

ISLAND AND REFUGEES: EXPLORING THE
INTERSECTIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S
GUN ISLAND

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Abstract

Gun Island by Amitav Ghosh investigates problems of race, migration and ecology. Using a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, one might examine how the author challenges the western anthropocentric notion of human subjectivity that has been created by modernism and historical processes by presenting nonhuman actors. This study examines how Ghosh uses environmental themes to discover subversive agreements in the book and narrative content of the postcolonial nonhuman subject matter. This research paper examines how the context of postcolonialism has disrupted the way borders are constructed. It does this by projecting an otherworldly possibility through an immaterial myth that suggests there exists an interconnectedness between living and nonliving things. The work of Amitav Ghosh also provides a thorough examination through the myth of Manasa Devi through the invisible borders. This article centres on the social economic, political and climate factors that contribute to the outcomes of the unauthorised movement of the impoverished individuals depicted in the text taken for research.

Keywords: Immigration, Climate Change, Environmental Justice, Social Justice, Myth, Anthropocentrism.

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1. Introduction

The novel taken up for discussion is *Gun Island* which prominently addresses climate change and global warming. His work unravels the huge aberrations of the modern period by fusing together history, mythology, environmental catastrophes and the migratory issue. In the age of socioeconomic and cultural globalisation, all of his stories portray man-made climatic disasters and also forced displacement of the native population of India's Sundarbans. In addition, it draws attention to the situation that impoverished people from many other countries and continents endure to break the law by crossing boundaries of nations. It addresses the bold, dangerous and unlawful border crossings of a large number of individuals heading to western cities. *Gun Island* addresses the ubiquitous issues of human migration and climate change. The specific goal of the current article is to examine the courageous and horrific experiences of undocumented migrants from the Indian Sundarbans. It also investigates the rationale behind the myth that has grown up in environmentally concerned communities, which in some sense inspires people to protect and live on their own property.

2. Discussion

Dinanath Datta, the protagonist and narrator of the novel *Gun Island*, is a rare book merchant from Brooklyn who pays a visit to the temple of Manasa Devi which is in the Sundarbans. This shrine is portrayed in all the popular Bengali folklore known as the Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar). He encounters the harsh yet fragile environment of the Indian Sundarbans, which are isolated from India's more developed regions, up close during one of his travels. Nilima Bose, who is the trustee of the Badabon trust which is working for the welfare of the people in the Sundarbans, correctly notes, "the islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they're disappearing before our eyes" (Ghosh, 18). Dinanath discovers the dangerous way of life that the residents of this mangrove area lead. Kanai Dutta illustrates Sundarbans as the border where the people of material greed find the expense of biodiversity, business and wilderness stare each other in the eye. There being no alternative route to the sea, therefore Kanai claims that "every merchant who has ever sailed out of Bengal has had to pass through the Sundarbans" (Ghosh, 8). The urgent ecological issues confronting the Sundarbans are highlighted in the book. The

region's dead zones and consequent acidification and degradation of water supplies may be understood as the result of a conflict between nature and urbanisation or more accurately, the environment and people. Robert Diaz and Rutger Rosenberg says, "The formation of dead zones has been exacerbated by the increase in primary production and consequent worldwide coastal eutrophication fueled by riverine runoff of fertilizers and the burning of fossil fuels. Enhanced primary production results in an accumulation of particulate organic matter, which encourages microbial activity and the consumption of dissolved oxygen in bottom waters." (Diaz & Rosenberg, 926).

Piya, an Indian-American of Bengali descent stays in the Sundarbans for her research work on the dolphins. Piya is familiar with the area's terrain and makes frequent visits there. She notes that release of chemicals that were discarded from a refinery has contaminated the water due to which dolphins and other fishes die. A gang of powerful individuals that seem unbeatable and have influence over the police and politicians operate the refinery. Piya finds that the dead zones are formed due to the release of residues from the refinery. "Well, they're these vast stretches of water that have a very low oxygen content - too low for fish to survive. Those zones have been growing at a phenomenal place, mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers. When they're washed into the sea they set off a chain reaction that leads to all the oxygen being sucked out of the water" (Ghosh, 95). The readers are informed that these zones can extend over areas which can also produce a dead zone in the river, particularly at its confluence with the sea. Water contamination and the presence of dead zones in the Sundarbans lead to the mortality of dolphins, crabs, fish and other marine organisms in riverine and marine environments. It adversely impacts the livelihoods of the individuals who engage in fishing or crab collection. Through *Gun Island*, it is observed that the negative effects of human-caused water pollution worsen the circumstances of the native people by disturbing the regular living system and making them refugees.

