

# **Reading HBO's *Game of Thrones*: A Politico-historical Allegory of Climate Change**

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Perhaps the biggest “punch line” in his series is that the squabbles of summer, the games of thrones, the clashes of kings, the storms of swords, are all distractions from the immanent and infinitely ignored threat of the white walkers, who threaten to storm the wall and destroy the world—i.e., the threat of total environmental apocalypse, personified in the very spirit of eternal winter. (201)

—Leederman, T.A. “A Thousand Westerosi Plateaus: Wargs, Wolves and Ways of Being.” *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire*. Ed(s). Jes Battis and Susan Johnston. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005: 189-204. Print.

The human imprint on the global environment has now become so large and active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system. [...] We then explore recent trends in the evolution of the Anthropocene as humanity proceeds into the twenty-first century, focusing on the profound changes to our relationship with the rest of the living world and on early attempts and proposals for managing our relationship with the large geophysical cycles that drive the Earth's climate system. (842)

—Steffen, Will, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen and John McNeill. "The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives." *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. A* 369 (2011): 842-867. Print.

No less than 24 per cent of India's arable land is slowly turning into desert, and a 2-degree Celsius rise in global average temperature would reduce the country's food supply by a quarter.

—Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. New Delhi: Penguin Allen Lane, 2016. Print. 120.

Environmental disaster, meanwhile, threatens all even as it is ignored by most. [...] The slogan "Winter is coming" is meant literally as well as metaphorically: planter forces are moving slowly but inexorably towards climatic catastrophe as the infighting among kings and queens distracts them from the bigger picture.

—Carpenter, Charli. "Game of Thrones as Theory: It's Not as Realist as It Seems....And That's Good." *Snapshot*. Politics and Society Media, 29 March 2012. Web. 12 August 2017.

### **Reading HBO's *Game of Thrones*: A Politico-historical Allegory of Climate Change**

Our paper is a humble attempt at reading the political allegory of Climate Change in HBO TV show *Game of Thrones*, adapted for television from George R.R. Martin's 1996-published *A Song of Ice and Fire* series' first book, *A Game of Thrones*, by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss. We seek to read the political history embedded in the TV show that derives its sustenance from Britain's War of the Roses and the Hundred Years' War to begin with. The TV show has recorded more than 13 million viewers per episode since its fourth season itself. Now, the series is at its seventh season and still holds an undeniable grasp on its dedicated viewers.

The paper is divided into seven sections including the Conclusion. The first section deals with a thumbnail introduction to the realm and particulars of Television Studies since this paper is a venture into the critical world of TV shows with its visual rhetoric that is peculiarly its own. The second section is devoted to a brief sketch of the TV show spanning six seasons to aid the readers who are not yet initiated into George R.R. Martin's medieval fantasy world of Westeros

and Essos. Following the paraphrase, the third section concerns itself with a study of HBO's *Game of Thrones*' plot-arc: how it is influenced by historical events, how it is informed by alternative political histories from the past and the present. The fourth section is specifically on Martin's The Wall, its history and the myth, its historical and contemporary influence across time and across cultures. The fifth section dwells on the historiography of the Others, the White Walkers from beyond the Wall of the northern lands of winter. The term paper sees the advent and the march of the levelling Wights/White Walkers/Others as a parable of climate change, which forms the body of the sixth section of the term paper. The conclusion brings together all the myth-making and all the references of the history and contemporary politics towards a discourse of the Climate Change in the Anthropocene.

## I

Raymond Williams in his seminal 1975-book, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* explores the idea of television and its relationship with the society. Amidst the social institution and culture he calls television "a cultural form" (7). Williams, in the chapter "The Technology and the Society" charts the effect of television in nine salient points: it has altered the media of news and entertainment, has altered our institutions and forms of social relationships, has altered our basic perception of reality, has altered the scale and form of our societies, has affected the central processes of family/cultural/social life, has centralised formation of opinions and styles of behaviour, has brought about a domestic consumer economy but has also emphasised elements of passivity, cultural and psychological inadequacy making our society complex but atomised (11-12).

"Television is a multifaceted apparatus," writes Janet Wasko (1). TV is a technological process, an electronic device, a system of distributing images and sounds. Television as a form of mass communication did not emerge until the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the technology saw

its development at about 1920s. Schwartz, a biographer of one of the often overlooked inventors in the United States, Philo Farnsworth, writes: “The immediacy of television was the key” (113).

Janet Wasko further adds that television is not only a technical device, “but also a social, political, economic, and cultural force”: “Television is an industrial system that produces and distributes products, as well as (often) promoting other commodities and commerce” (2). Television has always been regarded as one of the most potential storytellers of the society, and Signorelli and Bacue underline the very point saying: “[t]elevision has joined the ranks of socialization agents in our society and in the world at large” (527).

