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The Anthropocene and Apocalypticism in Jeet Thayil's *Low*

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ABSTRACT

Jeet Thayil's Low is based on the central theme of grief and agony, which the protagonist, Dom, faces after the sudden loss of his wife, Aki. In search of a haven, he runs to Mumbai, which mirrors the broken protagonist. Along with Dom's struggle to find a clean water source to immerse Aki's ashes, Thayil presents various major environmental concerns like pollution, global warming, the rising sea level, waste management, etc., which can be traced back to the Anthropocene. He also warns against an impending apocalypse. This study addresses the ecocritical elements in Thayil's Low, the representation of urban space plagued by ecological hazards, and a possible global annihilation in the future. Thayil, with a touch of personal grief, moves into the terrains of ecological grief and eco-anxiety as he portrays today's urbanscapes and warns about the times to come, which transverses into the realm of climate fiction.

Keywords: Anthropocene; Apocalypticism; Climate fiction; Ecological Grief; Eco-anxiety; Pollution; Urbanscape

INTRODUCTION

Jeet Thayil's *Low* is the odyssey on which his protagonist, Dominic Ullis, or Dom, embarks after the sudden loss of his wife, Aki. Dom roams around Mumbai, clutching onto his wife's ashes as he tries to process his grief. Amidst his hallucinations and psychedelic dreams, he revisits his memories to somehow forgive her for committing suicide. Moreover, he blames himself for her death, and the novel recounts his journey of self-reconciliation. The tale of grief and escapism is more comical than tragic at times. Both Dom and the city he runs to escape trauma are depicted as broken. On one side is Dom, who uses different drugs and intoxicating solutions to rid himself of the problems and the pain, and on the other side, almost like a mirror image, is the city of Mumbai, which is emanating toxic pollutants and filling its water bodies with all kinds of waste. This leads to the ecocritical reading of the text, which is this paper's proposed area of inquiry. Thayil, in *Low*, maintains autobiographical elements as he takes inspiration from the sudden loss of his wife, Shakti Bhat, in 2007. Bruce King (2021, p. 138) also points out that Payal, one of the characters in *Low,* resembles Leela Moraes, the wife of Dom Moraes, who was Thayil's real-life friend and mentor.

Mumbai or Bombay, the former name of the city that Thayil prefers, is one of the biggest, if not the biggest, metropolises in India. The metropolis of Mumbai has been the setting for various works of fiction and films and has been portrayed as a center of commerce and advancement and the hub of Bollywood or the Hindi film industry. It is apt to quote Shilpa Daithota Bhat, who graphically depicts Mumbai in the following:

> The representation of Mumbai has always been made in terms of its potential for commerce, its historical association with the British, and its inclination to modernisation… Consequently, conceptual contrasting of good/evil, tradition/modernity, and rural/urban has produced binary discourses since the metropolis is viewed as having a history that evolved over a period of time (from colonial to contemporary times), during which there was gradual but certain, destruction of ecology due to technology, modernity, and capitalist society.
>
> (Bhat, 2020, pp. 3-4)

Mumbai has changed significantly over time, with rising skyscrapers replacing green spaces. In his novel *Low*, Jeet Thayil portrays a dark future for the city, predicting it will be submerged due to human negligence. This paper will analyse *Low* as a climate fiction novel, focusing on urbanisation's ecological implications in the Anthropocene age. Thayil's portrayal of ecological grief and eco-anxiety compared to Dominic's grief will also be studied to make an ecocritical interpretation of Thayil's *Low.*

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Thayil's second work of fiction is an intriguing novel dealing with themes of loss and grief through black humour. In her paper, Nikita Gulati (2022) studies the narratology of the novel. She focuses on the traumatic experiences of the novel's main character and how it affects the process of narration. However, there is a lack of research on *Low* as Gulati's work remains the sole entry. Loss and grief remain the major themes of the novel, but this paper aims to look beyond the characters and focus on the background setting of the novel, Mumbai. Along with the characters, the city is also depicted as suffering due to humans' continuous environmental abuse. The city is described as plagued by global warming, and Thayil stitches together a tale full of apocalyptic undertones. He warns about a future where the city will be engulfed by the rising sea that forms its current border. Thayil uses the recurrent flash floods that have engulfed the city of Mumbai during monsoon season in recent years as an omen and driving factor towards the apocalyptic tone of the novel.