The current migration of people of Sundarbans is caused by changes in climate which is similar to the story told in the old myth of the Gun Merchant, who left his home country to escape the deadly effects of Goddess Manasa Devi's wrath and retaliation against him. Italian historian Cinta provides a sobering analysis of the long-standing folktale of the Gun Merchant. It is clear from the comparable journeys of the poor migrants from the Sundarbans

and that of the Gun Merchant, that the legend is “an apocryphal record of a real journey to Venice” (Ghosh, 138). Cinta states that the Merchant “decides to go overseas to recoup his fortune after his homeland, in eastern India, is struck by drought and floods brought on by the climatic disturbances of the Little Ice Age; he loses everything including his family” (Ghosh, 141). Piya describes the current state of the Sundarbans as a new one and that the world’s ecosystem is meeting with despondency. The effects of human-caused environmental destruction, such as rising sea levels, global warming and water contamination, represent an existential danger to all life on Earth. It is evident from the words of Piya that the contemporary ecological crisis has changed the Earth “We’re in a new world now. No one knows where they belong any more, neither humans nor animals” (Ghosh, 97).

The story tells the reader, rather accurately, that the Bhola Cyclone of 1970 destroyed the interior Lusibari region and the coastal Sundarbans. The strong storm surge had destroyed the communities. There were dead bodies floating around and just the naked skeletons of trees visible. The storm had rendered the hamlets bereft of their residents. The influx of refugees and East Pakistanis, who sought to flee political chaos, the struggle for livelihood, and social turmoil, made the situation worse. Such occurrences made the situation of the native inhabitants of Sundarbans struggle for food and water. The locals were destitute and socially disadvantaged as a result of the precariousness of life and nature in the Bay of Bengal coastal region which prevented them from prospering. Living through storms and cyclones, Sundarbans residents must constantly strive to adjust to the region’s constantly shifting climate. After two of his fishing vessels and a few other boats sank during the 2009 Aila Cyclone, Horen, a Sundarbans fisherman, decided to close up shop. Farmers deserted the area as sea levels rose and harsh weather caused saltwater intrusion into the soil, making it unusable for cultivation. Through the novel *Gun Island*, one can witness the determined youth of the region making the audacious choice to go out of the country, although illegally, in order to make money for a better and more secure future.

After every hurricane, traffickers become more numerous. Their goal is to exploit the impoverished by seizing the chance to make money; they enticingly transport able-bodied men to construction projects and women to distant brothels. Tipu, a local lad from the Sundarbans, claims that because it is difficult for them to get legally permitted papers like passports and visas, the oppressed people of

the Sundarbans opt to cross national borders illegally. Tipu argues that two significant factors contributing to the movement from the Sundarbans are climate change and the consequent rise in the frequency of catastrophic storms, all the while providing the rationale for the unauthorised immigration of the poor. If the ignorant and impoverished inhabitants of the Sundarbans do not leave the region, they will eventually starve to death. Therefore, it is possible that sea level rise and climate change would render certain areas uninhabitable, which will result in significant increases in migration. Tipu claims that those in poverty lack the resources and thus they will walk into the woods to get honey and other forest goods. Moreover, careers in farming and fishing are inappropriate due to the high saline content of the land and water. The reason for the shift in the natural resources of a particular place is the result of climate change, which redraws the boundaries of the communities. People migrate as a result in search of a living, which accelerates the depletion of the local resources. Kartiki mentions, "...as climate change affects the availability of resources and reshapes geographical boundaries, communities will be forced to migrate to access natural resources, and seek more productive livelihoods. This will likely drive conflict, as people struggle over limited resources and cross national borders" (Kartiki, 23-24).

