

## Climate Change and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: An Ecocritical Study

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### Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) is a significant novel that explores climate change and human migration. Ghosh uses myth, narrative craft and folklore to portray this grave environmental degradation. The novel presents Deen Datta, a Bengali Indian living in Brooklyn, as a rare book dealer. His journey from the Sundarbans to Venice demonstrates the global dimensions of the climate crisis and human displacement. By drawing on the legend of the Gun Merchant, Ghosh connects the past with the present to demonstrate how climate change shapes human lives and patterns of migration. He expresses his sensitivity towards environmental destruction. He effectively combines culture, history, myth and fiction to highlight the novel's environmental themes. The novel presents a grim picture of environmental collapse, showing how global warming and the climate crisis contribute to the displacement and migration of humans and other species worldwide. This study embraces an ecocritical framework to explore the complex relationship between environmental degradation and human precarity in the novel. Furthermore, the study examines how climate-induced displacement reshapes identities, alters cultural traditions, and intensifies social and economic inequalities across borders. The paper argues that *Gun Island* not only points out the urgency of the climate crisis but also redefines migration as an ecological and cultural event. Ultimately, this paper delves into deep reflection about human-nature relationships as well as a reconsideration of human attitudes towards natural resources in the face of the increasing environmental crisis.

**Keywords:** Climate change, Migration and Displacement, Anthropocene, Climate Refugees, Environmental crisis, Environmental Justice.

## Introduction

Primarily, the term ecocriticism is used to establish a close relationship between literature and the environment. The increasing frequency of ecological disasters and environmental calamities has become a major global concern. Global warming, biodiversity loss and habitat loss are the outcomes of human over-interference in nature. Several species have become vulnerable and extinct due to excessive human-caused natural calamities. For the first time, the term “ecocriticism” was used by William Rueckert in his influential essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978). Studying the etymology of the word ecology, the word “eco” is derived from “oikos” (a Greek word) meaning “household” or dwelling place, while “logy” originates from “logos”, which means rational discourse or study. Ultimately, ecocriticism represents a mode of literary criticism that closely examines the relationship between literature and the environment. Continuing this framework, Lawrence Buell, in his book *The Environmental Imagination*, explains ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in the spirit of commitment to environmental praxis” (Buell 430). In an article titled “Environmentalism and Ecocriticism,” Richard Kerridge explains ecocriticism in these words: “Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint. Texts are evaluated in terms of their environmentally helpful or harmful effects. Ecocritics analyse the history of concepts such as ‘nature’ in an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis” (Waugh 530).

The environmental crisis is arguably one of the defining issues of the 21st century and has spawned widespread analyses of the political, social and cultural aspects of the environmental predicament amongst diverse fields. Amongst these literary critics and theorists are engaged in understanding literature as it pertains to nature and to the ways it portrays the consequences of ecological disaster and the connection between humanity and nature. The field

of ecocriticism offers an approach to literature that addresses ecological themes and also provides a context for interrogating literature's complicity with dominant narratives of division between humanity and nature.

The only contemporary Indian author to seriously bring the subject of climate change into the literary domain, Amitav Ghosh makes a unique contribution. In his widely acclaimed book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Ghosh asserts that contemporary literature has been unsuccessful in dealing with the consequences of climate change, turning the ecological crisis invisible within literature. His recent novel, *Gun Island* (2019) can be considered as an attempt to address this literary predicament, drawing upon an ecological crisis that weaves together human displacement with a transnational narrative across India, the Mediterranean and Europe.

*Gun Island's* explorations of the interconnectedness of environmental change and migration demonstrate how climate instability, in the forms of encroaching sea levels and climatic anomalies as well as the legend of Bonduki Sadagar's journey by sea, create conditions of instability which displace humans and encourage them to traverse national boundaries. As one of the most climate sensitive regions, the Sundarbans function as the novel's key site of interaction between ecological devastation and social vulnerability, and a source of constant anxiety and precariousness for its inhabitants.

This paper seeks to read *Gun Island* through the perspective of ecocriticism to analyse the connection between climate change and migration. The paper argues that Ghosh does not read migration as a purely political and economic affair but rather as an ecological event arising out of the drastically altering environment. By describing the interdependent relationship of humans, animals and ecology, the novel transcends anthropocentric perspectives and positions climate-driven migration on a global level. The novel's preoccupation with the crisis of

environment and human mobility establishes it as a relevant part of the ongoing climate fiction and widens the dimension of ecological imagination within Indian English literature.

