

Imbalance and Climate Crisis: An Eco-critical Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract

Crisis representation within the field of literary studies increasingly recognizes climate change as a defining global emergency, whose pervasive and multidimensional impact profoundly shapes both the material conditions of the contemporary world and its cultural imaginaries. Literary texts have increasingly become significant sites for examining how societies imagine, narrate, and respond to ecological catastrophes and environmental transformations. Climate fiction, or “cli-fi,” has emerged as a critical literary genre in the 21st century, addressing the ecological anxieties of the Anthropocene by merging scientific realities with imaginative storytelling.

*This article provides an eco-critical reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019), a novel that deftly intertwines myth, migration, and human-nonhuman interactions to map the contours of a planet in flux. The research hypothesizes that Ghosh's integration of the “*Bonduki Sadagar*” (*Gun Merchant*) myth functions as a deliberate narrative strategy to historicize the current climate crisis. By embedding modern ecological collapse within ancient folklore, Ghosh reframes climate change not merely as a scientific phenomenon but as a cultural and existential catastrophe that disrupts the*

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boundaries between the past and present, the human and the non-human. This paper analyses how Gun Island foregrounds the agency of nature manifested through the “uncanny” and investigates the novel’s depiction of climate-induced migration, arguing that Ghosh presents a world where environmental degradation and human displacement are inextricably linked.

Keywords: climate change crisis, anthropocene, migration, myth, ecological awareness, the uncanny, human- nonhuman relations.

Introduction

Climate Fiction, or ‘Cli-Fi’, has evolved from a niche sub-genre into a dominant mode of contemporary literary expression. It reflects the growing recognition that climate change is the singular, overarching narrative of the 21st century. Amitav Ghosh highlights in his non-fiction work *The Great Derangement* (2016), ‘serious’ literary fiction has historically struggled to address climate change, often relegating it to science fiction or fantasy. Ghosh posits that the modern novel, built on the foundations of probability and individual agency, is ill-equipped to handle the “improbable” scale of geological catastrophe. *Gun Island* can be read as Ghosh’s fictional response to his own critique. In this novel, he attempts to break the “derangement” by creating a narrative where the miraculous, the catastrophic, and the scientific coexist. He moves beyond the statistical abstraction of global warming to portray its visceral reality: rising seas, erratic cyclones, and the mass movement of species.

The setting of the novel the Sundarbans is crucial. This massive mangrove delta, straddling India and Bangladesh, is the ‘ground zero’ of the climate crisis. It is a liminal space where land and water are in constant flux, and where the boundaries between human settlement and the wild are porous. By rooting his global narrative in this fragile ecosystem, Ghosh emphasizes that the ecological crisis is not a distant future scenario but a present-day reality for millions in the Global South.

The Resurrection of Myth: The Gun Merchant and Manasa Devi

At the heart of *Gun Island* lies the ancient Bengali folktale of the “Bonduki Sadagar” (Gun Merchant). The protagonist, Dinanath ‘Deen’ Datta, a rare book dealer based in Brooklyn, is drawn back to Kolkata and eventually to the Sundarbans to investigate a shrine dedicated to this merchant. According to the legend, the Gun Merchant was a wealthy trader who refused to submit to Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes and other poisonous creatures. In retaliation, the goddess unleashed the fury of nature upon him storms, floods, and serpents chasing him across the oceans until he was forced to seek refuge

in a land free of snakes, “Bonduk-dwip” (Gun Island).

The Gun Merchant was said to have been a rich trader who had angered Manasa Devi by refusing to become her devotee. Plagued by snakes and pursued by droughts, famines, storms, and other calamities, he had fled overseas to escape the goddess’s wrath. (Ghosh 17)

This myth is not merely atmospheric decoration; it is an allegorical framework for the Anthropocene. The Gun Merchant represents the archetype of the modern capitalist or the industrial human: arrogant, wealthy, and believing he can trade his way out of nature’s laws. He believes that his “guns” (technology/commerce) can protect him from the “goddess” (nature). Manasa Devi, conversely, represents the vengeful, uncontrollable force of the Earth.

Ghosh suggests that modern humanity is re-enacting the Gun Merchant’s folly. We have refused to bow to the limits of the biosphere, believing our technology will shield us. But like the Merchant, we are now being pursued by “storms and calamities” across the globe. The myth serves as a warning that the conflict between human commerce and planetary boundaries is ancient, but the stakes have never been higher.