Thayil's love for Mumbai resulted in it being the setting of his debut novel, *Narcopolis*. The depiction of any modern city would be incomplete without addressing the pollution issue. Thayil, in his third book, effectively captures the city's polluted environment. Due to human greed and overexploitation, the Earth's landscape has been irrevocably altered, severely impacting the environment and ecological balance. This has resulted in declining foliage and wildlife and widespread air and water contamination. Even though the city is a passive character in the novel, how it is described is critical. The worrying fact is that the image of a polluted city has become so mundane that it comes instinctively when a writer portrays a city set in the present timeline. In other words, *Low* can be categorised as climate change fiction or cli-fi novels.

The themes of urbanisation and its effects on the environment have been studied by Akhter and Islam (2024) in their paper, where they study the description of the city of Kolkata in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. The paper presents the city facing a loss of green cover and wetlands due to the rise in urban development, which has changed the city's image. The work by Yadaw and Chowdhury (2019) presents a compilation of works in Indian writing in English that focuses on the trope of apocalypse and the effects of the Anthropocene. This work studies the influence of climate change fiction, a popular concept in the West, on the English literature of the Indian subcontinent.

Thayil's other works of fiction, notably his first work of fiction*, Narcopolis (2012),* have been explored for various themes. Pius (2014) has studied the novel's narrative style, exploring the

narrative techniques used by Thayil, such as an absent narrator and a non-linear narration. Shankar (2024) depicts the representation of the transgender character who identifies as a female in the context of the Booker Prize-shortlisted novel by Thayil. In their paper, Daniel and Mishra (2022) study Thayil's first novel to present a historical context of Bombay's underbelly and the marginalised voices concerning the drug trade and the socio-political turmoil of the times. The paper also delves into the grotesque realism and the characters' existential crises. Thayil's second work of fiction, *The Book of Chocolate Saints* (2018), has been examined by Robert Stilling (2023) for the use of the Western stereotype of the decadence of the life of an artist due to addiction in the oriental context.

The existing research on Jeet Thayil's *Low* focuses on the grief experienced by the main character in the novel and how it affects the narration. The experience of the sudden loss of the protagonist's wife and how he processes the grief is the main objective of Gulati's paper. The other works of Thayil have been researched for themes of marginalisation, queer representation, polyphonic voices of narration, and drug use. The works on the themes of Apocalypticism and the effects of the Anthropocene, done on Indian Writing in English, lack a detailed representation of the city of Mumbai. Apart from this, there is a dearth of work done on the ecological elements employed in the novels of Thayil, notably in the case of *Low*. The description of the effects of urbanisation in the Anthropocene age and the use of concepts like ecological grief and eco-anxiety in Thayil's third novel are credible points for research and, therefore, the focus of this paper.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Adeline Johns-Putra defines cli-fi or Climate change fiction as " concerned with anthropogenic climate change or global warming as we now understand it" (2016, p. 267). In today's scenario, genres, such as, cli-fi are important as Evancie (2013) quotes American climatologist Judith Curry, who advocates "scientists and other people are trying to get their message across about various aspects of the climate change issue . . . fiction is an untapped way of doing this — a way of smuggling some serious topics into the consciousness". The cli-fi genre, as such, comes under the broad area of ecocriticism.