*Gun Island* shows that climate change is a global problem through different significant places. The setting of the story is in the Sundarbans (India), Los Angeles, New York, Brooklyn, and Venice (Italy). In these places, the impacts of climate change are more visible in reality. It is revealed through biodiversity loss and the threat to life in more sensitive locations such as Venice and the Sundarbans due to human-caused catastrophe. Ghosh depicts how global warming is badly impacting climatic patterns, which have reshaped social and ecological life in the Sundarban islands. Land dynamics have changed rapidly in the Sundarban region due to the high rise in sea level. "The islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they are disappearing before our eyes" (18). The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in its 1990 report, observed that the most significant consequence of climate change may be its impact on human migration. As noted, "The greatest impact of climate change might be on human migration-with millions of people displaced by shoreline erosion, coastal flooding, and agricultural disruption. Since then, successive reports have argued that environmental degradation, and in particular climate change, is poised to become a major driver of population displacement-a crisis in the making" (Gupta 11).

*Gun Island* is divided into two parts, namely "The Gun Merchant" and "Venice." Part One discusses the Sundarbans, while Part Two focuses on Venice and immigrants. Ghosh describes the current situation of the Sundarbans through Dinanath's exploration of the myth of "Mansa Devi." The primary focus lies on the evolving living conditions of human populations and aquatic life alongside rapid shifts in global climate patterns. Dinanath tries to understand that climate change has adverse effects on all living beings in the forest. During his visit, he becomes familiar with the impact of Cyclone Aila, which struck the Sundarbans in 2009. He observes the serious condition of the Sundarbans and the living conditions of its residents as

well as aquatic animals. The main focus of the novel is the unprecedented and unexpected changes in climatic conditions. Ghosh attempts to expose this changing scenario in the Sundarbans region. He suggests that what appears as demonic possession symbolises the deeper ecological crisis shaping the overall condition of the Sundarbans. Anthropocentric greed has turned the Sundarbans into a place that can no longer sustain living organisms, including humans. Amitav Ghosh emphasises that human greed may ultimately lead to a “Pralaya,” which could destroy the entire world. Tipu clearly explains to Deen the consequences of human greed.

“Hey, Pops, I got news for you: greed’s real, it’s big. You got greed, I got greed, we all got greed..., it’s not parasites we got inside of us, it’s greed! If that’s what a demon is, there’s no way it’s imaginary. Shit no! We’re all demons... That’s really bad news, because according to Hindu mythology when demons take over is when the world ends” (Ghosh 113).

By visiting the Sundarbans dhaam of “The Gun Merchant,” Dinanath understands and exposes the materialistic tendencies along with the impact of human greed. Humans have ignored and neglected Mother Nature in the name of development, prosperity, and the pursuit of better lifestyles and living conditions. The situation in the Sundarbans has become alarming and dangerous due to anthropocentric greed. Human beings have exploited nature for personal benefit. Now, the scenario in the Sundarbans has changed drastically. Once, humans controlled and regulated the Sundarbans, but now nature is expressing its anger and fury towards humans through climatic calamities and disasters, making the region barren and uninhabitable for all living beings. The people of the Sundarbans began to experience severe hardships.

“It seemed both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans. When people tried to dig wells, an arsenic-laced brew gushed out of the soil; when they tried to shore up embankments the tides rose higher and pulled them down again. Even fishermen

could barely get by; where once their boats would come back with catch, now they counted themselves lucky if they netted a handful of fry” (Ghosh 54).

Through the character of Piya, Ghosh meditates on the scientific perspectives of climate change. Piya is a marine biologist. She frequently visits Kolkata in order to carry out her research project in the Sundarbans. She usually stays with Nilima in the city. Generally, Piya presents scientific reasons and explanations of climate change. Ghosh expresses his concern regarding the depletion of various species due to “dumping of toxic effluents” (177) in the oceans. Piya talks about the population of fish and crabs, which is declining at a very high pace. “more shoals of dead fish drifting up. [...] a big crab die-off– a huge swarm of them lying dead on a mud bank. That’s seriously bad news because crabs are keystone species in the Sundarbans” (108). Dolphins are changing their paths and moving towards highly fished areas due to rising sea levels. “some had been ensnared by fishermen’s nets and some had been hit by motorboats and steamers” (92). She gives many reasons and explanations for the beaching of dolphins. Marine animals use a kind of echolocation that is helpful for navigation, but it gets disturbed by submarines and sonar equipment sounds. Humans have ignored and neglected the threat they have posed to these aquatic animals due to the creation of dead zones. These dead zones are very dangerous places for aquatic animals, where no life can survive.

