



# ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *GUN ISLAND*

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## Abstract

This research article indicates the significance of not just human beings but also the physical environment as represented in literature. At present, environmental degradation has emerged as a major global concern for humanity. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) undertakes an investigative journey into the present globalized world of anthropogenic climate metamorphoses that prompt excruciating illegal migrations from the Indian Sundarbans, the mangrove region. It is also the saga of many other undocumented migrants from various developing countries who illegally migrate to the West in search of employment and opportunity but miserably fall victims to human trafficking, xenophobia, and imprisonment. The unpredictable and contradictory climatic effects caused by human effects such as fossil fuel consumption, especially after the industrial revolution, global warming, rises in sea levels, and acidification of oceans show that humans have the greatest impact on nature compared to other living things. Although the existence of man in the world is relatively short, humans are the biggest factor affecting the environment in the 21st century. Therefore, due to the global impact created by man, human impact changes the lives of nature, animals, plants, and himself in an unknown direction. In this context, Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* features the impact of humanity on the ecology, which connects the past to the present, with a Bengali myth showing how the impact of humanity stretches into the ecology.

Key words: Environmental issues, Ecological degradation, Humanity, Immigration.

The novel *Gun Island*, written by Amitav Ghosh, is a fiction that deals with many ecological problems, such as the exploitation of nature by humans, which closely affect the lives of all living things on earth, climate change caused by anthropocentric consequences, and the problem of migration caused by this ecological change. In old times, the factor that changed the climate was geological factors along with the micro components that formed the world, while the biggest factor causing climate change in the Anthropocene era is human.

Unquestionably, one of the most complicated issues under investigation by international political decision-makers and theorists at the moment is the phenomenon of human migration on a worldwide scale. In his most recent book, *Gun Island* (2019), Amitav Ghosh describes the hardship and illegal migration of the indigenous inhabitants of the Sundarbans in India as a result of manmade climatic catastrophes in the age of socioeconomic and cultural globalization. At the same time, it highlights the predicament faced by underprivileged individuals from many different nations and continents who unlawfully cross borders on both a national and an international level. It addresses the outrageous, hazardous, and illegal border-crossing of numerous people travelling from the Middle East, Africa, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to Western cities. Except for the illegal migration from the Sundarbans, the reasons behind the illegal movements of refugees from other developing countries are not overtly revealed in the text. But the sufferings of the undocumented migrants from those countries, as all of them travel illegally in pursuit of employment possibilities, including those of the migrants from Bangladesh and India who have been affected by the climate, and which are eloquently shown in the story. The text highlights the serious ecological issues the Sundarbans is dealing with. Dead zones in the area as a result of the deterioration and contamination of water resources and the conflict between nature and urbanization, or more properly, nature and the environment, can be seen as the result of this conflict.

The growth in primary production and ensuing global coastal eutrophication, which are fed by fertilizer runoff from rivers and the combustion of fossil fuels, have worsened the establishment of dead zones, claim Robert Diaz and Rutgers Rosenberg. A buildup of organic particles brought on by increased primary production promotes microbial activity and the oxidation of dissolved oxygen in bottom waters. (2008, p. 926) One of the text's key figures is Pia, a Bengali-American Indian-American who keeps watch over the Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sundarbans. She frequently visits the location and is knowledgeable about the terrain of the region. She observes that the river water has been polluted by agricultural pollutants as well as by the dumped chemicals of a refinery. The refinery is run by a group of influential people who are unstoppable and have control over politicians and the police. According to Pia, dead zones grow “at a phenomenal pace, mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 95). Through her, the readers are made to comprehend that these zones can be as long as middle-sized countries, and a dead zone can also be found in a river, specifically where it meets the sea.

In the Sundarbans, such water contamination and existing dead zones result in the death of fish, crabs, dolphins, and other marine life both of the river and sea. It wrecks the lives of the poor who earn their livelihood by fishing or collecting crabs. It is observed that “the proponents of the vicious circle of poverty argue that as the poor in the developing countries depend most on the natural resources for earning their livelihood, a vicious cycle of poverty - environmental degradation-poverty is created” (Radha & Sankhyan, 2002, p. 11). In *Gun Island*, we see how the detrimental impacts of anthropogenic water pollution deteriorate the condition of poverty-indigenous people by destroying their livelihoods and causing them to leave their homes in order to survive. This human exodus from the Sundarbans due to climate change is comparable to the Gun Merchant from the ancient legend

of the same name that is used in the text. The Gun Merchant fled his home country in order to avoid the destructive forces of climate change, which are represented by the wrath and retaliation of the Goddess Manasa whom the Merchant disobeyed. Cinta, an Italian historian who appears in the text, provides a rational interpretation of the fabled tale of the Gun Merchant. The parallel journey of the climate-driven migrants of the past (the Gun Merchant) and the present (the underprivileged from the Sundarbans) elucidates that the legend is “an apocryphal record of a real journey to Venice” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 138). According to Cinta, the Merchant’s “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, and decides to go overseas to recoup his fortune” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 141). Pia despondently describes the present environmental condition of the Sundarbans and the world, “We’re in a new world. No one knows where they belong any more, neither humans nor animals” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 97). The effects of anthropogenic environmental disasters including sea level rise, global warming, and water pollution are portrayed as posing an existential threat to all life forms on earth during the coming climate apocalypse.