Ecocriticism as a theoretical approach is comparatively younger than its other counterparts. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996, p. xviii) in *The Ecocriticism Reader* defines ecocriticism as "…the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." This is a basic idea of ecocriticism as it has grown and branched out with time. Like nature finding its way through the most challenging of terrains, ecocriticism has found a place in feminism, Marxism, Sociology, and so on. As Kerridge and Neil (1998, p. 5) claims, "...ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to the environmental crisis." This evaluation has helped visualise the environment and its problems as described through literature. Rachel Carson is one of the pioneers in the field of ecocriticism. In her work, *Silent Spring,* while talking about pesticide poisoning and pollution, she writes in detail about the far-reaching effects of pollution, which could affect our future generation as well:

> The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, Earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is, for the most part, irrecoverable; the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is, for the most part, irreversible. In this now universal contamination of the environment, chemicals are the sinister and little-recognised partners of radiation in changing the very nature of the world—the very nature of its life.
>
> (Carson & Wilson, 2002, p. 4)

Carson is a trailblazer in addressing environmental problems caused by human indulgence, and this indeed started a worldwide discussion scrutinising issues from pollution to the possibility of a nuclear war. Greg Garrard (2011) commends the work of Carson and states the importance of ecocriticism as follows:

> The great achievement of the book was to turn a (scientific) problem in ecology into a widely perceived ecological problem that was then contested politically, legally, in the media, and in popular culture. Thus, ecocriticism cannot contribute much to debates about problems in ecology, but it can help define, explore, and even resolve ecological problems in a wider sense.
>
> (p. 6)

A trope of ecocriticism that is key to this paper is Apocalypticism. Old relics and texts, especially religious texts, employ apocalypse as a correction tool with a way out of this dire consequence. However, the two World Wars shattered human belief systems, diminishing religious organisations' hold. As times changed, it was reflected in literature, too. This change was visible in the use of Apocalypticism in literature as texts moved from happy endings or a possible way out of it to ones where the apocalypse was the only outcome. Elizabeth Rosen (2005) calls these texts "neo-apocalyptic".

> …neo-apocalyptic literature is a literature of negativity and pessimism; it functions largely as a cautionary tale, positing potential means of extinction and predicting the gloomy probabilities of such ends. If these tales exhibit judgment, it is of the sort that assumes that no one deserves saving and that everyone should be punished. The traditional optimistic conclusion and intent to exhort faith disappear in neo-apocalyptic literature, replaced by imaginative but definitive End scenarios.
>
> (p. 12)

With the advent of human civilisation, slowly but steadily, almost every part of the Earth has come under human influence. As a result of this human influence, some changes have been caused in the planet's existence. This has caused Paul Crutzen, the Nobel award-winning atmospheric chemist, to call the latest geological epoch the "Anthropocene", which translates to a period created by human intervention. Crutzen and Stoermer (2000, p. 17) found it "more than appropriate to emphasise the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term "Anthropocene" for the current geological epoch.". Crutzen (2005) further explores the concept when he notes:

> Because of anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide, global climate may depart significantly from natural behaviour for many millennia to come. It seems appropriate to assign the term "Anthropocene" to the present, in many ways, a human-dominated geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene—the warm period of the past 10 to 12 millennia.
>
> (p. 14)

Another key concept that would be explored in the context of the novel is ecological grief. Cunsolo and Ellis (2018, p. 275) define ecological grief as: "the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change". As such, ecological grief is a natural response to ecological loss, which is supposedly particularly pronounced in people who retain close relationships with the natural environment, such as foresters, farmers, mountaineers, divers, or indigenous peoples, but may well be universal. (Comtesse et al., 2021, p. 734) Moreover, Thayil's portrayal of ecological grief in the novel transcends to another level, eco-anxiety.