The epoch of broadcast television that lasted for more than five decades from the mid-1950s, was also the period when “television studies budded off from an already hybrid knowledge tree”: writes John Hartley, in the Foreword to his *Reading Television*. TV was treated as part of mass society; it was routinely analysed for outcomes that were known in advance to be negative, to be anti-social, to be apathetic towards the human conditions of the 1960s and 1970s. But soon Television Studies sprouted, writes John Hartley, “out of existing branches of social theory, social science, psychology, cultural criticism and other academic disciplines” (xi). Its immediate purpose was not really to understand but to ‘discipline’ television into the supposedly orderly context of disciplinary taxonomies of knowledge; “and to discipline unruly TV itself via a rhetoric of control, prohibition and pejorative labelling” (xi).

In the 90s, figures such as Pierre Bourdieu started to take TV as an influential force summarily. Television, with the gradual emergence of television studies between 1970s and 1980s, became a phenomenon by itself. As a textual and cultural point of view, television was being read. This article is an essay at reading HBO’s medieval fantasy drama, *Game of Thrones*, as a paradigm in television study where power is exercised and contested. Before we conclude the section, one feels tempted to quote John Hartley differentiating between the broadcast and post-broadcast era in television which is “characterized by interactivity, customization, multiple platforms and non-

broadcast screen entertainment carried via video, cable, streaming, or archive systems such as TiVo” (xiv).

*Game of Thrones*, therefore, happens to be a post-broadcast era TV drama in the heart of society at large, everyday culture and private lives. With symbols, music, story, consumption and subjectivity the drama becomes a historiography of public domain of arguments and historical discussion as a part of the 2010s cyber-culture, identity, control and creativity (Fiske xvii).

## II

*Game of Thrones* is set in the medieval era on the fictional land of Westeros and Essos (Fig. 1). The major houses involved in this “game” are the Stark, Lannister, Baratheon and Targaryen and the minor, important but short lived houses are that of Martell, Tyrell, Frey, Greyjoy and Bolton. The actions of the plot mostly take place at King’s Landing, Winterfell, The Wall, Braavos, Meereen and Dorne. It is a tale of war for the Iron Throne and an ultimate battle of the living against the dead (the White-Walkers).



Fig. 1: The geographical formation of Westeros and Essos. *A Wiki of Ice and Fire* contributors. "Westeros." *A Wiki of Ice and Fire*, 21 April 2015. Web. 10 July 2017.

Lord Eddard Stark, the Warden of the North is compelled to oblige the King and his friend Robert Baratheon (The Usurper of the Targaryen rule of three centuries). He travels to the capital with his daughters Arya and Sansa, leaving Winterfell at the command of his eldest son Robb Stark. But he lands upon a very dangerous murder mystery and gets executed on false charges of treason. Robert is dead by this time and is succeeded by Joffrey Baratheon (Lannister). Robb wages a war against the Lannisters, which results in his death at the hands of the Freys at the Red Wedding. Amidst all this chaos Arya Stark escapes the Capital sworn to avenge her family.

The second son of Eddard Stark and Catelyn is Brandon Stark, constantly accompanied by his direwolf, Summer. His dream of being a knight is dashed by the crippling attempt on his life by Jamie Lannister who pushes him off the tower at Winterfell on Bran discovering the incestuous tryst of the Lannister siblings. He embraces his new abilities and as Winterfell falls and his siblings are torn apart, he, now accompanied by Hodor, Osha and the Reed siblings travel extensively beyond The Wall, until he becomes The Three-Eyed Raven exploring a number of ciphers in the plot before.

The children born to the Queen Cersei Lannister from her incestuous relationship with her brother Jamie Lannister, breathes their last one by one. Joffrey, the eldest, is murdered at his own wedding by the Tyrell matriarch Lady Olenna and the mastermind Lord Petyr Baelish (Littlefinger). Tommen, the younger, commits suicide after his wife Margaery Tyrell and the religious dictators of The Faith are murdered by an explosion at The Sept of Baelor plotted by none other than Cersie! The youngest Myrcella is murdered by Ellaria Sand of Dorne, an act of revenge for the death of her lover Oberyn Martell, who fought Gregor Clegane (The Mountain) resulting in a smashed head.

The eldest Baratheon brother Stannis murdered the youngest, Renly, to secure the crown for himself. But by the end of Season V, he is executed by Brienne of Tarth—sworn protector Kingsguard of Renly, her act motivated by vengeance. Therefore Cersei lands on the Throne as the Queen Regent of The Seven Kingdoms.

