

Exploration of Eco-criticism in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: A Story of Myth, Migration and Climate Change

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Abstract

In "*Gun Island*," Amitav Ghosh crafts a narrative that intricately weaves together mythology, migration, and ecological crisis, creating a work that resonates deeply with contemporary environmental concerns and emphasizes the important issues of Contemporary Society such as climate change, climate-induced displacement, Anthropocene, and humanity's complex, often fraught relationship with nature. The emergence of Eco-criticism, in the late 20th century, has become significant in literary criticism, promoting environmental consciousness, and sustainability. It recognizes literature as a powerful vehicle for raising environmental awareness. By blending the myth with modernity and ecological critique, Ghosh narrates the story and underscores the humans' connection with the natural world and draws attention from Kolkata's urban bustle to the fragile mangroves of Sundarbans', and then Venice, a city threatened by rising seas.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Environment, Mythology, Migration, Ecological, Displacement

Introduction

In "*Gun Island*" the author masterfully knits together mythology, environmental degradation, and migration, crafting a narrative that resonates with pressing environmental issues of our time. It highlights a range of themes that directly speak on the ecological challenges that our world is facing today. The narrative of the *Gun Island* takes its readers on a journey from Kolkata's urban bustle to the fragile mangroves of Sundarbans', ultimately reaching Venice, a city threatened by rising seas. Through this global, multi-layered narrative, "*Gun Island*" serves as both a reflection of human existence within an interconnected ecological web and a call to action regarding environmental stewardship.

One of the unique contributions of literature to environmental discourse is its ability to bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and public awareness. Literature acts as a bridge between Science and Society and aligns with the goals of eco-criticism, which seeks to foster a holistic understanding of environmental issues by integrating scientific knowledge with cultural and ethical perspectives (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). To highlight the reality of climate change, the novelist adds scientific terms throughout the novel such as rising sea levels, changing weather patterns, oceanic dead zones, and so on. The myth of the *Gun Merchant* serves as a lens through which Ghosh explores the idea of environmental ethics. By reviving this ancient tale, Ghosh underscores the fact that the challenges posed by ecological degradation are not new, they are part of an age-old ethical dilemma, an ongoing moral narrative that highlights the responsibility of humanity to protect the environment. This interplay between myth and reality prompts readers to reflect on their responsibility toward the planet, highlighting the significance of sustainable living and ethical action in the face of ecological disruption.

The current study is an attempt to analyze the representation of myth, ecological consciousness, environmental degradation, and migration in "*Gun Island*" authored by

Amitav Ghosh. The narrative of the novel highlights the impact of human activities on nature such as climate change, deforestation, biodiversity loss and extinction of species and how environmental crises causes displacement of human beings and other living organisms. It also demonstrates that literature can advocate for sustainable coexistence with nature and critically examine the socio-environmental dynamics, human accountability, and moral obligations toward nature, emphasizing their relevance in addressing contemporary ecological challenges.

Literature Review

Literature has long been a mirror of human life, reflecting not only emotions, behaviors, and desires but also its relationship with the natural world. Historically, writers and philosophers have depicted nature as a source of inspiration, moral guidance, and aesthetic pleasure praising the divinity of nature and how it impacts human beings. In the recent past novelists and writers are trying to bring ecological awareness through their literary works and eco-critics are playing a vital role by raising their voice for safe guarding nature by highlighting the relationship between humans and nature. With the advent of industrialization, modernization, unsustainable agricultural practices; exploitation of nature has become critical issues hence giving rise to climate change. The present paper explores ecological concerns through the lens of Indian English fiction, emphasizing environmental consciousness as portrayed by Amitav Ghosh in 'Gun Island', which also serves as an eco-critical novel as its text exposes the intersection of climate change and human displacement.

Theoretical Framework for Research

Ecocriticism, a relatively recent literary theory, examines the interaction between literature and the physical environment. Coined by William Rueckert in *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* (1978), the term emphasizes the ecological principles within literary texts, fostering environmental awareness. Rueckert defines it as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature". Over the time, this nascent field expanded into a multidisciplinary study, aligning with the broader domain of environmental studies. Lawrence Buell in his book "*The Environmental Imagination*" (1996) defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the environment, conducted with the spirit of commitment and environmental praxis" (Buell. 430). His contributions, such as 'The Environmental Imagination' (1996) and 'The Future of Environmental Criticism' (2005), delineate the evolution from the first wave focused on cultural representation of nature in literary texts, to the second wave, analyzing the interconnectedness of humans, non-humans, and the natural world. Addressing global environmental challenges, such as climate change, species extinction, and ecological crises, through a Marxist and global perspective comes under the third wave. Norman Myers, a British environmentalist, renowned for his work on environmental refugees, introduced the term Climate Refugee in "Environmental Refugees: A Growing Phenomenon of the 21st Century," published in the *Journal Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*.

