

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: An Ecological Concern

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Abstract. Amitav Ghosh's latest novel *Gun Island* (2019) is a fictional experimentation of his concern about climate change as conveyed in his nonfiction treatise *The Great Derangement* (2016). The story rotates round the experiences of a Brooklyn-based Indian dealer in rare books named *Dinanath* (Deen). Deen loves to lead a quiet life spent indoors but his visit to his birthplace Kolkata changes his attitude to life and surroundings. He finds his life becoming entangled with an ancient legend about Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes. While visiting a temple, deep within the vast mangrove forests of Bengal, he experiences a disturbing encounter with the most feared, and revered, of Indian snakes, a king cobra. As his once-solid beliefs begin to shift, he is forced to set out on an extraordinary journey that takes him from India to Los Angeles and Venice via a tangled route through the memories and experiences of those he encounters. A flurry of coincidences and spooky interventions contribute to weaving of plot which shows how nature-nurture can be dissolved. The narrative progresses with Deen's interactions with the supporting characters like Cinta, a brilliant Venetian historian with a reverence for the mystical aspects of life. Piya, a pretty, and eminently practical, marine biologist, a loudmouth slacker/hacker named Tipu and Rafi, a desperate migrant reveal the genuine concerns for the climate change, present and past, around the world. The proposed study, mainly based on the principles and insights of ecocriticism, a field of study of literature with the help of the concepts, ideas and insights of ecology, will look into how the novelist develops within the text an underlying discourse as well as argument for the development of the awareness about the environment against the backdrop of present great concern of the people of the world relating to global warming.

Keywords : Ecology; ecocriticism; discourse; environment; climate change.

Most people I talk to seem to defend or rationalize the pollution of water. They think you're defending fish or insects or flowers. But the effects on otters and so on are indicators of what's happening to us. It isn't a problem of looking after the birds and bees, but of how to ferry human beings through the next century. The danger is multiplied through each generation. We don't really know what bomb has already been planted in the human system. (Ted Hughes in an interview with Blake Morrison, quoted in Gifford, 86)

Ecocriticism got the status as a full-fledged literary theory with the publication of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's (1996) book *The Ecocriticism Reader, Landmarks in Literary Ecology* which maps the methods of ecocriticism. It is Glotfelty whose name is closely associated with ASLE formation and the
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development and popularization of this theory in the USA and other countries including the UK. She argues that "all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world affecting it and affected by it and it is evidently the study of the relationship between literature and physical world" (Glotfelty, xix). The USA based ecocritical study in the 1990s centres round the works of three major 19th century American writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) which celebrate nature, the life-force and the wilderness as manifested in America. Side by side, in the UK this literary study got momentum with the seminal work of Jonathan Bate's (1991) *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* which is undoubtedly a classic and founding text on contemporary British ecocriticism. According to Love (2003), ecocriticism offers a way of criticism that "encompasses nonhuman as well as human contexts and considerations. And thereby it bases its challenges to much postmodern critical discourse as well as to critical systems of the past". (Love, 3)

Though in the last two decades a large number of ecocritical studies have been done (e.g., Buell 1995, 1999 & 2005, Gifford 1995 & 1999, Murphy 1998, Cohen 2004, Philips 2003, Morton 2007, Tyler and Rossini 2009, etc.) there is debate regarding its nomenclature. It is found that some critics express the environment oriented criticism of a literary discourse without referring to the term ecocriticism. In a word, they favour the term environmental criticism. On the other hand critics including Glotfelty opine that the term ecocriticism has an analogy to the science of ecology and it studies the relationships between things (here between the physical world and human culture) existing in the ecological system of the region as well as the world. Moreover, the term enviro- connotatively is anthropocentric and dualistic, suggesting that 'we humans are at the centre, surrounded by everything that is not us, the environment' (Tiwari and Chandra, 615). On the contrary, the term *eco-* is precisely and perfectly related to the idea of the interdependence of communities, integrated system of human-nonhuman world and also the consolidated and durable connection among the 'constituent parts'. In midst of the prevailing controversy relating the appropriateness of one of the competing terms the future will dictate which will prevail as lasting one encapsulating the ideas which this branch of literary theory deals with. If studied the works done within the framework of this theory, it is observed that it attempts to study in a literary piece/discourse.