> Eco-anxiety (or climate change anxiety) is a response to impending threats by climate change (e.g., rising sea levels, desertification;). The perception of the slow-moving impacts of climate change can evoke feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and uncertainty. Anxiety is an adaptive response to future-oriented, possible threats that encompass such aversive emotion states, cognitive worrying and physiological arousal and apprehension. As such, eco-anxiety is an adaptive response to the threat of climate change, which has been shown to be associated with pro-environmental behavioural engagement.
>
> (Comtesse et al., 2021, p. 734)

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

THE POLLUTED URBANSCAPE IN THAYIL'S *LOW*

Thayil, in his description of a pollution-clad Mumbai, consciously incorporates the two significant elements, air and water. Dominic describes the air of Mumbai as "carbon-laden" (Thayil, 2020, p. 31) in one of his taxi rides through the city, and Aki describes the automobiles as "pollution machines" (Thayil, 2020, p. 103). Interestingly, Dom, during one of his psychedelic escapades, gets legitimately confused if it was the drug he took or if it was the toxic air of the metropolis. Here, Thayil presents how his protagonist is mirrored by the city he runs to in search of a haven. Thayil maintains the motif of the broken protagonist and the equally broken city throughout the novel. In a way, Dominic was Mumbai, and Mumbai was Dominic. The picturesque description of the confusing state where Dom tries to get a hold of himself is fascinating.

> The sun had disappeared behind layers of dense smog and particulate matter, smog so sensuous it felt like fur against the skin. He tasted the unmistakable tang of chemicals. Was it an emanation from his pores, a side effect of the bastardly meow, or one more layer of the city's thousand–layered miasma?
>
> (Thayil, 2020, p. 92)

Thayil, while projecting Mumbai as a foil to Dom, also gives the city life of its own. Instead of being the background in the narrative, the city is represented as a living character that finds resonance in the novel's central character. In a way, Dom represents everyone in the city, and the city represents every other city in the world.

The idea of rain in a pastoral setting is one of rejuvenation and enrichment. The image of the drops of rain kissing the hot and dry land is a soothing one. But the same rain in abundance or, more importantly, no way to seep into the soil can cause some problems. If we shift this scenario to an urban setting, the issues could have far more devastating effects. Mumbai and monsoons have a taut relationship. The reports of the city submerged during the monsoon season have become yearly events. It was in July 2005 that Mumbai was affected by a vast flood that shook it to its core. Amitav Ghosh (2016), in his book on climate change called The Great Derangement, includes the account of Mumbai when it faced the worst flood in its history.

> One such occurred on 26 July 2005, when a downpour without precedent in Mumbai's recorded history descended on the city: the northern suburbs received 94.4 cm of rain in fourteen hours, one of the highest rainfall totals ever recorded anywhere in a single day. On that day, with catastrophic suddenness, the people of the city were confronted with the costs of three centuries of interference with the ecology of an estuarine location.
>
> (Ghosh, 2016, p. 46)

The floods of 2005 caused disarray in the minds of Bombayites as their myth of being indestructible was broken, as Ghosh notes. Thayil also carries on the idea of Mumbai being on the verge of a flash flood at any moment, capable of drowning the metropolis. Payal, while looking out of her room's window, observes:

> It was a peaceful view, and it was unchanged for most of the year, except during the monsoon season when everything disappeared under rain, which was her favourite season. First, it wrapped the city in blankness. It destroyed the city and then made it new. It remade the city in its own watery image. Bombayites believed only in what they could see and touch. Because they were always in the presence of water, they knew they could become water molecules one day.
>
> (Thayil, 2020, p. 79)

Water becomes a critical element of Thayil's *Low* as his protagonist comes to Mumbai to immerse his wife's ashes in a flowing water source, which causes him much trouble as pollution and garbage have taken over almost every water body. This same element of water is depicted as a destructive force as rising sea levels will lead to the submersion of landmasses. This representation of a world destroyed by water in the future is a projection of Thayil's eco-anxiety.

