form of real-time entertainment, only stood as a physical deployment of globalisation's secret but real mission.

The film forces us to think about the Anthropocene as a post-humanist, ecologically disturbing period in which oil furtively travels subterranean lengths and symbolically burns any remaining trace of mythopoeic desire that the sea would have otherwise hoped to preserve. At the same time it also connects the spectre and unrestraint of the sea to an intellectual history of both globalisation and the Anthropocene, especially in distant cultures.

Yugant, as previously stated, literally means the end of an era; of history. In the context of this chapter's claim, *Yugant* could be interpreted as signifying the end of the Holocene. The lapsed time between the honeymoon of the couple and their doomed present could be hence interpreted as in-between, anthropogenic time, a period when humans have conclusively affected planetary functions. In other words, from the relative innocence of the past, we seem to have decisively entered, through this film, into the Anthropo(s)cene.

BEYOND THE CLICHÉS

Yugant can draw significant traction from its unique vantage as an early critique of Anthropocene. But there is a degree of critical discomfort in trying to associate one film with epochal responsibilities; it often leads to hyperbolising its achievements. Academic film and cultural studies disciplines are usually more comfortable looking at a collective—a period, an oeuvre, a genre—to present a thesis. *Yugant* resists any forceful collapse into a generic disposition: it challenges the existing framework of discourse in its immediate cultural context as Bengali cinema. Neither can it be said to have reflected any major disruption in the context of Indian/national cinema. Also, it has been rendered subsequently somewhat invisible in conventional feminist scholarship on Aparna Sen's repertoire. I would rather see *Yugant* as primarily a narrative of the sea—the sea as a condition of de-territorialisation, even statelessness—tragically foregrounding a plea for collective well-being. Further, the real appeal of the film is retrospective, its value in understanding its apocalyptic vision as prescient and unambiguously post-*humanist*. To that end, the film's real cultural claim is to have anticipated some of the key emerging debates within eco-feminism and, as its logical extension, of the *post-globalisation* anxiety around the Anthropocene.

The sense of inevitability within which *Yugant* operates is vital in understanding its immediate cultural climate. After all, as a Bengali-language film it is naturally predisposed towards factoring in a more specific response to globalisation than may be available to it as an Indian film. In her critique of globalisation, Sen could have easily given into more available debates that were in circulation in Bengal. The region, which has historically demonstrated that it has a ready ear for global debates, especially those coloured by leftist ideologies, was a fertile ground for dialogue on globalisation in the mid-1990s. This was further bolstered by the governing administration in Bengal, the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPI-M), which was at the height of its elective power and yet substantially at odds with a growing sensibility that saw it as left over from the ‘ancien régime’ of European communism. The threats of globalisation as perceived by the petulant political Left were hence as much about the debate as they were about its own survival. So rather than reasoned debates, the political public were fed with a pedantic and paranoid cocktail that proposed an easy interchangeability between globalisation and neo-imperialism, and demonised India's economic liberalisation which had

declared its five-decade welfare model null and void. The political Left in the 1990s made one last attempt to unite all these opposing forces as presenting different facets of globalisation.⁷

Sen's film was the first major cultural response to this climate in Bengal but in a persistently non-ideological, non-hysterical way. Sen steps into the debates around globalisation from what was considered the least important of its vantage points: ecology. Along the way, she also avoids, commendably, the usual othering of the West as a diabolic force, promulgating the fragile relationship of the couple as a motif for the fragility of the planet itself, both only minutes away from the final moment of catastrophe. *Yugant* hence clinically foregrounds a *moment* of invasion in a specific time in the historical consciousness of Bengal. Politically speaking, the cultural economy of globalisation as a marauding force was to find easy resonance among a spectatorship fed with its spectre of new colonisation. Sen doubtlessly responds to this, but without stepping into the available clichés. By steadily avoiding the traps of political economy and by invoking the reason of an all-consuming ecology, Sen's film de-territorialises and complicates the political dialectic on globalisation. The film, unleashed on a cinematic audience unprepared for such tragedy, provoked disquiet and confusion, but little empathy or understanding. One can argue in fact that its popular and cultural reception was clouded by its anti-idiomatic agency and its sheer audaciousness.