Meanwhile the North has been captured by The Boltons. Sansa Stark after being almost held captive at the Capital and then at the Vale finally returns home but at a great cost. She is married off to the most vicious, misogynist character on the show, Ramsay Snow (the bastard of Roose Bolton). But she finally manages an escape with the help of Theon Greyjoy and meets up Jon Snow, “the Stark Bastard”, who has been manning The Wall all this while and uniting the Wildlings and the men of the Night’s Watch to fend off the White Walkers. In unison with the army of Vale, he defeats Ramsay at the “Battle of the Bastards” and regains his home, Winterfell.

On the other side of the Narrow Sea, Daenerys Targaryen—the last of her House—builds up her own army of The Dothraki, The Unsullied and The Second Sons. She is also the mother of three fully grown dragons—Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion. She was forced to flee Westeros, lest she might be killed to eliminate her dynasty. By the end of Season VI of the show, we see her returning to her homeland with a huge army at her back to claim what is hers by birthright.

### III

Westeros is hugely inspired by the socio-political conditions of England between the period of 1450 and 1485. It goes without saying that The War of the Roses forms the basic plotline of George R.R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire series. The Yorks and the Lancasters, with their respective White and Red Rose symbols/sigils, influence HBO’s Game of Thrones in the opening seasons. England was torn apart with civil war between the two houses until the ascension of the Tudor Dynasty in 1485.

The sought-after Iron Throne in *Game of Thrones* symbolizes the ultimate dictatorship, the peak of political command in medieval England. One may pertinently see a reflection of The Marble Throne of England in the Iron Throne.

Tywin Lannister, father to Cersei, Jaimie and Tyrion Lannister, like Edward I, takes to violent, unjustified and relentless pursuit of authority. Not unlike Edward I, Tywin is pretty frustrated with his children. Tyrion Lannister, a mirrored figure of Richard III, is noted for his physical deformity. George R.R. Martin clearly underlines in an interview:

[h]e wasn't a hunchback. He didn't have a twisted arm. But he was that king who was deposed by Henry VII, so the Tudor historians tried to make him a physically twisted, deceitful, king-slaying, child-slaying monster, and a lot of what happened to Richard III is happening to Tyrion. Tyrion is someone who is easily cast as a villain, the dwarf hated by the gods, so they twist his body into unfortunate shapes. This is a clear sign of the evil inside him. This was how the medieval mindset worked. (A, "Real History Behind *Game of Thrones*")

Cersei reminds one of Margaret of Anjou, known as the she-wolf for France, who was one of the strongest queens of England in the 1450s. Cersei's Walk of Shame from the TV show has an unmistakably poignant historical precedence. Jane Shore, during the reign of Richard III was made to walk through the streets of London in a kirtle carrying a taper in her hand. Cersei's public shaming was intended to strip her off her royal magnificence/agency either.

Joffrey Baratheon—though fruit of an incest—is a reminder of Richard II, one of the boy-kings of the time with inefficient political holds on the throne. Richard II's spiteful and vengeful manner is portrayed in the fictional character of Joffrey adeptly. Robert Baratheon, his alleged father, is a reflection of Edward IV. Just like the English king, Baratheon too was noted for his lechery and drinking, a king who is very efficient with his war-hammer but cannot hold his own

kingdom once the war is over. Robert is also known as 'The Usurper'. Just like Edward IV defeated Henry VI, Robert Baratheon disrupted the rule of the Mad King Aerys Targaryen.

Lord Eddard Stark (Ned Stark) shows a little resemblance to Richard, Duke of York. But for the most part he is a parallel to William Lord Hastings, who was a great friend of Edward IV. The fictional character shares quite a same life to that of Hastings—being a loyal friend to the King but outlives the King and in an attempt to be righteous gets rewarded with decapitation. Ned Stark's eldest son Robb Stark is a semi-reflection of Edward IV too. Both the fictional and the historical character take on the political command at a very young age after the passing away of their father and also share the same story of marriage—marrying a woman he met while on a campaign. The difference between these two characters lie in that Edward IV successfully overthrows Henry VI, but Robb Stark is murdered at the Red Wedding.

The Red Wedding, where Lady Catelyn Stark, her son Robb Stark and his pregnant wife Talisa and the Stark soldiers are brutally murdered by the Freys, is an amalgamation of particularly two Scottish historical events. First is the Black Dinner held at the court of King James II of Scotland. The 16-year-old William Douglas, 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Douglas and his younger brother were invited to the royal dinner and beheaded by the end of the event. Second is the Massacre of Glencoe, where the guests (the Campbells) murdered the host (the MacDonalds) in the middle of the night after accepting hospitality from the latter. In the TV show, the order of events is reversed, where the host (Walder Frey) signals the murdering of the guest (Stark family).

The Purple Wedding is inspired from the death of Eustace of Blois of the early English Middle Age. He was heir apparent to the English throne under king Stephen of England. He is said to have died quite suddenly choking on a lamprey pie. This incident was imitated by Martin in devising the death of Joffrey at his wedding, where he chokes on a pigeon pie and wine and dies on spot. It was later revealed to be the doing of a poison, cleverly plotted and administered by Lady Olenna and Littlefinger.

