

Climate Change and Environmental Justice: An Ecocritical Trajectory into Amitav Gosh's *Gun Island*

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is an emerging discipline within Cultural Studies that examines environmental representation and promotes environmental awareness via literary works. Amitav Ghosh, a prominent and internationally recognised figure of Indian descent in Eco-critical literature, has articulated and synthesised several global and regional environmental challenges via his groundbreaking writings. Amitav Ghosh, in his novel, highlights the necessity for multispecies, multi-ethnic, and cross-cultural collaboration in confronting the global climate problem. Ghosh's comparison of human and animal migrations highlights the novel's focus on climate justice. I analyze the traits of environmentalism that I identify in his novels, employing the phrase "planetary environmentalism." This form of environmentalism transcends human-imposed territorial boundaries, as borders become irrelevant when the destiny of the entire world is at stake. It transcends all human-imposed geographical boundaries, since the notion of a border becomes irrelevant in global climate crisis threats. Because of climate change, Ghosh focuses on human migrations, and environmental justice. The extremes, which include superstorms, droughts, floods, and rising sea levels, are so unfathomable to modern literary fiction that very few writers choose to grapple with them. In spite of the fact that it could seem that climate change is a natural subject for the world of creative writing, more especially science fiction and fantasy, Ghosh argues that this statement is not accurate. When we look at *Gun Island* as a whole, we see the disastrous effects of the climatic catastrophe, which is the cause of the demise of all living things in the cosmos, including humans and animals. As a matter of fact, the result of a climatic fiction such as *Gun Island*, which serves as a reflection of the current world, is the development of universal consciousness.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, climate change, nature, justice, environmental crisis.*

Introduction

The climate catastrophe has emerged as a significant worldwide hazard in the Anthropocene epoch. The entire globe is experiencing the catastrophic effects of climate change. Human-

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centric culture and lifestyle, detrimental to Nature, have been implicated in creating climate change. The compulsion to exploit natural resources has presented significant dangers to the existence of life on Earth. Ghosh asserts that the fundamental issue is in the division between Culture and Nature.(Ghosh).

What then is ecocriticism? Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (Glotfelty and Fromm 17).

Furthermore, Ecocriticism examines environmental risks and challenges typically resulting from the hegemonic influence of the anthropogenic world, along with potential solutions to these problems. Ecocriticism is “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world” (Rueckert 107). Climate change is among the most pressing challenges of the Anthropocene epoch. The magnitude of the issue is unparalleled, and there is a worldwide deficiency in its administration. As the situation deteriorates rapidly, the actions implemented to address it are entirely inadequate considering the impending implications. “Climate change is not just a political and environmental problem, but it signifies a failure of imagination, therefore rendering it a cultural crisis as well. The situation may be urgent, yet it remains very abstract and quite difficult to comprehend imaginatively. The worldwide inability to respond is resulting in a tragedy of unparalleled magnitude” (Vescovi 123). The most complex responsibility allocated to authors is to elucidate this worldwide catastrophe and elevate consciousness on a broad scale.

Fiction can serve as a means to engage readers' imaginations with the situation. Cole depicts “although climate fiction may appear distant from policy or policymaking, it offers insight into what scholars term the “climate imaginary” : the symbols, narratives, and concepts through which climate change is depicted and imbued with significance” (Cole 2). “The function of authors is crucial in addressing the climate catastrophe, as future generations will undoubtedly hold the leaders and politicians of our century accountable for their inability to confront the issue. However, they may consider artists and authors equally accountable, as envisioning possibilities is not only the responsibility of politicians and bureaucrats” (Ghosh 135). The significance of this phrase lies not in assigning blame but in the profound observation on the role of writers: their power is in envisioning possibilities and enhancing the collective

