
Exploring Environmental Degradation and Climate Change in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) is a work of literary fiction that intricately addresses modern environmental issues, focusing on the effect of climate change and ongoing environmental degradation. Through a mixture of myth, ecological crisis and migration, Ghosh reveals the interconnectedness of human actions and nature, suggesting that understanding the Anthropocene (human age) requires humanity to rethink its place in the world. This article attempts to analyze how Ghosh presents these environmental issues through his narrative-craft, including the use of folklore, migration resulting from ecological disasters, and the role of non-human agents (nature). Linking myths and current environmental realities, Ghosh offers a critical commentary on the Anthropocene, the role of capitalism in environmental destruction, and the human displacement resulting from climate change. This review examines *The Gun Island's* key environmental themes and sets it into a broader discourse of ecological criticism and climate fiction.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, *The Gun Island*, , climate change, migration, ecological criticism, climate fiction.

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is widely known for his contributions to literary discourse on climate change and environmental degradation. These themes are central to both his fiction and non-fiction. In his 2016 book, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh criticized contemporary literature, history, and politics for being inadequate to understand the full scope of the climate crisis. He argues that contemporary literature has largely ignored the grave urgency posed by climate change. In his 2019 novel *The Gun Island*, Ghosh presents these issues in the form of a story. The novel is a mix of folklore, mythology, and contemporary environmental crises, showing that human behavior and nature are deeply interconnected. The novel's protagonist, Deen Dutta, gets lost in this mythical journey that takes him from the Sundarbans to Venice. The Sundarbans, which is highly affected by climate change, plays a symbolic role in the novel. The environmental degradation of this region represents the global climate crisis, and shows how it impacts coastal areas and low-lying areas. The issue of migration is also important in *The Gun Island*, where people have to leave their homes due to the environmental crisis.

This migration is linked to the legend of the ancient gunsmith, who was cursed by the goddess Manasa and was forced to leave home. In the novel, Ghosh indicates that displacement caused by climate change is not new, but has a historical and cultural basis. The natural world and animals also play an important role in the novel, where animals such as dolphins and snakes guide the protagonist and shape the plot. Ghosh also recognizes the agency of non-human beings and shows that nature is an active force. Along with this, the novel also criticizes capitalism and globalization, which are the main causes of environmental destruction. Ghosh emphasises that the indiscriminate pursuit of economic benefits has deepened the climate crisis. Finally, *The Gun Island* intensively explores the environmental crisis and climate change issues, and it leaves readers wondering what humanity's place in this world is and how we should rethink our relationship with the environment.

Purpose of the study- The purpose of this study is to explore how Amitav Ghosh tackles the themes of environmental degradation and climate change in his novel *Gun Island*. It analyzes the use of myths and contemporary crises to address environmental issues in the novel, while also examining the depiction of non-human actors (nature and animals). The study also evaluates how human displacement and migration are linked to environmental destruction. Further, the study places Ghosh's novel in the broader context of climate fiction and eco-criticism to understand how the novel contributes to the global discourse on climate change.

Environmental Degradation in *The Gun Island*

Myths and environmental realities

A key narrative strategy of *The Gun Island* is that Amitav Ghosh skillfully mixed myth and contemporary environmental issues. The story revolves around the legend of a 17th-century Bengali merchant Banduki Saudagar (gun merchant), who was cursed by Goddess Manasa. Manasa Devi, who is considered to be the goddess of snakes and the natural world, becomes a symbolic commentary on modern environmental crises through this myth. Ghosh deeply links this myth with today's realities, establishing parallels between ancient curses and environmental crises in modern times. In the process, Ghosh makes the legend of the gun merchant and goddess Manasa a symbolic reference to modern environmental catastrophe. Just as humanity's exploitation of nature is causing environmental destruction, this mythical curse has been compared to the destruction of ecosystems, showing that it is the result of neglect of nature's balance and human arrogance (Ghosh, 2019).

The environmental degradation of the Sundarbans in present times, where shores are eroding and biodiversity is declining, reflects the mythical elements of nature's vengeance and punishment. Rising sea levels, salinity rise and frequent cyclones are directly linked to climate change and its impact on the region, which Ghosh uses as the central metaphor in the novel. Through the depiction of the Sundarbans, Ghosh reproduces the theme of mythical vengeance and punishment, creating this symbolic framework where environmental destruction becomes the result of humanity's exploitation of the earth's resources (Ghosh, 2016). Through this legend of gun dealers, the novel underlines the fragility of coastal areas and the dangers of human intervention in the natural ecosystem. By reproducing mythological elements in a modern context, Ghosh shows that environmental crises are not merely ecological but deeply cultural and historical (Chakraborty, 2009; Payable, 2020).