Jon Snow is the “bastard” of Ned Stark. This character portrays the exact kind of discrimination and hatred an illegitimate child supposedly faced in the Middle Ages. It brings out the importance of social status in that era.

The character of Sansa Stark is somewhat based on Elizabeth of York. She was almost traded to form an alliance, a pawn in the political game. Marriage in the medieval ages was a medium of joining houses.

The Dothraki across the Narrow Sea draw their inspiration from the Mongolian and the Hunan tribes. There are also traces of influence of the Native American Comanche tribe who took pride in their appearance, just the Dothraki do (the length of their hair being an indicative of their victory).

Daenerys Targaryen is a reworking of three historical characters. Henry VII or Henry Tudor of the War of the Roses deeply shape the persona of Dany. He has spent most of his life in exile in France, just like Daenerys was forced to flee to Essos to escape capture and death. Moreover the banners of Henry Tudor bore the sigil of dragon, which is the symbol of the house Targaryen. Secondly, Alexander the Great from ancient Greek/classical history influences the extensive conquest of the “Mother of Dragons”. Thirdly, Cleopatra, the strong Egyptian Empress has a clear resemblance in Dany’s struggle with the consequences and obligations of power. Her residence as portrayed in the Season V of the HBO TV series is that of a pyramid—a clear reflection of Egyptian culture.

“The Battle of Blackwater” broadcasted in the penultimate episode of the Season II of the show is actually inspired by the the Second Arab Siege of Constantinople. The Arabs tried to blockade the city both by land and sea but were badly defeated when the Byzantine navy used a mysterious substance called “the Greek Fire” quite resonating with the Wild Fire that was used by the Lannisters to defeat Stannis Baratheon.

“The Red Faith” of the show draws its sustenance from ancient Persian religion Zoroastrianism. The Red Priest or the Red Priestesses follow the Lord of light, R’hllor, quite echoing the worship of the God of light, heat and life by Zoroastrians as fire is considered a medium for spiritual awareness and wisdom.

The Iron Bank of Braavos is the most powerful bank in Westeros. It shares its likeness with the Medici Bank of Florence, the most powerful institution in the 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

Additionally The High Sparrow from the Faith of The Seven is a recreation of the Protestant reformation that swept across the sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. From this line of thought arises the successful animation of the Gunpowder Plot of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century in the finale episode of season VI. A group of thirteen Catholics plotted to stage an explosion of the Houses of Parliament in England to make away with the Protestant king James I. The explosion orchestrated by Cersie Lannister by Wild Fire at The Sept of Baelor eliminates the army of The Faith and most of the Tyrells. It is a charismatic representation of alternative history in HBO’s *Game of Thrones*.

#### IV

The Wall in the *Game of Thrones* series is basically a 100 leagues long and 700 feet high ice wall built along the northern border of the Seven Kingdoms to bar the wildlings and the “Others” or the White Walkers. It is made of solid ice, stone and earth, strengthened by charms and sorcery. Due to lack of men in the Night’s Watch, currently only three out of nineteen castles overlooking the structure are in use. It was built by Brandon the Builder with the help of the Children of the Forest, for the purpose of defending The First Men.