- the interrelationship between humans and the environment,
- the historical evolution of the relationship between human and nonhuman world,
- the present and future state of that relationship,
- the impact of environment/nature on the human mind,
- the effect of our culture/civilization on the nature at large,
- the concerns and anxieties of the literary artists conveyed through their respective works as understood and deciphered by the critics, and whatever

comes under the purview of the idea relating to human world and environmental issues in a literary text.

Amitav Ghosh's latest novel *Gun Island* (2019) is a fictional experimentation of his concerns about climate change as conveyed in his nonfiction treatise *The Great Derangement* (2016) which is an outcome of vast reading and intuitive reflection. Before we proceed to deal with the novel, let us first look into this non-fiction. *The Great Derangement* (henceforth GD) exhibits the author's grave concerns over the climate change and global warming and their telling effect on the living and non-living world as a whole. The climate crisis has been gradually but steadily destroying the ecological and geographical balances around the world leading to the fact that 'humanity was entrapped in the time of its derangement' (GD, 217). To drive home this point, the author points out unambiguously:

The waters that are invading the Sundarbans are also swamping Miami Beach, deserts are advancing China as well as Peru; wildfires are intensifying in Australia, as well as Texas and Canada. (83)

Such phenomena have evidently started affecting not only the particular area but also in due course other parts of the globe and the marginalized people. Ghosh, as the discourse exhibits gradually and strongly, has developed his argument by citing the instances of natural phenomena covering from the past to the present in order to put forward his idea of the dangers caused by the climate change and expresses his surprise why the literary authors do address this issue in their literary works, especially fiction. In this context Ghosh writes with the touch of emotion-mixed reason and genuine concern for the deplorable condition of ecology:

In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York and Bangkok, uninhabitable, when readers and museumgoers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first, and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they—what can they—do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the *Great Derangement*. (14-15)

Having preoccupied with the concerns over the climate change and its devastating effect on (non)human world at large as conveyed in *The Great*

Derangement Amitav Ghosh ventures to write the fiction *Gun Island* (henceforth GI) which is evidently a mixture of the real and the fictional focusing on the central issue of climate change along with other related issues like partition, refugee, migration, poverty, etc. The proposed study, mainly based on the principles and insights of ecocriticism, a field of study of literature with the help of the concepts, ideas and insights of ecology, will look into how the novelist develops within the text an underlying discourse as well as argument for the development of the awareness about the environment against the backdrop of present great concern of the people of the world relating to global warming.

The story GI rotates round the experiences of an urbane Kolkata-born, Brooklyn-based Indian dealer in rare books named Dinanath (Deen), the narrator-protagonist. Deen who loves to lead a quiet life spent indoors is at the heart of hearts a victim of existential angst. His visit to his birthplace Kolkata changes his attitude to life and surroundings. He finds his life becoming inescapably entangled with an ancient Bengali legend about the goddess of snakes Manasa Devi and the Bonduki Sadagarer dhaam (the Gun Merchant's shrine).

Having been requested by Nilima Bose, the founder head of Badaban Trust (an NGO dedicated to the wellbeing of the marginalized working class people residing in Sundarbans), Deen visits the Gun Merchant's shrine situated deep within the vast mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, a wild region of mangrove islands on the Bay of Bengal, stretching between India and Bangladesh. He experiences a disturbing encounter with the mysterious symbols decorating the remote shrine and the most feared and revered, of Indian snakes, a king cobra. Listening to Rafi, Deen imagines that the symbols decorated within the shrine commemorate the 17th-century legend of a gun merchant who had to undergo tribulations imposed by angry goddess Manasa Devi. Deen undergoes an unexpected, to some extent miraculous, series of threats from a cobra, a tumble into a morass of mud, wildfires, falling masonry, a dislodged flowerpot, a broken railing, a poisonous spider, a series of tornadoes and storms, a rising tide, a swarm of disgusting ship worms, even a scary man in a green baseball cap. All these haunt Deen (un)consciously and he is seen getting entrapped in pursuit of truth behind the folk story of the Gun Merchant and related affairs affecting present day human as well as nonhuman existence of the world.