This combination of myth and environmental reality allows Ghosh to make a subtle critique of the Anthropocene (human era), where nature responds to human errors with disastrous consequences. The symbolic punishment received by the gun dealer is reflected in modern ecological disasters, sending a clear message to humanity that it is imperative to respect and restore the environmental balance (New York Times, 2019; The Guardian, 2019).

Human-nature relationship

Amitav Ghosh's novel "*Gun Island*" highlights the need to re-evaluate the relationship between humans and the natural world. The story portrays nature as a conscious and dynamic being manifesting its presence through events like floods, storms, and the actions of animals. This approach challenges the traditional human-centred approach, which coincides with modern ecological thought, where the need to recognize the power and autonomy of nature is emphasized (Ghosh, 2019). The novel portrays nature as a responsive and sensitive

force, emphasizing that due to the environmental exploitation of humanity, nature is no longer just passive, but has become an active participant.

In *The Gun Island* non-human characters, such as dolphins and snakes, play major roles, guiding the protagonist Deen in understanding how human activities are having an impact on nature. These animals act as mediators between nature and man, demonstrating that nature communicates in its own way and responds to humanity's acts (Dey, 2020). Ghosh has shown in the novel how human-induced climate change has made the natural world uncertain. Through untimely floods and severe storms, nature is no longer presented as a passive backdrop, but as an active actor, responding to humanity's destructive activities (Chakraborty, 2009).

This idea coincides with the discourse of broader ecological criticism, where nature is considered a dynamic and integral part of the narrative in the Anthropocene (human age). Ghosh's novel reflects this approach, where the natural world responds to the damage caused by human activities. Nature is not just a background in this narrative, but a powerful force, constantly reminding humanity that the delicate balance it has disrupted needs to be restored (Ghosh, 2016; New York Times, 2019).

Climate Change and Migration

Migration as a result of ecological disasters

one important aspect of *The Gun Island* is Amitav Ghosh's focus on climate change-induced migration. Throughout the novel, many of the characters are displaced from their location due to rising sea levels, floods, and other environmental disasters. Ghosh, for instance, highlights the migration of people to the Sundarbans, a region highly vulnerable to the effects of global warming. The novel shows that these characters are often at the mercy of natural disasters, exacerbated by climate change, forcing them to leave their homes and seek safety elsewhere (Ghosh, 2019).

This migration focused approach reflects the reality of climate refugees, which is a growing global crisis. The novel emphasizes that environmental degradation disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, exacerbating social and economic inequalities. Ghosh's portrayal highlights how environmental disasters, such as floods and cyclones, particularly affect coastal regions, including areas like the Sundarbans, Bangladesh, the Maldives and coastal areas of India. This reality is deeply reflected in the novel, where the characters are shown to be displaced due to climate change, which pushes them towards an unstable and uncertain future (Chakraborty, 2009; Ghosh, 2016).

The novel illustrates that migration due to climate change stems not only from environmental disasters but also from underlying social issues, disproportionately affecting impoverished and marginalized communities. The depiction of migrants in the story extends beyond the characters and mirrors global challenges, where individuals are compelled to abandon their homes and land because of flooding, rising sea levels, and other consequences of climate change (Due, 2020). In this way, *Gun Island* presents human migration caused by climate change as an important global issue, coinciding with real-world concerns. Ghosh shows that the problem of climate refugees is not only ecological, but it further deepens economic, social and political inequalities that already exist on a global scale (New York Times, 2019; The Guardian, 2019).

Climate change a global issue

While *Gun Island* primarily centers around the Sundarbans, Amitav Ghosh underscores that climate change is a worldwide issue. The novel moves across various locations, including Venice, a city facing the threat of

rising sea levels. By linking disparate regions to a common ecological crisis, Ghosh emphasizes that climate change is not confined to a specific region or country, and that its impacts are being experienced globally. The narrative highlights the global nature of climate change and its widespread effects (Ghosh, 2019).

Mr. Ghosh united the different parts of Gun Island and conveyed the message that the challenge of climate change is not local or regional, but a global crisis that can only be solved through collective efforts and international cooperation. The novel emphasizes that the problem of environmental degradation is not limited to one country or region, but has its roots all over the world. Ghosh stressed the need for global cooperation to understand that national or regional efforts alone will not be enough to tackle this crisis, but collective action will have to be taken together at the international level (Chakrabarty, 2009; Payable, 2020).

Thus, the novel translates the scope of environmental degradation beyond national and regional boundaries, demonstrating that confronting climate change requires global solidarity and collective action. This approach underscores the importance of multilateral and collective efforts to tackle the climate crisis at the global level (New York Times, 2019; The Guardian, 2019).