Amitav Ghosh's work *Gun Island* is an example of how the mangrove region's natural resources become scarce due to climate change and ecological harm, ruining the lives of the Sundarbans' impoverished and causing noticeable mass migrations. Tipu explains the usage of the internet through which connections are established with several persons who help/are helped to travel to other borders illegally as unauthorised immigrants have convenient accessibility to knowledge and information in the age of the internet and digitisation. The unlawful human migration that is depicted in the novel *Gun Island* demonstrates how globalisation has its drawbacks and limits while offering knowledge that aids in travel planning to unauthorised migrants. The book emphasises the negative effects of improper technology use and internet-based education. People from less fortunate backgrounds are drawn to captivating pictures of distant countries they come across online. They attempt to enter these places unlawfully by faking their identities. At the same time as governments across the world are putting restrictions on illegal immigration, Tipu is gathering information from the internet on unauthorised travel routes. But in the past, when people moved from place to place, these limitations had not been as severe as the present. The narrative emphasises how undocumented immigrants end up

as social misfits, political refugees, the destitute and anonymous entities.

People crossing national or continental borders unlawfully without the required legal documentation to enter other nations are referred to as undocumented migrants. These are the individuals who frequently overstay their visas or work permits, breaking part or all of the rules pertaining to their foreign status. Generally, smuggling aims at “material gains from the illegal crossing of international borders and there can be consent from the individual to be moved” (Yahya, 2). Undocumented immigrants go abroad in quest of employment and profitable prospects. But either during the migration process or later on, individuals could experience a variety of hardships brought on by labour exploitation, political repression, human trafficking and anti-immigration laws. A thorough study of the book demonstrates the harsh reality faced by immigrants as well as the environmental problems that lead to immigration. Tipu and Rafi bring forth the terrifying story of illegal migration in a sensitive with all its harshness and brutality. Smuggling takes many more illegal migrants, like Tipu and Rafi, as its victims. Rafi describes his terrifying experiences on the dangerous trek he and Tipu take out of the Sundarbans. Tipu uses several Bangladeshi *dalals* (touts) to help plan their trip in advance. First, they are brought to Dhaka. After that, they are transported to Kolkata and imprisoned in an unclean connection house. Those poor people would have been subjected to physical torture if someone had complained or asked too many questions. When they set off on their journey once more in a truck the following night, they are packed in like cattle and do not even have enough space to sit. For much of the time, they are completely unaware of their location, and many of them suffer motion sickness. They are then told to make arrangements for an additional US \$ fifty when they are near the Pakistan border.

The traffickers beat Tipu up when he objects. The migrants begin to run as soon as the vehicle pulls up to the Turkish border, acting on prior advice to avoid being shot by border officials and escape alive. In the pandemonium that follows, Rafi and Tipu become separated and they start to get scared. They hear gunfire while they are running and several of their colleagues are injured by the bullets, screaming in agony as they lie hopelessly on the track like stricken animals. While describing this horrifying scene, Rafi says, “there were maybe thirty or forty of us, running blindly, in a panic: it was like a stampede” (Ghosh, 240). Along with twelve other Hazaras, Rafi seeks refuge in a hiding place. Rafi had lost his way and felt confused after parting ways with Tipu since he had no idea where

he would go next. Eventually, Tipu phones Rafi and suggests that he join a crew of migrants who were going to trek to Europe. A small number of the refugees were from Bangladesh, but the majority was from Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. Tipu also suggests that he attempt to go to Venice. Rafi finally makes it to Venice, where he meets a lot of other undocumented immigrants who had also fled their home countries illegally and endured terrifying situations. Thus, along their voyage, the illegal migrants who had been deluded by the prospect of a better life abroad become disillusioned.