imagination. The role of fiction in shaping the climate imagination is significant, as the latter encompasses interests that surpass the mere exploration of climate fiction. Ghosh contends that “the trajectory of the contemporary novel exemplifies a specific instance of a wider cultural phenomena. This dynamic is succinctly encapsulated by John Updike's description of the modern book as a individual moral adventure.” (Ghosh 127). The acknowledgment of the primacy of communal interest is an essential requirement for effectively addressing the climate challenge. The other component emphasizes the 'moral' character of the work, suggesting it represents “an inward journey directed by the conscience” (Ghosh 127) and is contingent upon themes of identity. This notion is integral to a broader context, since occurrences in literature frequently mirror those in politics. Consequently, “the notion of 'individual moral adventure' gains significance as politics transforms, for many, into a quest for personal authenticity, a voyage of self-discovery” (Ghosh 127).

“When I try to think of writers whose imaginative work has communicated a more specific sense of the accelerating changes in our environment, I find myself at a loss; of literary novelists writing in English only a handful of names come to mind” (Gosh). As we can see, the novel's environmentalism is mostly highlighted climactic scene, however the concept is hidden in the narrative, which spans various continents and addresses numerous environmental challenges. *Gun Island* is “an unmistakably global novel” (Gilson 270). Besides, It is also regarded as “an emphatically global text” (Kluwick 71). Ghosh, in *Gun Island*, “endeavours to convey Earth-wide environmental flux through his localised spatial descriptions” (270). He says that “Ghosh’s portrayal of localized environmental crisis in the novel highlights “the ways in which the local and the global have become inseparable in the Anthropocene” (Gilson 271). To comprehend the novel's focus on planetary environmental justice, I will illustrate its perspectives on the climate catastrophe as a global issue. I examine Ghosh's analysis of the temporal and spatial dynamics initiated by global capitalism. The novel’s narrator and protagonist Deen observes that “it was as if the very rotation of the planet had accelerated, moving all living things at unstoppable velocities, so that the outward appearance of a place might stay the same while its core was whisked away to some other time and location” (181). Gilson evaluates Deen’s view here as “Ghosh’s most concise and direct encapsulation of the themes underpinning his novel” (275), that is, how capitalism has accelerated the climate crisis. Nixon parallels Ghosh’s narrator in *Gun Island* by commenting on the speeding of time and the dichotomy of saving time while feeling perpetually time-deprived : “Ours is an age of

onrushing turbo-capitalism, wherein the present feels more abbreviated than it used to – at least for the world’s privileged classes who live surrounded by technological time-savers that often compound the sensation of not having enough time” (8).

Turbo-capitalism is not only responsible for accelerating the climate crisis, but also for making the crisis planetary, as Dipesh Chakrabarty contends when he asserts that “[t]he globe and the planet – as categories standing for the two narratives of globalization and global warming – are connected. What links them are the phenomena of modern capitalism (using the term loosely) and technology, both global in reach” (4). Chakrabarty’s distinction between “the globe” and “the planet” is relevant to understanding the concept of planetary environmentalism. He argues that “The globe is humanocentric construction; the planet, or the Earth system, decenters the human” (4). In my analysis of *Gun Island*, I emphasize how Ghosh marginalizes the human perspective to illustrate that the climate issue impacts both people and nonhumans in analogous manners, hence requiring a global viewpoint to address its consequences. This analysis illustrates how the narrator Deen serves as a crucial conduit for linking the many climate occurrences of the remote locations highlighted in the novel, so articulating the notion of global environmentalism.