The Uncanny and Non-Human Agency

A central tenet of eco-criticism is the dismantling of anthropocentrism the belief that humans are the only actors with agency. Eco-critical thinkers argue that the natural world possesses its own forms of agency and vitality, which challenge the human assumption of dominance over the environment. In Gun Island, Amitav Ghosh imbues the non-human world with a terrifying vitality. Animals, weather systems, and ecological disturbances repeatedly interrupt the human narrative, reminding the characters that nature cannot be contained within human frameworks of logic and control. The environment is not a passive backdrop; it watches, reacts, and intervenes. This is most evident in Deen’s encounters with the ‘uncanny’. These moments destabilize the boundary between rational explanation and supernatural possibility, forcing Deen to confront the limits of his intellectual worldview. The concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), as defined by Sigmund Freud, involves something familiar becoming strangely unsettling. The uncanny therefore arises when ordinary objects or environments suddenly reveal a hidden strangeness that had previously gone unnoticed. For Deen, a man of rationality and logic, the sudden intrusion of the irrational shakes his worldview. His training as a historian encourages him to interpret events through evidence and reason, yet the ecological phenomena he encounters refuse to fit within these rational frameworks.

- **The King Cobra:** While visiting the shrine in the Sundarbans, Deen encounters a King Cobra that seems to possess a deliberate consciousness. The cobra’s silent presence transforms the sacred space into a site of confrontation between human curiosity and non-human authority. It guards

the shrine, asserting a territorial claim that predates human ownership, the animal appears not merely as wildlife but as a symbolic guardian of ecological memory, reminding humans that the land existed long before their myths and institutions.

- **The Spiders in Venice:** Later in the novel, as Deen travels to Venice, he is plagued by visions and physical manifestations of spiders (specifically the poisonous Brown Recluse). The sudden appearance of these creatures in an urban European setting creates a powerful sense of displacement and ecological unease. These creatures, traditionally associated with the Merchant's curse, appear in a European city, signifying that the "local" myth has gone global. Their presence suggests that the ecological disturbances once confined to distant regions are now penetrating the heart of modern Western cities.

"I had an uncanny feeling that I too had lost myself in this dream... I was being dreamed by creatures whose very existence was fantastical to me - spiders, cobras, sea snakes - and yet they and I had somehow become a part of each other's dreams." (Ghosh 227). Ghosh uses these interactions to suggest that in the era of climate change, the separation between 'home' and 'wild' has collapsed. The poisonous spiders of the tropics are migrating to Europe, hitching rides on the global networks of trade, just as the storms are ignoring national borders. The 'uncanny' feeling Deen experiences is the realization that humans are no longer the masters of their domain.

Migration: The Human and Non-Human Exodus

Gun Island intricately links the migration of species with the migration of people. The novel posits that the "refugee crisis" and the "climate crisis" are the same phenomenon.

The Climate Refugees: Tipu and Rafi

The characters of Tipu and Rafi serve as the human faces of this displacement. They are young men from the Sundarbans who can no longer sustain a life in their sinking homeland. The cyclone Aila devastated the region, salinating the soil and destroying livelihoods. The characters of Tipu and Rafi serve as the human faces of this displacement. Through these characters, the novel personalizes the abstract statistics of climate change and reveals its direct impact on vulnerable communities. They are young men from the Sundarbans who can no longer sustain a life in their sinking homeland. Their experiences reflect the growing reality of climate refugees, individuals forced to migrate not by political conflict alone but by environmental collapse. The cyclone Aila devastated the region, salinating the soil and destroying livelihoods. Agriculture becomes impossible, fishing yields decline, and entire communities are pushed toward economic desperation. "Villages are being engulfed by rising sea levels, leaving families homeless . . . Cutting down

mangrove forests reduces storm protection, making the region more vulnerable”(32). Tipu and Rafi embark on a perilous journey the *dunki* route to Europe. Their journey mirrors the Gun Merchant’s ancient flight across the “Black Water” (*Kala Pani*). Ghosh portrays their struggle not as a search for luxury, but as a biological imperative for survival. They are moving for the same reason the Irrawaddy dolphins are moving: their habitat has become uninhabitable.

The Migration of Species

Parallel to the human story is the displacement of animals. In the novel, environmental disruption does not affect humans alone; it alters the behaviour and habitats of numerous non-human species. Piya Roy, the marine biologist, tracks the erratic behaviour of river dolphins and whales. Her scientific observations reveal that marine ecosystems are undergoing rapid transformations due to rising temperatures, pollution, and changing ocean currents. They are beaching themselves, moving into new waters, and behaving in ways that science cannot fully predict. Such unpredictable patterns suggest that climate change is destabilizing ecological systems that once appeared stable and comprehensible. By juxtaposing Tipu’s illegal crossing of borders with the dolphins’ movement, Ghosh highlights a grim irony: capital and goods move freely across borders in a globalized world, but living beings whether human or animal are violently restricted. This contrast exposes the inequalities embedded within modern globalization, where economic exchange is prioritized over the survival of vulnerable populations. While corporations and commodities circulate without limitation, migrants and displaced communities face surveillance, detention, and exclusion. In this way, the novel critiques the political structures that criminalize survival while simultaneously enabling the global systems responsible for ecological destruction.