The illegal migrants transitioned from a childhood of innocence to a direct experience of the harsh realities of the globalised environment and the infamy of world politics. Tipu comes from the Sundarbans, just like Rafi, but he lives a comfortable life and is not impoverished like Rafi is. Tipu's father works for Piya, helping her in her research and therefore she gives him a number of material benefits. Unlike the usual migrants from the Sundarbans, Tipu has not been compelled to travel abroad in order to make money. Instead, he voluntarily decides to leave his hometown in search of employment in a wealthy foreign city, something that he is unable to do in Kolkata due to pervasive societal prejudice and the marginalisation of Sundarbans locals. The story tells the reader that because of their lack of advancement and financial hardship, the native inhabitants of this mangrove region are despised in Kolkata. For example, Tipu's schoolmates in Kolkata start making fun of him and calling him a Dalit when they find out that he is from the Sundarbans and they say that only prostitutes and slaves come from there. Moreover, Tipu attacks a child from a powerful family for making offensive statements about the Sundarbans, which guarantees his expulsion. With fake documents, Tipu enters the country illegally while deceiving his relatives about his whereabouts and employment. Piya, who also serves as Tipu's legal guardian, gets in touch with an organisation that assists migrants and refugees and she also follows Tipu's travels. According to an NGO representative who speaks with Piya, "over the last couple of years there has been a huge increase in reports of teenage boys and young men leaving home without informing their families" (Ghosh, 183), Tipu's story highlights the difficulty of illegal immigration as those who do so run the possibility of being tortured, deported, detained or becoming victims of international organised crime. Paradoxically, the biblical region of Sinai peninsula in Egypt turns into a dangerous location for unauthorised immigrants and refugees, as well as a centre for the trafficking of human organs. Smugglers abound in the area, claiming

to have received money from migrants. The reality is that human trafficking results in prostitution, and organ removal which is then sold to Europeans. Ghosh portrays cruelty and terrible realities that are similar to that of trading slaves in the past, which has shifted to refugees in the present day.

Gisella, who is a niece of Cinta, gets an opportunity to make a documentary film, and claims that the traffickers have connections with the police, the richest echelons of the political and legal establishment, the criminal underworld and with the European countries. Gisa says “All these networks could be exposed. It’s being said that this is the reason why so many governments don’t want to accept the Blue Boat. This group of refugees may know too much” (Ghosh, 263). Ministers of the nation have considered deploying the navy if necessary, but for now, the Blue Boat has carried refugees towards Italy. Because they lack documentation, the refugees are in fact undesirable. In addition, illegal immigration causes conflicts between Venice’s right-wing administration and human rights advocates. The book provides insight into the tactics used by the recently elected right-wing administration to defer the largest political issue in Europe regarding illegal migration and the refugee crisis. S Diamond in his article mentions right-wing attitudes in refusing the immigrants entry: “the focus on cultural homogeneity was central to early anti-immigrant activity” (Diamond, 157), but the global man-made ecological crisis needs to be addressed which has become the reason for these mass migrations. Gisella begins work on a documentary concerning the latest flow of people entering Italy illegally when it was detected that people were coming from the Adriatic and distant shores of the Mediterranean. In addition, hundreds of people from Libya and Egypt are travelling across the Mediterranean in boats. Some of them survive; a large number perish. She asks Dinanath for assistance in translating her book which is about refugees from various parts of the world. She tells him that migration and the refugee crisis are two hot socio-political themes in Italy and throughout Europe.

While describing the government, Piya says “Our new right-wing government came to power because they promised to be tough on migration” (Ghosh, 145). Citizens voted to remove unauthorised immigrants from the country because they saw illegal immigration as a serious issue. A boatload of migrants has been discovered in the eastern Mediterranean, and it appears that they are heading towards Sicily. The situation for the migrants might get worse since the interior minister of the recently established government in Rome

is a radical right-wing politician who ran on an anti-immigration platform and would stop at nothing to prevent the refugees from entering Italy. The refugees on board the Blue Boat are said to be from Egypt and include some Bengalis from Bangladesh or India as well as Eritreans and Ethiopians. Gisa believes that a documentary that examines the mass migration from both a sociopolitical and human rights standpoint is necessary. She accurately expresses the worries of the general public throughout the globe saying, “Why are the migrants coming, in such dangerous circumstances? What are they feeling? What are their hopes? That is why a documentary is necessary” (Ghosh, 146).

