

Capital fictions: Neel Mukherjee's *Choice* and the politics of value

Published in 2024, *Choice* was shortlisted for the Goldsmiths Prize, an award which celebrates the innovative qualities of “writers who make best use of [the novel’s] many resources and possibilities.” In fact, resources in Mukherjee’s narrative appear formally as well as thematically: through the question of unequal access to resource, and the inner resources humans call for when faced with dire choices within the Climatic Regime (Latour 2018). But rather than shaping such choices univocally, *Choice* hinges on diffraction by means of three different, loosely connected stories – philosophical parables (Rashid 2024) which hold a mirror to the situated realities of injustice in the midst of climate emergency.

In the first section, a London literary editor named Ayush experiences an awakening about the consequences of his first-world lifestyle; he feels at odds with his own, unsettled by the market-driven policies of his publishing house or the so-called pragmatism of his husband, an economist. Ayush’s ultimate bet on the future, triggered by the general indifference to energy waste, biodiversity loss and animal sentience, is to give away his children’s education fund to a climate charity. The second section follows Emily, an academic, after she has been a victim of a concussion in a car ride, when the driver of an app service, an asylum seeker, seemingly hurt a pedestrian. Unpicking this triggering experience leads her into reconsider her own life and family legacy, as well as that of Salim, the Eritrean driver, and to seek “under the surface” for the hidden connections that might unite them. The novel’s final section describes the lives of Sabita, her husband and her children, in rural India, after they have been given a cow named Gauri by a government program in view of increasing their wealth. As their lives radically alter for better and for worse, Sabita and her family have to make ceaseless “calculations” to ensure their survival as well as Gauri’s.

In contrast to the “virtualised drama of crisis” (Macdonald 2013, 18) often found in fictions that use climate change as a theme, *Choice* articulates the quiet, mundane drama of characters who have to re-assess the very meaning of value in the face of life-defining choices. Rather than following a before/after dynamic, *Choice* remains deeply set in the present, a present intensified by what critics have identified as a “poetics of attention” in recent literary fiction (Ganteau 2023). With frequent outbursts of solastalgia, the narrative invites readers to “pay attention” – a recurring phrase – as an antidote to the “cheap nature” paradigm of the Capitalocene (Moore 2017). Ultimately, considerations over value extend to humanity itself – the compassionate external narrative voice and the network of echoes within the triptych form allow to complexify the collective “we” of responsibility found in Anthropocene theory. Through his characters’ complex ethical dilemmas, Mukherjee destabilises the narrative of a unified human trajectory informing the current climate crisis, and responds to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s intuition that the combination of postcolonial politics and climate responsibility requires us “to view the human simultaneously on contradictory registers: as a geophysical force and as a political agent, as a bearer of rights and as author of actions” (2012, 14). By staging the unequal value endowed to time, natural resources, or to human and non-human beings, the narrative unpicks the long-standing fictions nurtured by the Capitalocene, while reinstating the possibly capital value of literary fiction itself in the midst of climate upheaval.

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Biography:

Maëlle Jeanniard du Dot holds a PhD in Postcolonial Literatures in English (2023, Université Grenoble-Alpes/Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi) and is a tenured teacher (*professeure agrégée*) teaching ESP, translation and literature at Université Rennes 2. Her thesis titled "Places in the making : the po/ethics of place in the fictions of Mohsin Hamid and Hari Kunzru" was the recipient of the 2025 Jacqueline Bardolph Prize for best doctoral thesis in postcolonial studies, granted by the French Society of Postcolonial Studies (SEPC). She has published papers and book chapters analysing the novels of Hari Kunzru, Mohsin Hamid, Sanjena Sathian, Nadeem Aslam, Daniyal Mueenuddin and Abdulrazak Gurnah.

Respondent:

Jessica Small-Guiso holds a PhD in Contemporary Refugee Literature in English (2025) from Université Grenoble Alpes. She is currently a Teaching and Research Assistant (ATER) in the Department of

Modern Languages and a member of the ILCEA4 Research Unit at the same institution. Her research lies at the intersection of critical refugee studies, migration studies, and literary and cultural analysis, with a particular focus on representations of asylum, legal and political categories of belonging and exclusion, and state violence.