In *Gun Island*, Deen – short for Dinanath Datta – is an Indian American “dealer in rare books and Asian antiquities” (Ghosh 3). His enterprise is situated in Brooklyn; nevertheless, he frequently travels to his family residence in Kolkata for personal and professional purposes. One visit leads him on a significant expedition into the Sundarbans, the biggest mangrove forest globally, straddling the borders of India and Bangladesh along the Bay of Bengal. Deen’s journey to the Sundarbans catalyzes the narrative’s progression around the globe, linking various manifestations of vulnerability associated with climate change. Similar to Ghosh’s previous work, *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island* utilizes the Sundarbans as a locus to examine the impacts of climate change on the mangrove ecosystem specifically, and the Bengal Delta broadly. Deen is compelled to visit the Sundarbans to observe a shrine constructed by a mythical character of Bengal known as Bonduki Sadagar, which name Deen inaccurately interprets as “the Gun Merchant.” The merchant has supposedly built the shrine to appease Manasa Devi, the snake goddess of Bengali folklore, “who rules over snakes and all other poisonous creatures” (Ghosh 6). The tale follows Deen’s voyage throughout several locations, culminating in the resolution of the enigmas presented by the legend of the Gun Merchant in Venice. The story illustrates the global magnitude of the climate catastrophe.

Ghosh contemplates the relationship between the contemporary climate catastrophe and the tale of the Gun Merchant to emphasize the links between history and the present, while pinpointing an origin for the crisis. The novel elucidates the legend that embodies the conflict between profit and Nature characterizing the contemporary world, as Deen learns about the merchant from Nilima Bose, an elderly woman who manages a trust and previously visited the shrine: “The Gun Merchant was reputed to have been a wealthy trader who incited the wrath of Manasa Devi by declining to become her devotee.” Afflicted by serpents and relentlessly pursued by droughts, famines, storms, and many disasters, he sought shelter abroad to evade the goddess’s ire, ultimately finding sanctuary in a country devoid of snakes, known as “*Gun Island*” – Bonduk-dwip”(Ghosh 17). Ursula Kluwick depicts : “the legend emerges as an allegory of human hubris and global environmental collapse” (71).

During his journey to the temple in the Sundarbans, Deen's extraordinary encounter with a king cobra, associated with the mythology, introduces a new realm of mystery, infusing the narrative with seemingly supernatural aspects. The novel implies the remarkable occurrences that seem supernatural within typical human experience, and manifestations of nature's action. Primarily, Deen encounters a considerable problem in adapting to his extraordinary experiences and comprehending the relationship with others. Kuhelika portrays : “unlike human subjects, the nonhuman subject cannot speak in the linguistic sense, but as multispecies scholarship reveals, the nonhuman environment constantly responds to environmental stimuli in agential ways in order to survive” (10). Likewise, we see other occurrences on *Gun Island* and nonhuman environment appears to "communicate,". We see the episode with the king cobra's bite that induces mystical visions in the character Tipu. Initially, Deen perceives nonhuman agency as supernatural; but, he eventually starts to engage with the intertwined link between humans and nonhumans on both emotional and cognitive levels. “I had an uncanny feeling that I too had lost myself in this dream; it wasn’t so much that I was dreaming, but that 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 advocates for justice within the framework of global ecology, emphasizing the significance of symbiotic connections under climate instability, as Deen advances in comprehending the intricate connection between humans and nonhumans.

Ghosh highlights the problem of justice describing the Manasa Devi , indicating that humanity's arrogant inclination to subjugate nonhumans. Deen says “the Manasa Devi was in

effect a negotiator, a translator between two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her mediation there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression” (Ghosh 167). Gilson depicts “Ghosh’s L. A is metaphorically represented by the merchant of the parable, and the raging wildfires are signs of nature biting back: the retaliation of the Manasa Devi” (272). Likewise, “The legend encapsulates human greed that values profit at any cost” (Asaad 6). Although Asaad possesses some validity, it is difficult to generalise legend to signify the actions of humanity as a whole, as not all individuals have equal responsibility for the climatic issue.