If the film's subversion of its immediate cultural sphere was political, *Yugant's* negating of the national was ontological. After all, a cinema on globalisation should ideally exist only by negating the national. But then what is exactly a national cinema? Though accepted easily as a category, it has never been understood unambiguously. As Andrew Higson writes in his article 'The Concept of National Cinema',

To identify a national cinema is first of all to specify a coherence and a unity; it is to proclaim a unique identity and a stable set of meanings. The process of identification is thus invariably a hegemonising, mythologizing process, involving both the production and assignation of a particular set of meanings, and the attempt to contain, or prevent the potential proliferation of other meanings. At the same time, the concept of a national cinema has almost invariably been mobilized as a strategy of cultural (and economic)

⁷ For more on how globalisation was received through the vernacular in Global South, see Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, *The Rumor of Globalization: Desecrating the Global from Vernacular Margins* (London: Hurst, 2013).

resistance; a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood's international domination.⁸

Even if one were to agree, albeit sceptically, to the idea of a national cinema, it became increasingly ungainly after the 1990s when it was clear that mobility of goods, financing and people were going to irretrievably change first, the idea of a nationally produced cinema, and second, a cinema in which territorial specificities were in distinctive service of the function of cinematic narrative.

In India, the implications of dismembering a 'national cinema' perspective were further complicated. The fluidity of contesting national identities and the difficulty of constructing a nationally codifiable cinematic culture has always been central to India's problematic relation with national cinemas, a relation further undermined by the fluid flows of technological and cultural mobility. As film scholar Ravi S. Vasudevan says, the question of a national cinema has always been a rather indistinct term in India. In his article 'Geographies of the Cinematic Public: Notes on Regional, National and Global Histories of Indian Cinema', he writes,

There is an element of territorial fatalism inflicted by state building as it puts together diverse cultural and linguistic formations within a somewhat forced political and administrative integrity. This has had substantial effects on the terms of cultural flow and the networks of commercial enterprise.⁹

Though the national would border on the notional in India, at the same time the problem of national cinema is not interchangeable with culturally defining a nation. So while technologically there was an increasing awareness of the decentered nature of cinematic output, culturally the 1990s saw a dominant cinematic account in which nation seemed to reoccupy the space that free-flowing technology had cut open. Resultantly, Hindi-language, especially Bollywood cinema, was increasingly posing a redefinition of the Indian national territory as central to India's cultural reclamation. Another group of films may not have shared such a conformist position, but in them too it became increasingly important to foreground India as a cultural if not entirely national space. A third possibility,

⁸ Andrew Higson, 'The Concept of National Cinema', *Screen*, 30:4 (1989): 36–47, p. 37.

⁹ Ravi S. Vasudevan, 'Geographies of the Cinematic Public: Notes on Regional, National and Global Histories of Indian Cinema', *Journal of the Moving Image* (Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University) (2010): 94–117, p. 95.

especially in the regional ('art') cinemas, was to see the changing global order as an obdurate evil force affecting recondite national/local livelihoods. In fact, the element of globalisation made Indian cinemas renew their acquaintance with a reinvigorated *national* consciousness that had been missing since at least the founding days of its independent statehood in the 1940s. Nation was suddenly a very important category on the face of what seemed the 'twilight of the nation-state'.¹⁰

Yugant eschews any realisable form of imagined, masculinist nation-hood; and it does not compete for alternate visualities of the nation. The film's decontextualised individuation of conjugalit pitted against a global, *post*-humanist threat of ecological disaster segregates it from a vague territorial-cultural claim of Indianness or any strategic orthodoxy. Also, by altercating the sea as a synecdochic space (as against the pulls of 'territory'), it subverts any forced 'nationisation' of crisis. By consciously waylaying the *national-territorial* for the global, the film invokes *both* the inevitability of globalisation while also scrutinising its marauding affects. It is precisely because it avoids the easy traps of both rightist revivalism and leftist victimhood that it stands excepted from all the available notions of national cinema, either in generic slipperiness or in the new-found cultural dogma.

But even if there could be an element of conjecture about *Yugant*'s cultural and national irreducibility, there seems to be a consensus when it comes to whether it can be considered a feminist film. The answer is in the negative: Aparna Sen's films have been read as constitutive of a 'cinema of women in India', or for their 'polyvocal' feminist concerns. There is general critical agreement that Sen's cinematic lens is pressed into a social order with strong feminist links or is naturally populated by powerful female subjects. Resultantly, her films continue to be evaluated, sometimes exclusively, in terms of her feminist concerns—in spite of her protestations to the contrary.¹¹ In a recent paper, Mantra Roy and Aparajita Sengupta have made detailed enquiries into her position. They write,

We argue here that Sen responds to the women's movements in India through the 1970s and 1980s by nuancing the identity of the Indian woman through a pluralistic and polyvocal feminist lens, in the sense that her women are not merely products of the feminist movements in India—their

¹⁰ See Prem Shankar Jha, *The Twilight of the Nation State: Globalisation, Chaos and War* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 2006).