“Have you heard of oceanic dead zones? No? Well, they are these vast stretches of water that have a very low oxygen content- to go for fish to survive. Those zones have been growing at a phenomenal pace mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers. When they are washed into the sea, they set off a chain reaction that leads to all the oxygen being sucked out of the water. Only a few highly specialised organisms can survive in those conditions- everything else dies, which is why those patches of water are known as ‘dead zones’, and those zones have now spread over tens of thousands of square miles of ocean-some of them as large as middle-sized countries” (95).

Part Two of the novel, titled “Venice,” analyses how people are forced to migrate far away from their homeland due to climate change. Coastal flooding, shoreline erosion, and agricultural disruption compel many people to leave their homes. The Sundarbans has also become a region severely affected by climatic changes. The residents of this area are forced to migrate in search of safer and more secure habitats. Ghosh depicts the migration experiences of Tipu and Rafi. Through their journey, he shows that migration can be extremely horrifying and dangerous, especially when people move illegally from one place to another in search of better living conditions. When they migrate illegally from one place to another, they face serious risks to their lives. “...You have to run like crazy, over steep slopes. The soldiers on the Turkish side shoot if they see anyone trying to cross” (93).

Migration is a social and political phenomenon. Ghosh discusses the pain and suffering of climate refugees while also exposing the migratory patterns of different species caused by climate change. This narrative exposes the injustice faced by disempowered local communities. They are marginalised, economically weak, and highly vulnerable to these climatic conditions. Through the characters of Rafi and Tipu, Ghosh attempts to reveal issues such as illegal migration, human trafficking, identity crisis, and prostitution. Climate refugees are forced to leave their homes in India. They face extremely harsh climatic conditions due to global warming and climate change, along with the pressures of capital and labour. Through his exploration of migration, Ghosh advocates for social, political, and economic justice for humans and other species. Ghosh gives a clear picture of how climate change brings chaos and disruption to human populations and their lives through the characters of Tipu and Rafi. These two important characters of the novel leave their home in search of a safe and secure place and a better habitat. However, in this process, they suffer greatly and face many difficulties. Ultimately, by overcoming these challenges, they reach a secure place. “For the next year and half we were beaten, tortured, and sold by one gang to another. They made us work from

morning to night, paying us almost nothing and giving us only bread to eat. We were like slaves; what we went through was something that should not happen to any human being” (195). We need to learn from the sacrifice of Rafi for his friend Tipu, as he strives to secure a safe and stable place, which is admirable. Such values should be inculcated in the human mind in order to establish a harmonious relationship with Mother Nature. Human beings should give up this destructive anthropocentric greed and be ready to make sacrifices to protect nature. Tipu and Rafi demonstrate concern for the safety, security, and happiness of others. They endure hardship themselves in order to ensure the well-being of others. This spirit of sacrifice and care for others should be adopted by every individual to maintain a harmonious and healthy relationship with Mother Nature.

### **Myth and Ecology**

The story of myth and folklore serves as a framework and also a structure on which Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* stands. The story revolves around the myth of the Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar), which is considered a tale connected to the cult of the Mansa Devi, the goddess of the snakes. By transposing the old tale into the new narrative of climate change, Ghosh tries to bring the memories of past culture into connection with the facts of the present ecology. The myth works not only as a storytelling element but an interpretative mode to engage with the novel's theme of environmental damage, migration and inseparability of human and non-human.

The story narrates the plight of a merchant who tries to escape from the clutches of Mansa Devi after dismissing her might. He travels far and wide, but all his efforts are futile and he is unable to escape the repercussions of his deeds. In a way, it is similar to the state of contemporary mankind, who disregard the environmental omens and try to escape from the

adverse effects of environmental degradation. With this analogy, Ghosh argues that climate change is a global issue which is not limited to any region or country boundaries.

Mansa Devi holds a considerable significance in the ecocritical paradigm of the novel. Linked conventionally to the snakes, fertility and the natural, she represents a non-human world that has a will of its own. The continuous occurrence of snakes and other uncommon environmental occurrences in the novel can be regarded as a direct challenge to the anthropocentric worldview and highlight the fact that nature does not act merely as a mere backdrop but takes an active part in human affairs.