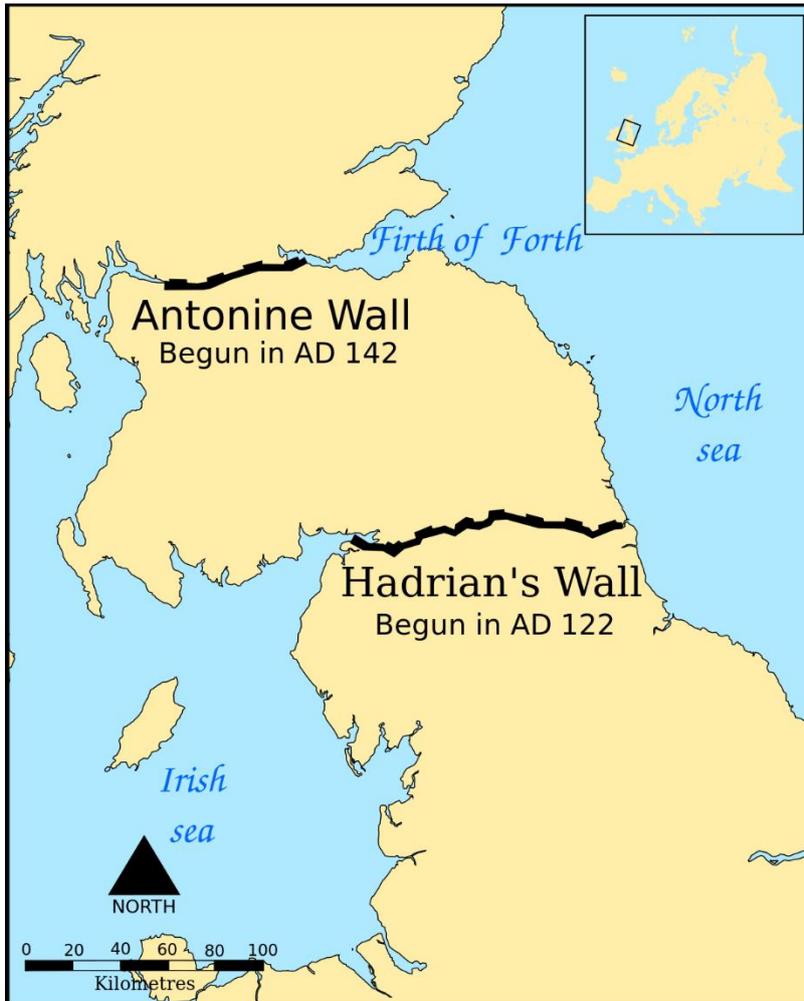


Fig. 2: Wikipedia contributors. "Hadrian's Wall." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 5 Aug. 2017. Web. 1 Aug. 2017.

According to George R. R. Martin, the Hadrian's Wall, built to prevent the Scots from entering the Roman kingdom, serves as an inspiration to this fictional wall of ice. It is also known as the Roman Wall, built as a fortress in the Roman province of Britannia, during the rule of Emperor Hadrian (Fig. 2). With a length of 73 miles, it was the northern limit of the Roman Empire, separating out the lands of the northern Ancient Britons, including the Picts. Contrary to the idea that this wall marks the boundary between England and Scotland, it in fact lies entirely within England and has never formed the Anglo-British border ("Hadrian's Wall").

Another parallel establishment to The Wall at Westeros is the Antonine Wall— another Roman construction, spanning for approximately 63 km, built across what is now the Central Belt

of Scotland between the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Clyde. It is the second of two Great Walls in Northern Britain—a representation of northernmost boundary of the Roman Empire (“Antonine Wall”).

One may feel tempted to refer to the historical French allied forces’ Maginot Line in this context. During the Second World War, France invested eleven years and 450 million US dollars to secure 450 miles of countryside against the approaching German militarization. But the Nazis simply went round the wall and invaded the territory on May, 1940. The White Walkers at issue might well be the Nazis of the show, going around Bran the Builder’s Wall (Dey, “Reading HBO’s *GOT* S07E02”).

Another historical model for The Wall in Westeros might be The Berlin Wall. The end of WWII decided the division of Germany into four Allied occupation zones, where East Germany would be ruled by The Soviet while the western part would be dominated by the US, Great Britain and France. Though the city of Berlin was totally within East Germany, it was to be divided in the same way—which led to the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961 by German Democratic Republic of East Germany to mark the territorial limits and to keep out the Western Fascists. The rich capitalist western sector, in sharp contrast to the economically poor socialist eastern sector, resembles the imperialistic luxurious land south of the Westerosi Wall contrasted to the socialist rule of Mance Raydar to the North-of-the-Wall. The Berlin Wall served its purpose until 9 November 1989 when the East German rule announced the permission of its citizens to cross the border when they wanted. Collaterally in Westeros, Jon Snow convinced the Crows and the Freefolk to unite and let the latter tread the lands south of the Wall (Simple History, "The Berlin Wall").

The contemporary American political scenario sparks off a similar idea: that of The Mexican Wall proposed by Donald Trump in his Presidential campaign. The US-Mexico border is about 3100 km long and traverses different terrains and bio-regions. Trump wants an “impenetrable, physical, tall, powerful or beautiful” wall at this border (BBC, “Donald Trump’s

Mexico Wall”), to tackle the threat to the National Security by the encroaching of the immigrants from Mexico without working permit, renegades from Mexican Civil War and remnants of the Internal Gang wars of Colombian and Mexican Drug Cartels. If The Wall built by Brandon the Builder is to keep the Others out, a means of check on the National Security of the southern lands of Westeros, Trump’s Border Wall is no less a replica that evokes contemporaneity in the work of HBO’s *Game of Thrones*.

## V

The White Walkers, also known as the Others, are described by Martin as “strange, beautiful...made of ice, something like that...a different sort of life...inhuman elegant and dangerous.” Their flesh is as pale as milk and has cold blue eyes that burn like ice or is as bright as blue stars.