¹¹ Susmita Gupta, 'The Cinema of Women', *The Telegraph* (Calcutta), 29 September 1985.

sense of agency might have been influenced by the social climate, but their negotiation of that agency is unique to their specific circumstances. [...] Moreover, Sen's films demonstrate that women's identities are informed by circumstances and choices that are not always necessarily tied to patriarchy.¹²

There is little scope here to provide a detailed critique of the contention above, primarily because the observation holds weight and secondly because it is beyond the scope of the chapter which, after all, is not about Aparna Sen's repertoire. Even if there could be some disagreement about giving her entire oeuvre the certainty of a generic temper, one can still read her body of work, from *Violet Stoneham* (in *36 Chowringhee Lane*) and the eponymous *Parama* to the films she made after *Yugant* including *House of Memories*, *Mr & Mrs Iyer* (2002) and *15 Park Avenue* (2005), as unequivocally interested in foregrounding a perspective which was critically aware of its gendered vantage point.

However, such interrogations of her cinema, which have tried to read her work through feminist theory, agency and articulation, are lukewarm in their assessment of *Yugant*. Roy and Sengupta's article for example pauses to individually scrutinise all of her major works up to *15 Park Avenue* as varying degrees of interpretation on the theme of feminism.¹³ But *Yugant* receives almost no mention in the discussion. Another paper by Brinda Bose, published earlier, does mention *Yugant* but is unsure of its position in the canon. Bose writes,

The film [*Yugant*] is not just about a marriage; it is about a contemporary marriage in which both partners pursue full-time careers while their relationship disintegrates. What has surprised (feminist?) viewers is that, if there is a partner perceived to be at fault in this marriage, it appears to be the woman, who is over-ambitious in her profession, and over-dedicated to her art, to the point of being corrupt and ruthless [...] A simple question remains, then: why is it possible (indeed laudable) for a married man to be professionally over-ambitious, when, for a woman, it degenerates into something that causes a broken relationship?¹⁴

¹² Mantra Roy and Aparajita Sengupta, 'Women and Emergent Agency in the Cinema of Aparna Sen', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 12:2 (2014): 53–71, p. 56.

¹³ They leave out *Parama* because they refer to Geetha Ramanathan's article as already having dealt with it substantively. See Geetha Ramanathan, 'Aesthetics as Woman: Aparna Sen's *Parama*', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 17:1 (2000): 63–73.

¹⁴ Brinda Bose, 'Sex, Lies and the Genderscape: The Cinema of Aparna Sen', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 8:3 (1997): 319–26, p. 326.

Even though she does not relegate it outside Sen's canon like Roy and Sengupta, Bose seems to have somewhat misread the entire context of the film as a chronicle of competitive careerism. She is interested only in the relative lack of sympathy of the woman filmmaker for her professionally ambitious female protagonist, who over the years had seemed to have attained a degree of cruelty to make her art matter. Had this been only the case, the film would not have been set on a faraway beach and under the unmistakable signs of climatic violence. Also, in all of her first three films including *Yugant*, Sen had been forthright about the effortless cruelty and selfishness of the middle class, including women. One part of the couple who misuse the trust of the lonely Stoneham or the indifferent women in *Parama* are no more or less women than their male counterparts. So there is nothing unique or unintelligible in Sen's refusal to create any moral high ground for Anu in *Yugant*. Bose's interpretation of *Yugant* is hence contentious, if not false.