A Bangladeshi immigrant named Fozlul Hoque Choudhury, also known as Palash, claims that Italian human rights advocates support the Blue Boat migrants. According to Palash, the Blue Boat has come to represent a number of socio-ecological issues, including social injustice, capitalism, climate change, corruption, the sale of arms, the oil business, and the general indifference of the international community to the suffering of refugees. The protagonist believes that as the Blue Boat’s anonymous immigrants have lost their identity, it is not necessary to consider them like other people and after all we are all living on one planet with the same emotions. It’s important to emphasise that refugees are varied individuals with a range of national origins, cultural backgrounds and motivations for leaving their home countries due to various socio-political circumstances. To put it briefly, everyone who is forced into migration has a unique tale. According to Dinanath, there are some parallels between the suffering of the Blue Boat illegal migrants and that of the historical indentured labourers who were brought to the New World as part of the Atlantic slave trade to work as labourers on plantations after being shipped from the Indian subcontinent and Africa. The suffering endured by the miserable bonded workers of the past and the refugees of the Blue Boat are comparable. The story tells the reader that “then, as now, trafficking in human beings had been an immensely lucrative form of commerce” (Ghosh, 278). But there is a key distinction in the mechanics of migration between these two kinds of displacement. Similar to the previous system of chattel slavery, the indentured labour system was governed and overseen by European colonial powers.

The working class and coolies usually had no notion where they were going or what lay ahead. Due to their ignorance of the laws and rules governing their existence, they were sold into slavery or exploited for the Empire’s commercial and economic gain. The

colonial overlords became the ones who dictated their fate by using and abusing the poor and the coolies. In contrast, the systems of the past and present are different in the current period of globalisation since expatriates from India living in Venice, such as Rafi and Tipu, cannot be considered slaves because they consciously chose to move illegally. The story tells the reader that “the world had changed too much, too fast; the systems that were in control now did not obey any human master; they followed their own imperatives, inscrutable as demons” (Ghosh, 280). Cinta observes that in order for Italians to make a livelihood in the twenty-first century, they must rely on the work of immigrants who have fled their home countries and who eventually clean up unclean areas of Italy. The reader is informed by the narrative that “Bengalis have been settling in the Veneto for a long time. Earlier they came to work in the shipyards of Mestre and Marghera. But now many more have come and in Venice they do everything- they make pizzas for the tourists, they clean the hotels, they even play the accordion at street corners” (Ghosh, 146). This clarifies that undocumented migrants are left with little choice but to satisfy the growing demand for low-cost labour and reduced manufacturing costs in the global supply chain due to their unlawful status.

Through the book *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh illustrates that western nations today are characterised by transculturalism and multiculturalism as a result of liberal immigration from around the globe. Legal immigrants such as Dinanath and Piya, for example, make their living abroad. They form close connections and emotional bonds with foreigners and enjoy a variety of enriching cross-cultural encounters that add value to their life. Furthermore, the refugees of the Blue Boat and the vast number of undocumented immigrants in Venice represent a sort of “overturning of a century-old project that had been essential to the shaping of Europe” (Ghosh, 279). Like Rafi and other undocumented migrants, a large number of unlawful refugees make it to Venice and secure employment there, sometimes without the foreign government’s knowledge. Ghosh delicately contrasts the Sundarbans with Venice. Dinanath asks, “I looked out the window and saw a scene that reminded me of a section of Bengali countryside I had seen on my final flight out of Calcutta. It was an estuary landscape with lagoons, marshes, and meandering rivers. It was feasible to confuse the Venetian scenery for the Sundarbans at that altitude” (Ghosh, 147). Rafi says there are certain parallels between the Sundarbans and Venice, such as the falling embankments, the prevalence of crabs in waterways and the climate-induced floods.