As the legends have it, the White Walkers came from the Lands of Always Winter some six or eight thousand years ago and brought upon The Long Night over the whole continent. They are skilled militants wielding thin crystal swords which can cover a metal blade in frost and shatter a steel blade. They enhance their army by resurrecting dead men or creatures as “wights”. There are a few elements which can suppress this army: one being weapons made of “Obsidian” or “Dragonglass” or “frozen fire”, another would be Weapons of “dragonsteel” or “Valyrian Steel”. In the Battle for the Dawn, the Others were finally defeated by the joint forces of the First Men and the Children of the Forest. The last heroes of the First Men went on to form the Night’s Watch, a sort of guard assigned to protect The Wall. The Night’s King, that is the Lord Commander XIII of the Night’s Watch (Fig. 3) is said to have married the “corpse queen”, a White Walker-woman and has reigned for thirteen years. According to the Old Nan, he was “a warrior who knew no fear and that was the fault in him, for all men must know fear”. He was defeated by Brandon the Breaker, the King of Winter and Joramun, the King-Beyond-the-Wall.

There is a controversy over the affinity between this Night's King mentioned in the book series and The Night King presented in the show. The Night's King was not the first White Walker according to *A Song of Ice and Fire* and did not attain his "status" before the Long Night was over. But the show confirms that he was the first ever Other and was created by the Children of the Forest as a means of defence against the attacks of the First Men (*Game of Thrones*: season 6, episode "The Door"), which is quite contrary to the book where the Walkers do not appear until The Long Night during the Age of the Heroes (Screen Prism, "*Game of Thrones*' White Walkers").



Fig. 3: *A Wiki of Ice and Fire* contributors. "Night King." *A Wiki of Ice and Fire*, 1 August 2017. Web. 3 August 2017.

Going by the plot-arc of the show, the ploy of the Children eventually backfired and now the White Walkers have returned as the doom of both Children of the Forest and men alike. To quote the creators of *Game of Thrones*, Weiss and Benioff, "What we are watching is the creation of this absolute evil, so the absolute evil is not absolute after all. No one is innocent in this world and there is just something really beautifully right about the idea that the great nemesis of mankind was created to protect the Children of the Forest from mankind!" (RNS Entertainment, "The Complete History of the Night's King").

Michail Zontos rightly points out the *disappearance of the narrative of history* of both the northerners and the Others in his essay, "Dividing Lines: Frederick Jackson Turner's Western Frontier and George R.R. Martin's Northern Wall":

If Native Americans had disappeared from the American master narrative, the wildling culture had disappeared from the narrative of the maesters. When Osha, a captured wildling, tries to warn the Starks about the dangers of the North, she realizes that she is not taken seriously. Maester Luwin reacts to her stories of children of the forest, giants, magic and white walkers, by saying that "the wildling woman could give Old Nan lessons in telling tales" (*GoT* 54 Bran 6: 485). Her stories and beliefs are dismissed as fairytales. (104-105)

No one has been seen taking the imminent threat of the White Walkers existence and march towards south of the Wall in a serious vein in the beginning seasons. Zontos also looks upon the merging of Castle Black and those of the Mance Rayder's Free Folk as "assimilation": "The defeat of the wildling force at Castle Black, and Stannis Baratheon's decision to allow them to come across the Wall in order to support the Night's Watch against the threat of the White Walkers leads us to the last point to be made here: the question of assimilation" (108).

Jessica Walker, on the other hand, looks upon the return of the Others/wights as "the inescapable, cyclical return to the traumas of the past" (86) in her article, "'Just songs in the end': Historical Discourses in Shakespeare and Martin": "Though summer may return temporarily, winter's return is inevitable; and just as ice keeps objects locked in stasis, the White Walkers represent a nation unable to move forward permanently from the traumas of the past" (84). Beth Kozinsky, in her treatise "'A thousand bloodstained hands': The Malleability of Flesh and Identity" aptly writes, while the people of the Seven Kingdoms still perceive injured bodies as other, the real threat to humanity rests with the White Walkers (181). Kozinsky goes on to define the thingification of the undead Walkers,

As a mysterious species from the North, the White Walkers function as the series' Other, but it is with an army of the human dead that they lead their assault. The Others and their undead servants threaten not just lives, but the malleability of identity. For the dead may walk, but they cannot change. (181)

The Night King is known to shape the human corpse into an undead whight without breaking the malleability of the human cadaver. This moulding raises pertinent questions of identity indeed. Before we conclude this section, it is noteworthy what Shacklock in "'A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies": Transmedia Textuality and the Flows of Adaptation" says:

One of the most obvious points of difference between the novels and the television series is the renaming of "the Others" to "the White Walkers." While this change is undoubtedly pragmatic (it distinguishes them from the villains in *Lost*), it points to the synaesthetic nature of adaptive texts. "White Walkers" suggests a merging of color and movement, a mix of vision and touch that flows into a single unit. The alliteration of the name enhances this sense of a conjoined sensation—a white movement and a walking color—creating a smooth "hinge" between two senses. (269)

The HBO drama did change the Others from Martin's books to White Walkers which denotes a conjoined sensation for the visual reception of the watchers: the whiteness, the colour, the walk. The mentioned synthetic nature of the colour and movement does lend a significant mixture of optic and tactile sensation to the malleable identity of the White Walkers.