The narrative is also grounded in the ecological lore of the Sundarbans. Traditions and belief systems like the ones surrounding Bon Bibi and local folk legends which promote co-existence between man and nature stand out in stark contrast to contemporary trends in the plundering of the environment. Also the journey of the Gun Merchant can be compared to present day climate migrants who have been forced to relocate due to the present ecological crisis. Through the connection of myth and present-day situations Ghosh reveals that migration has an undeniable link with ecological changes. Hence, the legend of the Gun Merchant proves to be an apt way in which Gun Island brings across its ecocritical stance and its undeniable relation between climate change, migration and the natural world.

### **Environmental Justice**

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* raises the question of environmental justice in climate change by showing that the burden of its impacts falls more heavily on the poor. In the novel, it centers on the vulnerability of the Sundarbans where sea-level rise, cyclone and degradation of the ecosystem threatens people's survival and livelihoods. Not having adequate resources to cope with these changes, many people are displaced in search of safety and survival.

Both Tipu and Rafi have a similar experience; their flight from the Sundarbans leads to a situation where they become prey to networks of human trafficking, and are met by a precarious and uncertain future. Ghosh, by this story of Tipu and Rafi, further stresses how environmental insecurity is linked to poverty and marginality. Ghosh illustrates through their struggle that it is those, who have least to do with environmental changes, which are affected the worst. This fact is reiterated in the comparative lives of Deen, a Brooklyn-based rich rare-book dealer, who travels across the world unhindered, with Tipu and Rafi, for whom travelling means only hardship. But the novel also places these experiences on a planetary scale. As Deen notes, "it was as if the very rotation of the planet had accelerated, moving all living things at unstoppable velocities" (Ghosh 181). This statement both reflects the increasingly accelerating nature of globalized capitalism, that has shrunk the globe while heightening ecological problems, and suggests Chakrabarty's concept of the difference between the globe and the planet. As he argues, "The globe is a humanocentric construction; the planet, or the Earth system, decenters the human" (4). Ghosh thus transcends a purely human-centric approach, as seen in the rendering of human and nonhuman shared vulnerability, in his commitment to an inclusive vision of planetary environmental justice. This proves that climate change is not separable from the issue of inequality and forced mobility.

Environmental justice is a theme that occupies an important part of *Gun Island*. In the novel, Ghosh shows how climate change impact is unequally distributed among the most marginalized groups of people: those living in the Sundarbans. Such peoples are more subjected to the dictates of slow violence, a new concept introduced by Rob Nixon, which describes "a violence that is slow, invisible, dispersed across long periods and large areas" (Nixon 2). The slow violence in the Sundarbans, the encroaching of the sea, the destruction wreaked by cyclones threaten local populations and their means of livelihood and push them into migration. The catastrophic experience of Tipu and Rafi is an illustration of the people who are pushed into

migration, not only by the fear of climatic catastrophe, but also by environmental and economic preponderance and rigidity and the threat of trafficking and human trafficking. Throughout their migration, Ghosh allows the readers to witness how the impact of climate change exacerbates existing socio-economic disparities, as the narratives of Tipu and Rafi stand as a testament to the structure of environmental injustice. With Deen's comparatively comfortable and privileged, the stories of the two are a reminder to the readers of how the groups who are most responsible for climate change are not the ones bearing its greatest burden. On the whole, *Gun Island* highlights the fact that climate change is an issue of social and environmental justice.

### **Conclusion**

An ecocritical perspective on *Gun Island* shows that Ghosh does not treat climate change as just an ecological crisis, but as a multifaceted issue involving migration, environmental justice, and the connection between humans and non-human entities. Through the story of the people of Sundarban and climate migrants in the novel, it becomes clear that environmental damage causes the vulnerability of the poor and a shift in the nature of mobility around the world. This study aims to analyse the significance of *Gun Island* by linking the local impacts of environmental change to the broader planetary crisis of climate change. Through its use of myth, folklore and climate-related themes, *Gun Island* offers new perspectives on climate fiction and deepens our understanding of the Anthropocene. In addition, the ecocritical approach helps analyze how environmental issues drive migration, shape environmental justice, and redefine the relationship between humans and non-human beings. *Gun Island*, therefore, emerges as a significant work of contemporary climate fiction that foregrounds the interconnectedness of the climate crisis, migration, and environmental justice.

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