Inhabitants of the Sundarbans live a storm-tossed and cyclone-ravaged life of incessant struggle and are forced to adapt to the frequently changing climatic conditions. Horen, a fisherman from the Sundarbans, stopped his fishing business as two of his trawlers and a couple of other boats had capsized in Aila Cyclone in 2009. Farmers left the place as the soil became uncultivable due to saltwater intrusion ensuing from extreme weather events and sea-level rise. In “The Indian Sundarbans Mangrove Forests: History, Utilization, Conservation Strategies and Local Perception,” it is observed that “sea level rise owing to global warming, anthropogenic drivers, and land subsidence eventually affects the mangrove forest and vulnerable, coastal communities” (Ghosh et al., 2015, p. 161). One sees in *Gun Island*, the resolute young people of the lands taking the bold decision of moving abroad, albeit illegally, to earn money for an improved and stable life.

It is hinted that Sundarbans residents Tipu and Rafi have grown up among technology and are adept users of modern devices like PCs and smartphones. Thanks to the internet, they are also drawn by the prospect of a better life in a distant nation. *Gun Island* indicates that even in India's most remote and underdeveloped coastal districts, this pattern can be detected. Tipu and Rafi plan their clandestine journey to the West in search of jobs. Nevertheless, they become entangled in the web of global migration politics, which robs them of their dignity and their individuality. The text highlights that illegal immigrants become political refugees, social outcasts, and homeless and nameless entities - the exploited resources. The sordid tale of illegal migration is brought out poignantly yet starkly through two young characters - Tipu and his friend Rafi. Rafi narrates his horrific experiences of the perilous journey from the Sundarbans with Tipu. Tipu prearranged their travel with the aid of some dalals from Bangladesh. They were first taken to Dhaka. Then from Dhaka they were brought to Kolkata and were kept locked and hidden in a “connection house” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 237) in unhygienic conditions. If someone would complain or ask too many questions, that hapless victim would have been “slapped or beaten; sometimes the jackals would hit” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 237) with pistol butts.



While increase in salinity and arsenic levels due to anthropocentric causes, the human impact damages the aquatic food chain and reduces the oxygen level in fresh waters resulting in the migration or even the death of the species. *Gun Island* also shows that environmental changes originated from human centered destruction of nature are not only today's problem but also the cumulative effect of human impact. For this very reason, the novel hints the reader that the protagonist of the myth, Bonduki Sadagar, escapes from the Manasa Devi and compelling reasons for him to change place was dangerous one because of the global climate change which corresponded with "the little ice age" period as incidents such as the eradication of indigenous people of American continent and reforestation after European conquest to Americas contributed to the change of the climate for that time.

Meantime, Ghosh features the "Little Ice Age" to point out that human influence is not a contemporary problem, but a more of a persistent and ongoing problem for the ecology. Therefore, the human induced effects that have been affecting the ecology of the earth in the 21st century is not the outcome of immediate consequences, but rather a cumulative burden that has been everlasting for centuries. For this reason, it is emphasized that man is the only geological factor that changes the climate of the world in the 21st century.

Ghosh reminds us through his scholar characters that the world has already witnessed the 'Little Ice Age', and the discrimination and persecution that the Gun Merchant faces because of his identity is mirrored in the racism that migrants and refugees from the Global South now face at an unprecedented scale. The writer illustrates vast and unknowable world that is being torn apart by human systems, this vulnerability matters, and fuels what we ultimately do with what we have to face in front of us. Including its flaws in pacing, or its preoccupation with the inner life of its principal character to the neglect of many of its other compelling people, particularly the women especially Cinta. Women are a stronger presence and force in the novel. Than in Ghosh's earlier fiction. Cinta is a scholar from Venice working on the role of Venice in the medieval spice trade from India.

To be able to denounce the human impact on ecology, such as greenhouse effect, global warming, loss of biodiversity, rise in sea levels, increase in saline water levels, loss of habitat, forced migration of species, contamination of water resources, and so forth due to anthropocentric causes in the 21st century, Ghosh uses a well-known Bengali myth between the Bonduki Sadagar and Manasa Devi in *Gun Island* as a modern reflection as a fiction of migration and environmental change. While the Manasa Devi in the Bengali myth symbolizes nature, the gun trader, who uses his wealth and influence to flee from it, actually stands in for modern humans who have nowhere to run from such a pervasive threat. Consequently, dude, who is receiving.

In this situation, humankind must appreciate and care for the environment in order to avert an ecological catastrophe that would likely wipe out his species. Ghosh blends aspects of miracle, mythology, and fiction in his book to depict this situation and foreshadow a potential ecological catastrophe. He also serves as a warning to the public about potential world catastrophes that could result from a change in the natural system. As long as people believe they are in control of nature, there will be an ecological transformation, and this climatic conflict will

affect not just the animals and plants but also humanity. A change in the ecological system becomes a global problem in later stages. The problem starts in early stages as a local problem, however all together a problem starts to affect another one and all together they develop into an ecological mishap that is enough to change the balance of the earth globally. In the novel, people who migrate to countries with the loss of work and living space see the effects of this global change in the countries they go. Therefore, a greater climatic change will not only affect certain parts of the world and some certain types of life but also the whole world and all the living that it harbors, and in such an immense and global ecological change there will be no escape for humans and other living things. In this perspective, Ghosh's hypothetical scenario warns against a potential ecological change and its financial, psychological, and social repercussions. As a result, a fictional warning in a novel can prompt a reconfiguration for humans in their relationship with ecosystem, giving humanity the chance to think about and restore our relationship with environment, so that our relationship with the earth would not mean dominance and control but instead encourage an admiration for the ecology.

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