Grief is the quintessential emotion of this novel. Thayil disguises his grief with dark humour, but the innate pain bleeds out as the character of Dom accepts the reality of losing his wife. However, Thayil's grief is two-faced. On the one hand, is the personal grief of Dom Ullis, who has lost his wife; on the other is the grief of witnessing his favourite city die a slow death due to environmental degradation. Thayil gives his readers a slice of his life through the character of Dom in *Low*. Thayil admits it took him about 12 years to write about his pain. In an interview by Fullerton (2020) for *Vice,* Thayil admits that writing about the grief was not cathartic; on the contrary, it messed him up even more. The only positive of this ordeal was that he got more clarity about his experiences. In another interview by Atifa Aslam, Thayil, when asked how he deals with social issues, responded that he writes about those issues. As a writer or a novelist, he believes his job is to incorporate gory details when he describes a particular city or place. A similar approach is visible in the description of Mumbai in *Low*. With Dom battling his grief in the front, Mumbai fights for survival in the background. The novel, which begins with an individual's grief, grows as far as to include ecological grief, thus giving more range and depth to the narrative. As mentioned earlier, the idea of a world submerged underwater is a projection of Thayil's eco-anxiety, a recurrent motif in the novel. Thayil has subtly added the different climatic and environmental changes in the novel, like the rising sea levels, droughts, flash floods, etc., to manoeuvre the thoughts of the readers to the deteriorating condition of our planet and an apocalyptic end of the world in the not-so-distant future. Even though Thayil maintains a subtle and calm narrative, the environmental issues he builds on are volatile, and they scream for attention.

THE URBAN DILEMMA OF WASTE MANAGEMENT

Besides avoiding anyone who reminded him of Aki, he escaped to Mumbai to immerse his wife's ashes. Being a city by the sea, Mumbai presented itself as a viable option. However, this became a significant predicament for Dom as he could not find a clean water source in the city. On his boat trip from Alibagh to Mumbai, Dom finally found a small area of clean water. His desperation is presented clearly when he says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's just that this . . . I don't know where else to find clean water in Bombay, not to mention the whole of India. I might not get another chance." (Thayil, 2020, p. 161) Thayil's use of the tragic condition of the protagonist causes the reader to feel bad for Dom and, at the same time, wonder about the extremity of the pollution in

the water bodies around urban settings. Moreover, Thayil does not stop there; he affirms Dom's fears as he continues his journey after immersing Aki's ashes; he witnesses debris of different kinds of waste thrown in the water and the familiar smell of sewage. Thayil's subtle observation that they were nearing the city adds gravitas to the situation.

> Jagdish adjusted course away from the open sea, and the engine noise became deeper. The salt receded, replaced by the raw smell of sewage and marigolds. Small waves of heat touched Ullis's face. He saw bits of plastic in the water, empty Frooti cartons, packs of Benson & Hedges and Gold Flake, drinking straws, fast food wrappers, and unidentifiable debris. Plastic waste and filth were nearing the city.
>
> (Thayil, 2020, p. 165)

The waste strewn in the sea becomes a landmark for the approaching city. Here, the waste acts as a symbol of human civilisation and its aftermath. Humans have conquered and transformed the planet in ways that suited them the most. As a result, nature has been tampered with, causing irreversible problems, thus setting the course of the Earth to its inevitable end. Thayil lies down the presence of unclean water bodies that creep into Dom's hallucinations too, as he visualises, ". . . above him a floating island of garbage had flickered into view. The water was unclean and warming, getting warmer by the minute, so hot his skin was beginning to pucker." (Thayil, 2020, pp. 5-6)

Jeet Thayil, as a contemporary writer, is aware of waste management issues in metropolitan cities, particularly in India. Urbanisation has led to a global waste management crisis. In India, 2 October, Mahatma Gandhi's birthday, is now observed as a national day dedicated to cleaning the surroundings, aligning with Gandhi's philosophy that cleanliness is akin to godliness. Thayil brings in the image of waste spread throughout the city without any exaggeration or element of shock but satirically states that the presence is quite natural. Dom describes the smell near the seas as "The usual smell of sea and sewage" (Thayil, 2020, p. 8). This proves how much the people have accustomed themselves to the omnipresence of waste or have adapted their senses to associate the smell of the sea to be infused with the smell of sewage.