## VI

On the one hand, The Wall is an exercise in keeping the marginal Others out of/away from the privileged political ecosystems of Westeros, and secondly, it is also an exercise in human

arrogance that will eventually result in The Age of Anthropocene in which the destruction of ecosystems is one of the most alarming concerns.

To quote Charli Carpenter, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts:

The slogan “Winter is coming” is meant literally as well as metaphorically: planetary forces are moving slowly but inexorably toward climatic catastrophe as the infighting amongst kings and queens distracts them from the bigger picture.  
(Carpenter, Charli, “*Game of Thrones* as Theory”)

This is how Carpenter reads the collective action story of *Game of Thrones*. The Night’s Watch has been blaring desperate alarms only to receive indifference from the kings and queens. Although cooperation is difficult, the wights in the guise of sweeping winter are an undeniable common threat.

The Northern barbarian hordes are rather open to the onslaught of the wights as they are on the fringe, the first victims of environmental change/catastrophe since “winter” has already arrived in Season VII. The free-folks beyond The Wall bring a new dimension of dramatic political culture to the show. Carpenter further quotes, “The argument seems clear: if existing governance structures cannot manage emerging global threat, expect them to evolve or fall by the wayside.” The noble houses of Stark, Baratheon, Lannister, Targaryen are too busy combating amongst themselves for their right over the Iron Throne, oblivious to their approaching doom at the hands of the Others. Since they have been long gone for almost 8000 years, people are blinded by denial and disbelief. The contemporary allegory here points to the fact that if global warming is our undead zombie in the Anthropocene, are we doing enough to prevent the extinction of life on earth as we know it?

Both Ice and Fire are two threatening disasters in the Anthropocene: on the one hand, there is a threat of an ice age, and on the other hand, two degrees of increase in Asian temperature could

wipe out the greenery around the equator in this decade. Already the Northerners are seen migrating to the south of The Wall and this is the case of climate migration that Dipesh Chakrabarty talks about in his seminal article “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change”: “[f]or climate change will produce—and has begun to produce—its own cases of refugees and regime failures.” (13).

Sunita Narain and Anil Agarwal have already published a thought-provoking book in 1991 from Centre for Science and Environment, Delhi, *Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism*. We are already in a phase of globalisation and global warming, and Ulrich Beck calls this age a “risk society” (Chakrabarty 13). Much like in our age of global warming, the Westerosi subjects are also acting like a geophysical force. To quote Chakrabarty once again, “[y]ou have to think of the two figures of the human simultaneously: the human-human and the nonhuman-human” (11). The Westerosi nobles, soldiers, dwarves are all part of the “human-human” category, even the Northerners, and it appears that the wights are the “nonhuman-human”. This is where the postcolonial scholar should categorically intervene. Man used to be an experimenter on a geophysical scale in the 1950s (Chakrabarty 11), which was the time of the father of fantasy novels: J R R Tolkien, and by the 1990s man turned a geophysical force himself. In 1996, the first instalment of *A Song of Ice and Fire* series saw the light of the day.

The Northern Wall that stands erected in the Age of Heroes rather appears to be early modernity reinforced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which saw an aggravating and potential growth in industry, capital and carbon emissions that heralded in the epoch of global warming in the 1990s—which reads like the coming of winter and the emergence of White Walkers after thousands of years. The Long Night in Westeros may indicate a new geological era that has affinity with our Anthropocene geological era. Global warming opens up “a new frontier of postcolonial studies” (8), and Westeros now has the issue of climate migration in the North. The Free-folks from the north of The Wall are the new subalterns and before long both the migrating Northerners and the encroaching wights

will have their alarming impact on Westerosi socio-political economy. “It is the question of refugees, asylum seekers, illegal workers” (8): these stateless/new subaltern Northerners led to the south of the Wall by Jon Snow are the stateless, shelter-seeking migrants who may be looked upon as the “surplus population” in the politico-economic demography of the Seven Kingdoms.