Gosh, in *Gun Island*, showcases Environmental issues, and when Deen travel to the Sundarbans, he discovers climate crisis’ devastating result in mangrove forest. Although Piya organizes the expedition but cannot join him, delegating Moyna, one of her acquaintances. “The islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea” (Ghosh 19). As we can see, Deen “goes on to learn about how all the living beings of the forest are being affected by climate change. During the visit, he makes the acquaintance of Cyclone Aila, which hit the Sundarbans in 2009, resulting in long-term consequences for all species” (52). “Moyna shares with Deen her anxiety and frustration about the environment, it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans” (53). After that, she depicts “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 loaded with catch, now they counted themselves lucky if they netted a handful of fry” (53). Moyna understands, “making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere” (53). To elucidate to Deen the reasons for the migration of the Sundarbans populace, Tipu depicts to his mother Moyna, a comprehensive account of climate crisis, rationalising his involvement in human trafficking. Additionally, “every other year, a hurricane devastates the surroundings. What actions are individuals expected to undertake? What would one do? If one is youthful, one cannot remain idle till succumbing to starvation. Even the fauna is relocating - simply enquire with Piya. If you possess any discernment, you will take action, and to accomplish this, you must assistance in identifying an exit strategy” (Ghosh 65).

Ghosh demonstrates the correlation between the climate-induced adversities encountered by the Sundarbans' residents. Ashwarya Samkaria portrays “on the periphery are voices of those

who are not only witnessing the immediate devastation of climate change but also its gradual violence, which is devastating their livelihoods at an alarming rate” (27). In my understanding of the problem, I talk about the Sundarbans, showcasing how Ghosh clarifies the concealed aspects of "climate change's spectacularly visible instant havoc". The history of colonialism and the current neoliberal economic framework are fundamentally connected to the inequitable social structures, which share marginalised populations to a vulnerable existence amid the intensifying climate crisis, and this results in significant change to areas both inside and outside the region, augmenting the population of global ecological refugees. Ghosh elucidates “Bangladesh, particularly the Bengal Delta, is highly susceptible to climate change. A significant portion of the nation is situated less than one metre above sea level, and it has already experienced substantial land loss due to rising waters” (155).

At present, Gosh asserts “Bangladeshis are among the largest groups of refugees crossing the Mediterranean to seek shelter in Italy” (154). Subsequently, Deen comprehends the socio-economic instability that compels individuals to abandon their birth place to settle in other country. Tipu left his homeland, and it shows the current "migration crisis" facing all over the world. Put it simply, Ghosh “avoids depicting the issue from a Western viewpoint, referring to it as the so-called European ‘migration crisis’ that commenced in 2015” (153). Further, He shows people’ difficulties move to Europe, suggesting that it is not only a European issue; rather, Europe has considerable responsibility owing to its engagement in four centuries of colonisation that has affected the whole world. Consequently, Ghosh vehemently contests “the division of climate justice from justice in a broader context and “climate migration” from other types of displacement” (153). Similarly, Latour depicts that “the climate question is central to all geopolitical issues and is directly linked to matters of injustice and inequality” (3).

In “The Nutmeg’s Curse”, Ghosh “narrates the experiences of a Bangladeshi migrant named Khokon” (155), how Khokon’s existence is fundamentally intertwined with the global dynamics propelling mass migration. Bilal, an immigrant from Bangladesh at *Gun Island*, serves as a genuine embodiment of Khokon, and Khokon shares reasons to leave his homeland “The conditions in the district are perilous now and previously, it was merely oppression; now, in addition to the oppression, there are successive disasters.” (156). Among those climate calamities were "extended droughts, severe hailstorms, and atypical rainfall" (156). Khokon arrived in Libya seeking a better life and subsequently travelled to Sicily on a dilapidated boat,

having paid smugglers for passage. Ghosh depicts "these men were climate migrants, whether they recognised it or not" (157). At the same time, other causes contribute to their displacement beyond climate change, these individuals are categorised as climate migrants since the climate crisis has exacerbated all other socioeconomic and political obstacles, resulting in their migration. The former piece clarifies the reality of climate migration, whereas *Gun Island* cultivates empathy for the victims of climate change.