The Role of Capitalism and Globalization in Environmental Destruction

Critique of capitalism

Gun Island has subtly criticized capitalism and its role in environmental degradation. The novel suggests that globalization, driven by capitalist growth and consumption desires, has further exacerbated ecological destruction. According to Ghosh, commercialisation of nature, which is presented as land encroachment and exploitation of natural resources, leads to disastrous consequences. The novel clearly shows how capitalist forces exploit not only human resources but also natural resources, and this exploitation becomes the major cause of environmental degradation (Ghosh, 2019).

Ghosh shows that the capitalist system, which is based on indiscriminate economic development and consumption, has changed nature as a commodity. In this process, land is encroached, forests are deforested, and natural resources are overexploited, leading to imbalance of ecosystems and problems such as climate change. This situation becomes even more serious for those who are already socially and economically vulnerable, as they are the most vulnerable to environmental crises (Chakraborty, 2009). Criticizing globalization in the novel, Ghosh focuses on how an imbalance with nature is being created in the name of economic development, and how this imbalance is proving fatal for both our environment and society.

Gun Island shows that the capitalist development model has put not only the environment but also society in deep crisis. This has led to an unequal distribution of resources, with poor and marginalized communities being the most affected. The continued exploitation of natural resources, viewed only from the point of view of economic gain, is leading to an environmental catastrophe that will be difficult to recover from (Dey, 2020). Ghosh tries to convey the message through this novel that if we do not take our development model towards sustainable development, the environmental crisis will take a more serious form.

Thus, Ghosh emphasizes that capitalism and globalization have profoundly affected environmental degradation. He suggests that we need a development model that not only focuses on economic gain, but is also able to maintain environmental balance (New York Times, 2019; The Guardian, 2019). This message refers to the ecological and social crises taking place in modern times under the capitalist system, where both nature and humanity are in crisis.

Environmental Justice

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* explores the concept of environmental justice by depicting the struggles of displaced people and vulnerable communities. Ghosh suggests that the effects of climate change are not evenly distributed around the world. While rich countries have the resources to mitigate the effects of environmental disasters, poor countries and marginalized populations bear the greatest burden. This imbalance highlights the global social and economic impacts of climate change (Ghosh, 2019).

Gun Island shows that those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change suffer the most during environmental crises. Ghosh paints a clear picture of how natural disasters such as flooding and rising sea levels affect the lives of the poor living in coastal areas. These communities are already socially and economically disadvantaged and will be further marginalized as climate change worsens. Lack of resources needed to cope with these disasters has forced many people to leave their homes and land (Dew, 2020). Ghosh uses this to highlight that climate change is not just an environmental problem but is exacerbating social and economic inequalities.

Ghosh's work emphasizes the moral and ethical implications of environmental justice. They argue that the effects of climate change are not limited to natural disasters, but also contribute to global social injustice. While rich countries have the means to address climate-related challenges, poor and developing countries face consequences with limited resources. As a result, people in poor countries are more vulnerable to the impacts of climate disasters, and their lives are placed in a state of insecurity and crisis (Chakraborty, 2009).

It also expresses the idea that climate change is not just an environmental issue, but a moral and social one. Ghosh invites readers to recognize and address the social inequalities at the heart of environmental crises. His story not only highlights the effects of climate change, but also advocates for social justice and equality. *Gun Island* highlights the need for a more just and ethical global approach to tackling the climate crisis (New York Times, 2019; The Guardian, 2019) .

Conclusion- Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* provides a deep examination of climate change and environmental degradation, blending elements of myth, folklore, and contemporary ecological challenges. Through the narrative of the cursed merchant and goddess Manasa, Ghosh symbolically connects humanity's exploitation of nature to the environmental catastrophe of the Anthropocene, emphasizing that our actions have deep historical and cultural roots. The novel challenges the human-centered worldview by portraying nature as an active, sentient force that responds to human exploitation, underscoring the need for humanity to rethink its relationship with the environment. Additionally, *Gun Island* highlights the issue of climate-induced migration, focusing on the plight of vulnerable populations in regions like the Sundarbans, who are disproportionately affected by environmental disasters. Ghosh critiques capitalism and globalization, linking them to environmental destruction and calling for sustainable development models that prioritize ecological balance. The novel's attention to environmental justice emphasizes the inequalities inherent in the climate crisis, urging global cooperation to address these challenges. Ultimately, Ghosh's work serves as both a critical commentary on the Anthropocene and a call to action, contributing significantly to the discourse on climate fiction and eco-criticism while encouraging readers to reevaluate humanity's place in the natural world.

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