At least the immigrants can feel a touch of their motherland when they see similar natural elements in the new city! Dinanath and Cinta endure terrible suffering as a result of Venice's climatic flood. Dinanath expresses disbelief, asking, "How was it possible that in this most civilized of cities we should be so utterly alone and helpless, so completely at the mercy of the earth?" (Ghosh, 232). The author's comparison of the Sundarbans and Venice emphasises how the climate catastrophe affects the entire world, not just a single area, state or nation. It is always present. The book illustrates how the world is increasingly becoming inhospitable due to manmade global warming by using depictions of the Sundarbans to highlight Venice and Los Angeles where a devastating wildfire occurs.

Though the novel mainly focuses on the displacement of the community (for survival) in the main plot, the sub plot concerns the mythical story line that connects every aspect of the characters. Prominent characters like Piya, Dinanath and Cinta constantly engage in discourse about the presence of supernatural components that possess the ability to induce, intimate, or even grasp through a cause. There is the goddess Manasa Devi, who attempts to bring the gun merchant into her control. The most popular myth in the Bengali area is that of Manasa Devi. An attempt is made by a gun merchant to get away from a deity who wants him to erect a shrine in the centre of the Sundarbans. The goddess, manifested as a snake or as some other deadly monster, follows him as he travels and flees from place to place. Finally unable to escape from the goddess, the gun merchant consents to construct a temple in her honour. People are hesitant to approach the goddess' shrine since it is revered as a holy space. As a result, the area continues to be uninhabited by people, keeping the resources safe from exploitation. One of the main topics of discussion in Dinanath and Cinta's interactions is his intuition when travelling. It should be mentioned that he seems to be a non-believer in the so-called myths and is extremely logical while talking about Cinta. But because Piya is a reasonable thinker and is perplexed about what is occurring, he moves aside from reason. Strange experiences like seeing snakes, having dreams about them, and coming across other poisonous animals like spiders have been his constant motivators. He understands the significance of the symbols etched on the shrine temple's walls and is tormented by the shrine. Later, he makes the connection between the symbols and deduces that they are all meant to represent the gun merchant's journey. Amitav Ghosh examines how people's adherence to old mythologies kept the environment from collapsing through these

evocative depictions. It dovetails “a premodern form of storytelling that animates the nonhuman and more-than-human relationships and knowledge with an ecocritical approach that reads as if the physical material world and background environment setting heightens the proximity between the human and the nonhuman. It recognises the materiality of reality and highlights the problematic that inheres in the linguistically cultural embeddedness of forms” (Samarika, 5). Amitav Ghosh’s employment of myth secures its own place in the novel whereby he gives us an ancient way of guarding the resources. There was a serene and contented existence with a wholesome atmosphere prior to the advancement of science and the arrival of humanity in uncharted territories. It is accurate to state, then, that Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* highlights the global economic, social, and environmental crises and highlights the urgency of self-realisation.

3. Conclusion

The focus of *Gun Island* is an anthropocentric world of turmoil in politics, social injustices, economic disparities, a utilitarian view of nature, contaminated water supplies, natural calamities and growing human dislocation. The deliberate crossing of international borders by illegal migrants allows them to enter economically developed nations and acquire money for a life that is better than they might have in their own country. However, after experiencing torture and inhumane treatment while migrating, they lose their previous social identity and are only recognised as refugees; such a bold albeit unlawful move becomes fatal for many of them. In addition, the refugees experience severe psychological suffering due to property loss, starvation and the ensuing decline in health; horrifying torture at the hands of traffickers, intense terror, physical abuse, and unemployment. They encounter the murky edges of the increasingly globalised world, with its capitalistic policies and materialistic practices.

The author presents the ongoing story of human migration resulting from the collapse of the global climate by fusing stories of daring escape from diverse nations that are developing in the present with myths and legends from antiquity. In the age of globalisation, the voluntary but socially, politically or ecologically compelled illegal migrations from various developing nations also suggest a type of rejection of the historical dominance of the powerful colonising countries over the movement of people across

national borders. The international community's recognition of the ongoing refugee crisis which is intensifying quickly in the age of man-made climate change is symbolised by the social unrest in Italy. In the era of globalisation and man-made climate change, Amitav Ghosh portrays an undocumented migratory trend that centres on the poor inhabitants of the Sundarbans and several other nations and continents attempting to flee their current situation in search of the idealised West.

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