In *Derangement*, using Franco Moretti's writings, Ghosh elaborates that contemporary fiction has relation with the norms of bourgeois existence. In the general consciousness, climate change and global meteorology conjure ideas of disasters occurring in distant regions, perceived as infrequent and unlikely in daily life. Furthermore, quotidian existence inside capitalism has become normalized to a degree that individuals' perspectives are restricted to their interests. It has emerged as a significant issue in urban society. This inclination to avoid the seemingly unlikely shapes the narrative imagination, rendering the creative depiction of modern climatic reality scans. The ecological problem transforms into a cultural catastrophe, so affecting imagination, as asserted by Ghosh. Literary works of a period are ideologically influenced by the prevailing style of production. Capitalism is the cause for the climate catastrophe. Similarly, capitalism, with its ideological apparatuses, impedes the literary engagement with the climate problem. Modern fictions, constrained by this trap, are inadequately representing the current climate reality.

Two prominent concerns emerge in the narrative: climate change and immigration, often highlighting their interconnectedness. This text addresses climate change crisis on the Sundarbans and its symbiotic relationship with the local population dependent on the forest environment. Rafi and Tipu symbolize those who are forfeiting their customary livelihoods and becoming climate refugees due to increasing sea levels and encroaching salinity in freshwater sources. The odyssey of Rafi and Tipu from the murky mangrove swamps to the allure of European existence reveals the hazards faced by immigration aspirants. Similarly, the story illustrates the flourishing of extreme right-wing politics that relies on anti-immigrant emotions. This novel illustrates the connection between the climate problem and anti-immigrant policies. Nevertheless, in *Gun Island*, the most prominent feature is Ghosh's endeavor to liberate himself from the narrative imagination's logic that he challenges in the *Derangement*. The central theme of this work is improbability. The story development is excessively influenced by a series of odd coincidences and unusual events. The impact of nonhuman agents on human

behavior is also emphasized significantly. This tale depicts how human ideas and acts are affected by unpredictable weather patterns, serpents and arachnids, avians and marine mammals. In *Gun Island*, the 'irrational' establishes a realm of rationality whereby the 'improbable' and inhuman entities function as active agents.

Gun Island may be the commencement of a series of books in which the author addresses the issue climate change and its relevance in modern literature. This work serves as a clarion call to his fellow fiction authors. This serves as a reminder that the climate catastrophe is genuine and they must contribute to combating it. This is a duty bestowed upon writers by the tradition of writing. As we can see, Ghosh does not provide further details, moral objection to speculative fiction addressing climate change is that employing fantastical tropes to depict such a grave issue may trivialize it and diminish the authentic hardships faced by millions. This applies equally to all literature as it belongs to speculative fiction. It is indeed accurate that nonmaterial entities—such as paradigms, certain emotional states, collective phenomena like mob behavior, and economic theories. Epic narratives and exemplary speculative fiction effectively imbue nonmaterial realities with characteristics of larger-than-life entities, facilitating a stronger imaginative engagement for the reader. Climate change encompasses both material and non-material dimensions. I have previously contended that the universe we live, if you prefer it is an expansive and multifaceted entity that occasionally needs a vessel greater than reality itself to encompass it.

Conclusion

According to Ghosh, the issue with climate change lies in its eerie nature. The extremes—superstorms, droughts, floods, and rising sea levels are so incomprehensible to contemporary literary fiction that few authors engage with them. Although it may appear that climate change naturally belongs to the realm of imaginative literature, specifically science fiction and fantasy, Ghosh contends otherwise. Regrettably, he utilizes a quotation from Margaret Atwood concerning science fiction and speculative literature as a framework for his reasoning. He asserts that science fiction cannot tackle global warming, as the issue is rooted in our current world and time; it is not an imagined 'other' planet, nor is it situated in a different 'time' or 'dimension.' also contends that portraying climate change as imaginative writing is an ethical transgression. In general, in *Gun Island*, we observe the devastating impacts of climate crisis that causes downfall of human beings as well as animals who live in the universe. After all,

global awareness is the outcome of a climate novel like *Gun Island* that functions as a mirror of the present world.

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