"The day was beginning like any other day. The smog smelled of sulphur. Plastic smouldered on a dump by the railway tracks. A gang of children were picking through a mountain of garbage, hunting for metal, paper and glass." (Thayil, 2020, p. 203) This is how Thayil describes the morning Dom spends in Mumbai. The calm and collected description of a morning filled with the smell of chemicals and piles of garbage with children scavenging to find something of value is sad. Thayil, while pointing out the waste scattered around the city, also represents a community of people who search for a means of livelihood amongst the things discarded by the rest of the city. Sunita Narain is one of the leading Indian environmentalists who has advocated for the rights of people experiencing poverty and who face the brunt of pollution, primarily caused by the economically healthier part of society. In an interview given to NDTV news channel about dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, she pointed out that the fundamental way to fight the virus is to wash hands, but the "irony of the situation is not only we are not harvesting enough rainwater but whatever we have – the rivers, lakes, all our water resources – we are destroying it with deliberate pollution." (Bhatia, 2021) With urbanisation helping a portion of humankind to achieve comfort in their well-built houses, some people live in the slums adjoining these megacities, fighting every day for their survival.

Although Mumbai is the primary setting of the *Low*, Thayil believes that the plight of urban spaces worldwide is similar. During one of Dom's conversations with his friend Neil, they discuss Dom leaving Mumbai and going to a new place to get a fresh start, like Tahiti. However, Dom's response maintains those ecocritical concerns that Thayil has subtly spread throughout this novel.

His response was, "Tahiti's full of traffic and plastic straws like everywhere else, probably." (Thayil, 2020, p. 212) In other words, Thayil implies that any place on Earth that has been urbanised or has come under human influence will not be much different from the other. Wherever humans have gone, pollution and destruction follow.

GLOBAL WARMING AND HUMAN IGNORANCE

As a result of the increasing pollution rates, various environmental concerns have come into existence. One of the chief concerns of our world has been global warming. Global warming is the increase in the temperature of Earth due to the accumulation of greenhouse gases, mainly produced by human activities like burning fossil fuels. Wallace S. Broecker (1975) introduced the term global warming. He predicted, "the exponential rise in the atmospheric carbon dioxide content will tend to become a significant factor and by early in the next century will have driven the mean planetary temperature beyond the limits experienced during the last 1000 years" (Broecker, 1975, p. 460). With the temperature of Earth increasing every day, the ice caps in the north-south pole have started melting at a much higher pace, which has caused the sea level to rise throughout the globe. Thayil uses this motif to show how our world will be submerged underwater, thus destroying everything on it.

Thayil mocks the human race's fixation on feeding its ego by creating statues and tall buildings bigger than the last one as the world burns down. He undertakes the issue of building a statue in the sea by Mumbai, which would be the biggest in the world. He also questions the mentality of the politicians who take pride in erecting statues rather than working for the upliftment of economically handicapped people. Instead, they take offence when someone enquires about their intent. What is even more astonishing is the fact that on the grounds of nationalism, ordinary people are also lured into the idea that somehow a monument or marker of history is more important than providing help to their brethren. On his taxi ride through Mumbai, Dom is introduced to the idea of the statue of Shivaji Maharaj, which was going to be built on the sea by his taxi driver with great pride. Dom, however, thinks:

> [T]he statue's completion and its annihilation would occur simultaneously. As the Doomsday Glacier dissolved and the oceans grew, only the tip of the statue's ceremonial sword would be seen for a moment before that, too, went under. The city would be swallowed alive. Why judge or decry any of it? Perhaps the world's tallest statue would provide succour to the damned. . . higher ground or shelter from the storm. It was possible. Anything was possible at the end of the day.
>
> (Thayil, 2020, p. 7)

Thayil discusses the issue of the statue again when Payal gets into an argument with Niranjan, a politician, about how the money spent on the statue is wasted and could have been put to better use. Niranjan goes on to mock her and all those who supported her by calling them "Englishwallahs" and claiming that they were not representatives of India. Dom, however, seems surprised about how people like Niranjan can be so engrossed with the idea of defending the creation of a statue when chaos spreads worldwide.