Character Analysis: Responses to the Catastrophe

The characters in *Gun Island* represent a spectrum of responses to the climate emergency, creating a dialectic of belief and action.

- **Dinanath “Deen” Datta:** Deen represents the skeptical modern mind. As a rare-book dealer and intellectual, he approaches the world through historical documentation and empirical reasoning. He relies on history, facts, and rationality. For him, myths and supernatural narratives initially appear as relics of cultural imagination rather than meaningful truths. His journey is one of “awakening.” Through his encounters with ecological disturbances and uncanny events, his confidence in purely rational explanations gradually begins to erode. He must learn to accept that the world is stranger and more interconnected than his academic training allows. The ecological crises he witnesses reveal the limitations of modern intellectual frameworks in understanding the scale of environmental transformation. His anxiety is the anxiety of the privileged observer who

realizes he is not safe. In this sense, Deen's transformation reflects the broader awakening of modern society to the realities of climate change

- **Cinta:** The Venetian historian, Cinta, acts as the novel's spiritual anchor. Having suffered a profound personal tragedy (the loss of her daughter), she understands that grief and the supernatural are parts of the human experience. She teaches Deen that "stories" and "myths" are not lies, but alternative ways of understanding reality. She bridges the gap between the scientific and the miraculous.
- **Piya Roy:** As a scientist, Piya represents the empirical observation of the crisis. She provides the data the rising pH levels, the migration patterns that ground the novel's more mystical elements, even Piya is forced to admit that the speed of change is outpacing scientific models.
- **Tipu:** Tipu represents the visceral, bodily experience of the crisis. He does not study climate change; he lives it. His "techno-shamanic" visions (visions induced by a cobra bite that he interprets through the lens of technology and connectivity) symbolize the mutation of human consciousness in a technologically saturated, ecologically collapsing world.

Conclusion: Literature as a Tool for Re-imagining

Gun Island is a significant intervention in the discourse of the Anthropocene. Amitav Ghosh refuses to offer a comforting resolution. The novel ends with a convergence of storms and migrations in Italy, suggesting that the crisis is global and inescapable. Rather than providing closure, the narrative leaves readers with a sense of uncertainty that mirrors the unpredictable nature of contemporary ecological crises. The novel ends with a convergence of storms and migrations in Italy, suggesting that the crisis is global and inescapable. The geographical shift from the Sundarbans to Europe further emphasizes that environmental catastrophe is no longer confined to the Global South but is increasingly affecting the entire planet. However, the novel is not nihilistic. By reviving the legend of the Gun Merchant, Ghosh suggests that we need new (or very old) stories to make sense of our predicament. Science alone provides the data, but myth provides the meaning. The "Gun Merchant" reminds us that the war against nature is a war we cannot win. The eco-critical reading of *Gun Island* demonstrates that the "ecological imbalance" is not just a biological issue; it is a failure of imagination.

The eco-critical reading of *Gun Island* demonstrates that ecological imbalance is not just a biological issue; it is also a cultural and philosophical crisis. Modern societies have constructed systems of knowledge that separate humans from the natural world, reinforcing the illusion of human superiority. We have failed to imagine that the earth is alive, that the non-human has agency, and that our actions have consequences that span centuries. In this sense, the climate crisis represents not only an environmental breakdown but also a failure of ethical responsibility toward the planet. We have failed to

imagine that the earth is alive, that the non-human has agency, and that our actions have consequences that span centuries. Through the intertwined journeys of Deen, the dolphins, and the refugees, Ghosh argues that survival in the climate crisis requires a 'restoration' of our connection to the planet a move away from the arrogance of the Gun Merchant and toward a respectful coexistence with the Goddess Manasa (Nature). Literature, in this context, becomes a vital tool. It documents the loss, but it also creates a space for empathy. It allows the reader to feel the salt in the soil of the Sundarbans and the fear in the boat crossing the Mediterranean. In doing so, *Gun Island* fulfills the ultimate promise of eco-literature: it wakes us from the "great derangement" and forces us to look at the world as it truly is damaged, dangerous, and undeniably shared.

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