So, as far as Sen's cinema is concerned, we must be cautious in evaluating her corpus. It is neither uncritically feminist nor is it negligent of the richness that a critical feminism framework can throw up. But even then *Yugant* avoids the safety net of peddling either soft or hard feminism: Anu has no better claim to be a feminist role model than Deepu has to being a chauvinist stereotype. In fact, here, Sen's gendered vantage is *not* lensed to either of them but to the planet itself. If there is one unmistakable victim of violence in *Yugant* it is the planet. Violence against the planet—rendered synecdochically here as the sea—is not a social or legal outrage but a cataclysmic one. Deepu's disquiet at the state of the sea and his wife's unapologetic disengagement is rubbed by Anu as signs of his infantile stasis. 'Grow up Deepu,' she had urged, 'people do not stay the same forever.'¹⁵ But for Deepu, the connection is unmistakable and comprehensibly metaphysical. 'You are growing old Anu, old like this ageing planet [...] you too are past your prime', Deepu says towards the climactic scenes.¹⁶

The film preserves its appreciation for the natural ambiguity of a gendered subject only when it is transferred to the planet itself, while also provoking the thought that the apocalypse, when it finally arrives, is not going to cherry-pick its victims as man, woman or non-human. The film focuses away from individual female subjectivity towards an interrogation of the potency of violence. Hence Anu's doom cannot be measured unless against the greater threat of annihilation. Similarly, even if Deepu can be seen as indulgent of his dystopian prognosis about life's longevity on earth, he

¹⁵ *Yugant*; 92:02–92:10.

¹⁶ *Yugant*; 115:15.

cannot be burdened with the offense of patriarchal mismanagement of earth's resources. Instead, the agency of violence is transferred from men to the *species* itself, if at all, blunting individuation for collective culpability. To that end, if there is a gendered subject in the film, it is not Anu, but the planet itself and Anu is no more or less culpable of 'exploiting' the planet's misery than Deepu. Extermination, in *Yugant*, is hence secular, blind and brute. Orthodox feminist theory will be dissatisfied at this proclamation, to which the articles mentioned above stand testimony. At the same time, there is little doubt that on this unique and shared planet of ours there cannot be a more universal feminist interpretation of equality than that which *Yugant* proffers. In this sense, *Yugant*'s isolation from the canon sits comfortably with its message.

By steering away from the victimhood of feminism, reverse nationalism and derivative socialism, all of which could have been easy entraps as far as her context was concerned, Sen's film foregrounds an ecological critique of identity politics and all its wanton segregation of demographics, interests and rights. If anything, the film's post-humanist context is actually pleading for a return to a broader, even monolithic humanism without being blind to its usual shortcomings. As a tour de force, *Yugant* hence stands in relative solitude while being surprisingly in agreement with the possibilities that critical humanities can bring to the climate change table.

YUGANT AS CINEMA OF THE SEA

One way to draw attention to *Yugant*'s power as a sea narrative is to situate it in a critical relationship with the canonical cultural appreciation of the sea, which can be traced to the very beginning of Western literature, with Homer's *Odyssey* if not his *Iliad*. This encompasses a vast body of literature of adventure, mobility, morality, discovery, identity and colonising impetus of the white Western male subject. Margaret Cohen's detailed study of the novel form's historical relationship with the sea, for example, draws from Georg Lukács's interpretation of the *Odyssey* as symptom of mankind's 'transcendental homelessness', as well as its critique by Adorno and Horkheimer, whose Odysseus betrays the modern idea of homesickness. They, writes Cohen, 'placed Odysseus at the threshold of the modern novel in his abstraction from the physical world and nature, calling him *homo œconomicus*, for whom all reasonable things are alike: hence the *Odyssey* is already a Robinsonade.'¹⁷

¹⁷ Margaret Cohen, *The Novel and the Sea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 2.

Either way, till well into the nineteenth century, the novel form did not go too far from foregrounding man's essential heroism and capacity of survival which more often than not is achieved through a physical or intellectual mastering of the sea's disconcerting vastness. More recent critical histories of colonisation would want to see the subjugation of the sea in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a history of travel, trade and exploitation of distant cultures by Western powers who were quickly acquiring the mastery of the instruments of control. In such literature too, the sea stands essentially as a symbol of control and mobility, merely extending the role it was assigned to play in the earlier forms of representation.

The first break came with the Modernists, who managed to include the sea within their avant-garde formalist experiments with space, language and interiority. From Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* to W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, the sea is an evocative allegory that impregnates language, memory and history. On the other hand, post-colonial literature of the sea, like J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, or Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies* historicises the sea instead of considering it as a topographical imposition on man's ever more ambitious pursuit of new lands and knowledge. To that extent, these works of literature move beyond the earlier, Odyssean framework.