As his long-cherished strong beliefs begin to shift, he is forced to set out on an extraordinary journey that takes him from India to Los Angeles and Venice via a tangled route through the memories and experiences of those he encounters. A flurry of coincidences and spooky interventions contribute to the weaving of plot which shows how nature-nurture can be dissolved. The narrative progresses with Deen's interactions with the supporting characters like Professoressa Giacinta Schiavon (known to her friends as Cinta), a brilliant Venetian historian with a reverence for the mystical aspects of life, Piya, a pretty and eminently practical, marine biologist or cetologist, Tipu, a loudmouth slacker/hacker youth, and Rafi, a

desperate migrant reveal the genuine concerns for the climate change, present and past, around the world.

Deen's interaction with *majhi* (boatman) Horen and Rafi reveals the movement of the Gun Merchant to the Island of Chains (where he was sold as slave), Land of Palm Sugar Candy (Taal-misirir-desh), Land of Kercheives (Rumaali-desh) and finally to the Gun Island (Bonduk dwip depicted by the image of two concentric circles meaning an island within an island' GI, 75). The merchant was assisted by captain Nakhuda Ilyas (nakhuda is 'a term that was in wide use in the old Indian Ocean trade: it had the dual meaning of ship owner' and 'ship captain' (56). This journey as depicted inside the shrine in the form of symbols and reported by Horen and Rafi makes Deen more and more inquisitive and goads him to explore the intricate relation between this legend and the historical event of the seventeenth century and the recent past. Haunted by all these, Deen gets the chance to attend a Conference at Los Angeles on Climate Change. This academic event attended by eminent historians including Cinta provides the space for discussion on the Little Ice Age, Black Death, Thirty Years War in Turkey and the devastating impact of these on human and nonhuman world. To bring home the point, let us quote some parts of the speech of the opening speaker:

The seventeenth century was a period of such severe climatic disruption that it was sometimes described as the 'Little Ice Age'. During this time temperatures across the globe had dropped sharply, may be because of fluctuations in solar activity, or a spate of volcanic eruptions—or possibly even because of the reforestation of vast tracts of land following on the genocide of Amerindian people after the European conquest of America. In any event many parts of the world had been struck by famines, droughts and epidemics in the seventeenth century. At the same a succession of comets had appeared in the heavens, and the earth had been shaken by a tremendous outbreak of seismic activity; earthquakes had torn down cities and volcanoes had ejected untold quantities of dust and debris into the atmosphere. Millions had died: in some parts of the world the population had declined by third... (122).

In course of his speech, this young speaker refers to Indian events of the seventeenth century including Taj Mahal. This helps Deen to think further about Gun Merchant as shown in following quote:

Here he named a number of seventeenth-century masterpieces—and among them there was one that served to jolt my memory: the Taj Mahal. That name

took my mind back to India, and it occurred to me that the temples of Bishnupur were built at about the same time as the Taj. This in turn reminded me of the Gun Merchant's shrine ...and I suddenly recalled the droughts, famines, storms and plagues that played so large a part in the legends. (123).

It is Deen's mentor Cinta who delivers the concluding speech in the conference. Through her speech marked with erudition, intuition and experience Cinta delves deep into the history of Venice and its connection with India, Egypt, Arabian countries in terms of business. In course of her speech she establishes the fact that Gun Island is none other than Venice itself :

... in that language (classical Arabic) Venice is linked to three apparently unrelated things—hazelnuts, bullets and guns! I say 'apparently' because of course the shape of hazelnuts is same to that of bullets which are, in turn, indispensable for guns! In any event, all three are known in Arabic by a word that derives from the Byzantine name for Venice, which was "Banadiq"—the ancestor of the German and Swedish "Venedig". In Arabic "Banadiq became al-Bunduqeyya", which still remains the proper name for Venice in that language. But bunduqeyya is also the word for guns, hazelnuts and bullets—and the latter, I like to think, were cast precisely in the foundry of old ghetto... (136-137)

This talk and Deen's further interaction with Cinta throw a clear light to unveil mystery related with the Gun Merchant and his journey. It is now clear to him and to the readers that the Gun Merchant who visited Venice also journeyed through Egypt and Europe. She asserts :

The outlines of the story are historically quite possible. The protagonist is a merchant, whose homeland, in eastern India, is struck by drought and flood 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...(141).