> Didn't they notice the heat and the wildfires, the hurricanes and cyclones and mudslides and floods, the drought and famine, the biblical pestilence that had already begun to fester, whether you lived in Hongkong or Florida or Bombay? Didn't they hear the hum of disturbance?
>
> (Thayil, 2020, p. 147)

Thayil points out how humans could be ignorant and so self-centred that we cannot comprehend what is happening around us. Instead of trying to devise ways to save the planet, we are fighting to feed our greed and establish dominance.

APOCALYPTICISM IN *LOW*

The motif of the world coming to an end with a global apocalypse is as old as human civilisation, if not older. It has been a part of myth and folklore and a major trope in religious texts. It is the oldest trick in the bag that has kept humanity under check or caused them to pause for a bit from the mad race of searching for heaven on Earth. "[A]pocalypse is the single most powerful metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (Buell, 1995, p. 285). Thayil employs the apocalypse metaphor in the novel, like a sword hanging on our heads. Thayil takes up the issue of rising sea levels to point towards a future when the whole of Earth might turn into the lost city of Atlantis. He describes the view out of Dom's taxi window, "They passed houses on a hill where the movie stars lived, prime real estate that would be worth nothing as the sea encroached, day by day, year by year, the waters heating and rising." (Thayil, 2020, p. 32) The encroachment of land by rising sea levels is a repetitive symbol throughout the novel.

Thayil has encompassed the entire novel with the aura of an apocalypse or global annihilation. The sad tone of the novel starts at a personal level when the readers are made aware that Dom has lost his wife. Like every other major issue that could cause a shock in an ordinary person's mind, it is presented subtly and effortlessly. As mentioned before, Dominic's grief works as a foil to the ecological grief expressed in the novel. Thayil vividly describes the sad state of Mumbai's metropolis. This ecological grief turns into eco-anxiety as he haunts his reader with the possibility of an apocalyptic end to the city of Mumbai engulfed by water. He uses Dom's hallucinations to portray several visions like "a vision out of the near future. A drowned nation, a league of drowned nations, a planet spawned by the devil and spurned by God, doom our only recourse." (Thayil, 2020, p. 61) Again, the cause of destruction is drowning, as pointed out earlier when he mentions the melting of the "Doomsday glacier".

Thayil also employs the element of intertextuality as he references Nostradamus, borrowing the prophecy of the philosopher to add credibility to the warnings he has given in this novel.

> As he scrolled down the centuries he found other prophecies imprecise but accurate, that described the cities of the world shaken by earthquakes and pummelled by tsunamis, riven by hunger and warfare and migration, beset by the rising waters of a heated planet.
>
> (Thayil, 2020, p. 170)

Like in the case of Nostradamus, his prophecies have been debated since the publication of his work *The Prophecies* in 1555; Thayil's fiction cannot be entirely side-lined as his representation imbibes elements from the real world.

Thayil concludes the novel on a positive note, offering Dom an opportunity for redemption as he starts to come to terms with reality and attempts to forgive himself. However, from an ecocritical standpoint, there appears to be no happy ending. Dom proceeds to deliver a monologue resembling a volcanic eruption that has been building up since the beginning of the narrative. He is convinced that the planet is becoming uninhabitable, and there is no point in rebuilding or patching up the rupture humans have created in the environment. He begins by describing Mumbai's living conditions before comparing them globally. "It's unliveable, yet people live here. It's true of everywhere, true and getting truer as the years pass." (Thayil, 2020, p. 196) He describes