Amitav Ghosh in his thought-provoking endeavour, *The Great Derangement*, writes that one island in Bangladesh—Bhola Island—“has led to the displacement of more than 500,000 people” (119). Compared to this alarming demography of climate migration, the force entry of the Free Folks to the south of the Northern Wall is significantly puny. Then again, there is the question of the deaths that the White Walkers cause on their march: they relentlessly slaughter people in their walk, sometimes to repeat iconic ritualistic patterns and sometimes to incorporate more of the risen undead into their army. If the agents of climate change have been mercilessly taking a toll on the lives of the living folks of Westeros, Amitav Ghosh reminds his readers of a very curtailed picture of death toll on account of storm surge induced by climate change in the Bengal Delta alone: “The 1971 Bhola Cyclone is thought to have killed 3,00,000 people. As recently as 1991, a cyclone in Bangladesh resulted in 1,38,000 dead, of whom ninety percent were women” (119).

## VII

This article provides a few avenues for the illumination on the trope of “uncertain times”. The gamut of uncertain times points to the fact that we are in Paul Crutzen’s popularized nomenclature, Anthropocene in the 1980s. It refers to the human impact on the biodiversity of the planet gradually rolling towards the sixth major extinction, and among other alarming human activities, one of those human activity is accelerating and exacerbating global warming by leaps and bounds. Our world is at a peculiar tipping point after The Great Acceleration of the 1945 that Bonneuil and Fressoz talk about. Leonardo DiCaprio in his National Geographic docu-feature, *Before the Flood*, made with Fisher Stevens, talks to Dr Piers Sellers, an erstwhile astronaut and present-director of Earth Sciences Division at NASA/GSFC about a glaring misconception in the global

warming-literacy of the masses that Sellers underlines on the satellite images of the world ocean streams noting:

The dumping of ice off melting Greenland would stop this conveyor belt, and the Gulf Stream would slow down, stopping the transport of heat from here to there. And then Europe would get cold toes because there is a lot of heat transport from the tropics, across the North Atlantic, which keeps Europe warm. (DiCaprio, *Before the Flood*)

Here lies the core of the affiliation between the wights and climate change. Because of the global warming certain parts of Europe may get colder. The White Walkers are the literal embodiment of the Winter that is “coming” indeed. This not only points to the dreaded Long Winter/dreaded Long Night but also to a very real-world scenario of climate change-dynamic in which global warming cause unprecedented colder climates. This is how the White Walkers become the manifestation of the real-world climate change that Europe faces because of the ice melting off Greenland and the arctic.

Climate change also induces the transition of precipitation belts across the globe, and that in a way means that the tropic regions around the equator, the already warmer lands would see more and more water-crisis and droughts, which may lead to failed states and civil war. Sellers says, “There are a lot of papers written in the State Department and elsewhere, how that sustained drought has helped fuel the conflict of the Syrian civil war, Darfur, Sudan—all these places that are short of water, short of food” (DiCaprio, *Before the Flood*). The Battle for the Wall in Season IV between the Free Folks and the Night’s Watch was in a way fuelled by a sort of climate migration—the northerners seek to cross the Wall and come south. Secondly, the onslaught of the White Walkers could also be seen as a geopolitical crisis-fuelled civil war in the lands of Westeros, much like the crises in Sudan, Syria and Darfur that Sellers notes.

HBO's *Game of Thrones* is a significant visual text of power bound binaries of inside/outside, human/non-human, men/wights, North of the Wall/South of the Wall, and such divisions only problematize the political economy and the environment of Westeros all the more. Amitav Ghosh in his *The Great Derangement* writes that climate change poses a potent challenge to the most important political conception of the modern era: "the idea of freedom":

Only those peoples who had thrown off the shackles of their environment were thought to be endowed with historical agency; they alone were believed to merit the attention of historians—other peoples might have had a past but they were thought to lack history, which realises itself through human agency. (159-160)

If the non-human forces of wights/Others/White Walkers really are the agents of global warming, as we know it, should they be not categorically identified with the non-humans without a history? Why is there not a history of the White Walkers? Why have they not been given a voice to tell their own history? Do their archives have to be overshadowed by the Children of the Forests, the First Men, the Andals and the pact and treaties between Men and the Children? Why do they not have any agency? Why are they not given the agency of freedom to choose, to live, to fight for their own story of origin? Why do they have to be defined by a powerlessness shadowed by Children of the Forest? Why do they have to attack every thousand years to make a mark in the history of Westeros? What if Azhor Ahai is only an embodiment of human agency in the age of high modernism, who wins the Battle for the Dawn only to relegate the wights/the nonhuman nature to the background in the name of rampant industrial progress?

The White Walkers, perhaps, are striding, marching towards King's Landing to take what is rightfully theirs: the land beyond the Northern Wall, the historical agency, the voice they were denied for centuries, their freedom. May it be that they demand to *merit the attention of the historians* at the Citadel. They have a past, they have a present but they do not have the recognition of history. They are, much like the nature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, denied the (human) agency to thrive,

to be, to live, to write their own destiny. It is difficult to have answers to all these questions. The unfinished narrations of George R.R. Martin do not give linear answers to these questions. The questions themselves, in fact, are more important than the answers.

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