It is Cinta who argues that due to adverse troublesome situation at Istanbul, the Gun Merchant left for Venice. By referring to Shakespeare's dramas *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, she substantiates her point why the Gun Merchant along with Ilyas went to Venice which was then 'the most important trans-shipment port for that part of Africa' (142). In order to help Deen to understand the reason behind the journey of the Gun Merchant to Venice and settlement of Ilyas at a

Ghetto in Venice, Cinta invites and arranges Deen's coming to Venice. Deen's experience at Venice as presented in the very authentic narrative shows how the climate change generates multiple effects on nature, shift of the habitats of animals, migration of people like the Gun Merchant of the past and Lubna, Rafi, etc. of the present. Venice in the 21st century is facing *aqua alta* and its inhabitants are facing several damaging and troublesome situations in their lives. At the ghetto Deen happens to meet Rafi who explains the reason of the journey of the Gun Merchant to Venice:

When the Merchant reaches Gun Island he thinks he is safe at last because no snake will be able to reach him here. But one day he sees Manasa Devi's face, in a book, and he knows that this is a warning. The next day, seized by fear, he tells his friend Nakhuda Ilyas that he wants to spend the night in the most secure place on Gun Island, where no creature will be able to find him. The safest place on the island is a room where guns are kept, a room that is made of iron. So Nakhuda Ilyas takes him there and locks him in, with all the guns, thinking that he will be safe there. But in the morning, when he goes to check, he finds the Gun Merchant desperately sick—he has been bitten by a poisonous spider! It is then that the Merchant realizes that he can no longer remain on Gun Island (171).

By utilising the fable and facts across the passage of time the novelist has been able to weave the narrative suggesting the growth of our protagonist through listening to fables, research-based studies relating to migration and climate change and its impact and real life experience. The events in the novel related with Deen's exposure to the geo-physical world starting from Sundarbans to Venice via Los Angeles, his encounter with scholars on the climate change and its devastating effect and reflective reactions have been portrayed with the touch of reality and fantasy in order to shatter our indifference to the demonic force slowly approaching us. The ecosystem of the Sundarbans and the Bay of Bengal has undergone a huge change due to global warming resulting in the sea rise, decrease of animals, increase of salinity in water, repeated occurrence of natural calamities like droughts, wildfires, cyclones, etc. The novelist has explicitly and implicitly represented his sincere commitment and accountability to the world in order to suggest that interdependence of man and nature cannot and should not be ignored even to the least degree. This novel, in short, alarms us about the fact that the climate change is gradually engulfing the mother earth and making it vulnerable to (non)human existence. Let us conclude by quoting an excerpt from an interview entitled '*Gun Island is Surreal Novel about Climate Change and Migration*' given by Amitav Ghosh to J.R. Ramakrishnan:

I do think that we have a duty to work towards a better outcome. I am not someone who thinks in terms of the apocalypse. That's a very male Western thing, these apocalyptic narratives. I don't want to be associated with that. I don't think my book is climate fiction at all. It's actually a reality that it is in hard circumstances that humans often discover joy and faith. When you talk about people who've been through wars, they talk about how terrifying it was but also how it gave their lives deep meaning. The same will be true of this time and you see that already. Every time there are these floods or other catastrophes, you hear people talking about coming together, how there was a sense of renewal and hope, and so on. Climate change is all around us and it affects us in different ways. If the reality we live in now alters our mind in relation to what we think about, I think that it is a positive. If we stop thinking about commodities and constantly writing about pop culture, and think about deeper human meanings, I think something positive is already. (Interview)

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