places like Mumbai, which are flooded almost annually, and with the water level rising, houses are raised but to no avail as the water then comes in suddenly. Flash floods in places where there has never been a water body, followed by droughts in the same areas. This further leads to the migration of people to the cities in search of water, which causes disturbance and riots. Further, he touches upon earthquakes that can decimate entire towns and the carbon in the Arctic waiting to get loose and make everything hotter than it already is. He questions the attitude of humans to overcome one calamity after another, only to walk into a much bigger one than the last. He exclaims that there is no point as "There's nowhere to go and everywhere is the same." (Thayil, 2020, p. 197) His perspective is pessimistic, but the scarier fact is that the calamities and destruction he describes are not a by-product of his wild imagination; instead, they mirror the present state of the world. It is almost like the fate of Phlebas the Phonecian, in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* who dies by drowning in the sea with no chance of re-birth as he led his life in pursuit of material needs and was devoid of moral values. Similarly, Thayil warns his readers that Earth has no chance of redemption until the human race makes amends for its crime towards nature and turns from its exploitative and destructive path.

Thayil depicts two homeless drug addicts who witness Dom's outburst as awe-stricken before eventually nodding off. Thayil's description resonates with the concept of Third World Environmentalism, introduced by Guha and Martínez Alier (1998), which is described by Nayar (2010) in his work. According to Guha and Martinez Alier, applying environmental reforms pertaining to Deep Ecology, for instance, would be much easier in developed nations rather than in third-world nations where there is a struggle for survival. The drowsiness of the two characters mirrors the struggles of individuals trying to make ends meet, where concerns such as ecological balance are the least of their worries. Even Dom, the character who points out these issues, does not try to find a solution. He still uses the same pollution machines to travel and flouts social responsibility. He is not a social reformer; he is just an ordinary man who has lost the person/companion who was his world, but he does become a vessel through which Thayil projects the plight of an ailing planet. Dom's pessimistic view that every place is deteriorating nudges Thayil's readers to take a stand against climate change and ecological imbalance caused by humans before it's too late.

CONCLUSION

Thayil doesn't seem to venture into non-fiction territory like Amitav Ghosh to present factual points to support his case. However, his fiction draws from his own life experiences and, aside from the human error in recollecting past events, does not stray too far from reality. As *Low* is set in contemporary Mumbai, the issues he addresses are also relevant to the present time. As Amy Peterson rightly points out,

> Climate change and its effects feel out of the ordinary, exceptional, and too strange for literary fiction. So writers in the Anthropocene must do more than decenter the human, Ghosh argues. We must find new ways to think, new words to convey the unimaginable, a fresh willingness to admit that events like hurricanes and flash floods, which once seemed highly improbable, have become common; we must recover a sense of collectivism in our stories rather than allowing the novel to be an "individual moral adventure."
>
> (Peterson, 2020)

Thayil, in that aspect, is able to garner the attention of his readers. The subtle yet scary representation of the urbanscape in *Low* demands an introspection towards the deteriorating condition of our planet due to human exploitation and ignorance before everything gets annihilated in an apocalypse, as warned in the old scriptures and folk tales. Thayil's work brings out the daunting image of Mumbai, which has lost its clean water sources and is on the verge of a calamity every monsoon season. The excerpt of the kids looking through heaps of garbage for something to sell is sad and worrying. The waste in the water bodies and the city showcases human negligence and greed for exploitation. Thayil extends this image to the world in general by exclaiming that every other metropolis is in a similar state. The apocalyptic tone about the future is a warning he issues for his readers, thus making his work much more than a work of fiction. The sad part of the matter is this book, at the outset, looks like a story of a husband who loses his wife and his journey on accepting his reality through a roller coaster of events, and the underlying story of the ailing city might go unnoticed. This paper aims to point out the environmental concerns that Thayil tries to put forward to his readers through *Low.* As the advanced species of our planet, we need to take heed of the warnings given to us by nature and mend our ways through sustainable development. *Low* does a tremendous job as a text to offer an awakening to recognise our folly and save our planet when we still have a chance.

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