Cinematic studies of the sea, however, have been more complex given cinema's inherent propensity to visually frame and map its proverbial uncontrollability. Peter Greenaway's adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or Godard's post-modern adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* in *Contempt* can add substantively to the original text because of their visual and scopic ontology. A number of films in the last 50 years—from Truffaut's *400 Blows*, Bergman's *Persona*, Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice*, Amenábar's *The Sea Inside*—continue with high modernity's intensification of the sea as a recurring motif of paranoia, *diffrance*, surrender, immanence and strength.

In one way, *Yugant*'s appeal and its autonomy as a film rest on its ability to maximise the potential of such a language that is unique to cinema. *Yugant* can be said to have appropriated this cultural memory of the sea as a complex motif of opposing factors: homelessness and homesickness, exteriority and interiority, contentment and enormity, helplessness and mastery. There is substantive power in the film even if *Yugant* is considered as an additional cultural work about the sea's continuing role as a signifier of

the human condition. Not just about the sea, *Yugant* also effectively narratives the beach's role as a marginal space of isolation, exclusivity and immanence. Here too, it shares proximity to a wide range of cinematic motifs. As Brady Hammond and Sean Redmond write in their brief introduction to a special issue of the journal *Continuum* on 'cinema at the shoreline':

In cinema one can consider the beach to be a powerful transformative meeting and resting place. It is very often a liminal heterotopia of illusion and compensation (Foucault, 1986) where capitalist time is unwound, and the sense of belonging, lost in the urban world, is newly found. This utopian world of the beach often stands in stark contrast and opposition to the mean city streets, the banality of suburbia and the commodified, relentless time of liquid modernity.¹⁸

To that end, *Yugant*'s symbolic location of the sea and beach as a liminal, ecumenical destination of a despondent couple fleeing as much from themselves as from a world of forged social transactions, is entirely comprehensible. But to stop at that would be to understand only half the story. For it is at the same sea and the beach that the film registers its shocking epiphany.

FROM GLOBALISATION TO THE ANTHROPOCENE

Yugant's power as a critique is vastly accentuated by this final possibility, which is to understand the sea as a-civilisational space, as a space of statelessness and hence the most vulnerable to climatic change and mutability. In other words, *Yugant* seems to be proposing that by embodying the globalisation of violence, the sea itself can turn into an apparatus of erasure, both as a geographic space as well as a symbolic one.

By moving out of typically culture-specific needs of cinematic narrative but without losing out on the atmospherics of globalisation, Sen manages to construct a sea narrative that is both specific to its time and yet movingly clairvoyant. In his study of how cinema 'maps' spaces, Tom Conley in *Cartographic Cinema* makes a pertinent point. He writes: 'A film, like a topographic projection, can be understood as images that locates and patterns the imagination of its spectators. When it takes hold, a film encour-

¹⁸ Brady Hammond and Sean Redmond, 'This is the Sea: Cinema at the Shoreline', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 27:5 (2013): 601–2, p. 601.

ages its public to think of the world in concert with its own articulation of space.¹⁹ Indeed *Yugant* forces us to think spatially, articulating the sea as that which stands for both itself and then also the world: as both an international and yet indeterminate ecological space. By invoking the sea as both the motif and metaphor, *Yugant* manages to use the sea as both a moving object and a static carrier, which is a brilliant strategy for a film on globalisation. We can further this idea if we consider the sea as a chrono-topo: a Bakhtinian category to understand how narratives, literary or otherwise, parcel out the conceptions of space and time from within their narrative framework. In their paper ‘Global Subjects in Motion: Strategies for Representing Globalization in Film’, Caitlin Manning and Julie Shackford-Bradley underlined a range of theoretical positions to understand how films from various corners of the globe (Iran, China, Germany) ‘break through to global audiences even as they critique and resist the master narrative of globalization’.²⁰ They propose an understanding of a certain kind of cinema which is global in its reach, unapologetic in using new technological apparatuses and is yet critical of the idea of globalisation. Through Frederic Jameson’s idea of ‘cognitive maps’ and Arjun Appadurai’s idea of the ‘scapes’ of globalisation, the scholars discuss the ‘multi-chronotopic’ potential of cinema to demystify globalisation. In the films they discuss, they argue that ‘people seem to inhabit different eras and chronotopes simultaneously as they contend with the flows and disjunctions of globalization, traversing complex and shifting scapes of ideas, images, and desires’.²¹

Yugant, I would like to propose, operates as a similar chrono-topo to posit a moment of arrival of globalisation through the unmissable synecdoche of the sea, which stands in both as part and signifier of a larger malice that has infiltrated a planet hurtling towards an ever-imminent possibility of self-destruction. The geographical impossibility of oil travelling from the Gulf to the Indian east coast is nullified by the spectre of a shifting geopolitical order which normalises violence on the planet as collateral and necessary to that shift. Oil travelling far distances and impregnating the multitudinous seas, to ‘turn it incarnadine’, and everything

¹⁹ Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 1.

²⁰ Caitlin Manning and Julie Shackford-Bradley, ‘Global Subjects in Motion: Strategies for Representing Globalization in Film’, *Journal of Film and Video*, 62:3 (2010): 36–52, p. 37.

²¹ Manning and Shackford-Bradley, ‘Global Subjects in Motion’, p. 37.

that is dependent on its vitality—life forms, livelihoods and tormented relationships—is a possibility only when we engage with the invisibility and stealth of the threats to the planet’s well-being. The threat to ecology is as transnational as the claims of a free-market globalised economy, hence its reach and furtive violence is total and inescapable, as inescapable as globalisation itself. *Yugant*’s power is hence not just to understand globalisation as a period in history in whose margins it is already operating but also to understand it as an ontological category, which has transformed the very nature of being human.

This is precisely where it is worthwhile to invoke the film’s power as a register of the Anthropo(s)cene. Noel Castree writes in a recent article,

‘The Anthropocene,’ once a little-known neologism coined by two senior geoscientists (Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer), has become something of a buzzword as it enters its mid-teens. It describes an Earth’s surface so transformed by human activities that the biophysical conditions of the Holocene epoch (roughly the last 11,000 years) have been compromised. In Mark Levene’s apt assessment, ‘[t]he term [...] has yet to become standard currency, though there has been sufficient acclamation from a wide range of scientific and non-scientific disciplines to suggest its durability.²²

By collating the *scene* into the *cene* and vice versa, I would want to not only highlight the semantic similarity but also the scopic possibility of how a cultural text, operating from within its own generic propensities, might open up to the geospatial order. In other words, in the *scene*, the cultural proximity of a film like *Yugant* to the *cene* of biophysical periodisation may be aptly collapsed. This argument can be extended only if we turn to recent responses of critical humanities to the question of the Anthropocene. Here, there is no one better than historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose recent work can be said to be the most systematic response from the humanities disciplines on the Anthropocene. Chakrabarty claims that if agreed upon in real terms, the Anthropocene can pose serious challenges to history in particular and critical humanities in general. In a widely influential thesis he writes,

Scholars writing on the current climate-change crisis are indeed saying something significantly different from what environmental historians have said

²² Noel Castree, ‘The Anthropocene and the Environmental Humanities: Extending the Conversation’, *Environmental Humanities*, 5 (2014): 233–60, p. 233.

so far. In unwittingly destroying the artificial but time-honored distinction between natural and human histories, climate scientists posit that the human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent that he or she always has been.²³

To that end, Anthropocene, as interpreted by Chakrabarty and others, will be both the climactic point of enlightenment humanism that has claimed unprecedented and unquestioned supremacy of human agency, while also its moment of tragic and irreversible dénouement. Anthropocene can hence be interpreted in terms of the farthest reach of the species that can be achieved within the moral and natural space of the planet while being its precise point of absolute irreversibility.

The primordial sea in *Yugant* could be seen a ‘natural selection’ of the Anthropocene to announce its arrival. The immutability and expanse of the sea is the carrier of civilisation’s most potent ambitions and symbolises man’s gradual mastering of the planet. The subversion of the sea is hence Anthropocene’s biggest publicity. Hence it is this epochal, epic sense of the transmigration of violence committed upon the planet, a violence that plays out its part in faraway, domestic theatres with equal force, which makes *Yugant* a brooding and prophetic meditation on climatic/climactic catastrophe. If we are to seriously consider man’s capacity to bring in unprecedented and prodigious changes to the Earth’s atmospheric conditions as the beginning of the Anthropocene, *Yugant*’s chronotopic unveiling of the *scene* of arrival of the Anthropocene cannot be over-emphasised. Even a cursory understanding of the world in the last two decades will show how gainfully and hopelessly right *Yugant* has been about the globalisation of violence and it’s all-consuming, barbaric powers of anthropomorphic extermination.

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²³Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35:2 (2009): 197–222, p. 206.

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