Prominent voices such as Meeker and Rueckert emphasized the need for ecocriticism to champion environmental sustainability. Emerson's seminal work, *Nature* (1836), Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1843), and Thoreau's *Walden* (1845) collectively advocate for a "return to nature," portraying it as a restorative and spiritual force that fosters harmony and self-reflection. Similarly, Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) show cased

the exploitation of nature and environmental degradation in the name of modernization and progression of the world; Noble Laureate Rabindranath Tagore's *Geetanjali*(1910), *Rakta Karabi* (1926), *Muktadhara* in (1922); Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* (1947); Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof* (1956), and *No Room for a Leopard*; Anita Desai's *Fire on the Mountains* (1977);Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006); Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Great Derangement* 2016) and recent novel *Gun Island* (2019) delve into eco-critical themes.

Representation of Cultural Memory and Cultural Landscape, Mythology and Environmental Degradation in Gun Island

The current study navigates the complex intersections of myth, migration, and climate change, shedding light on the pressing global challenges that are defining our contemporary world and examines environmental themes by employing eco-critical lens to analyze how its characters; landscapes and ecological concerns impact the lives of the people. The Novel "*Gun Island*" published in 2019, takes readers on a journey from the bustling urban life of Kolkata to the mysterious landscapes of the Sundarbans, finally reaching as far as Venice. It defies conventional storytelling by merging myth with modernity, focusing on the ecological crises shaping our world and the resultant migration, which is now a shared experience of many vulnerable communities (Parmeswaran, 2020). Through this combination, Ghosh explores not only the geographical movement of people but also their spiritual and ecological journey as they navigate a rapidly changing world.

Amitav Ghosh is an influential writer and his contributions to Indian English literature are significant. He was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and studied in Delhi, Oxford and Alexandria. He has authored many books and tried to raise the issues of the contemporary society based on the themes of migration, climate change and cultural identity. Amita Ghosh's literary achievements earned him several accolades, including the Padma Shri Award awarded by the Government of Indian in 2007 and 54th Jnanpith Award in 2018. He has been honoured to receive Doctorate Honoris Cause from University of Lucerne, Switzerland and Sorbonne in 2024 and 2010; Honorary Doctorate from Maastricht University, Holland and University of Puget Sound in 2019 and 2014. He was ranked by *Foreign Policy* magazine as one of the most important global thinkers in 2019. He has also been honoured to receive Lifetime Achievement Awards in 2018 and 2017.

In "*Gun Island*," Ghosh tells the story of Deen Datta, a New York based rare book dealer of Bengali origin, known for his skepticism and practicality, finds himself compelled to explore the legend Bonduki Sadagar, a Bengali folk tale and recalls that "The Gun Merchant entered my life not in Brooklyn, where I live and work, but in the city where I was born and raised – Calcutta" (*Gun Island*-3). Deen's journey from skepticism to awareness is emblematic of humanity's broader journey toward recognizing the depth and urgency of the ecological crisis at hand (Goodbody & Rigby, 2011). The legend of the Bonduki Sadagar or Gun Merchant serves as a moral guide, illustrating the dangers of neglecting ecological balance and the necessity of a symbiotic relationship with nature. It also represents as a symbolic thread linking past and present ecological challenges as Deen came to know about the Gun Merchant from Neelima Bose, who is an elderly woman, runs the Badabon Trust, a Charitable Organization, who has also visited the Shrine once, described –

“Like Chand, the Gun Merchant was said to have a rich trader who had angered Mansa Devi by refusing to become her devotee. Plagued by snake and pursued by droughts, famines, storms and other calamities, he had fled overseas to escape the goddess’s wrath, finally taking refuge in a land where there were no serpents, a place called ‘Gun Island’ – Bonduk-dwip”. (Gun Island-16)

“Pirates threw them into a dungeon and were taking him to be sold as a place called ‘The Island of Chains’ (Shikol-dwip) when Mansa Devi appeared before him once again. She promised that if he become her devotee and built shrine for her in Bengal she would set him free and make him rich”. (Gun Island-17)

In "*Gun Island*", mythology serves as a form of cultural memory, which is a repository of shared knowledge that offers insight into humanity’s longstanding relationship with the natural world. In the novel Ghosh describes that “the most famous of these stories is the legend of merchant called Chand-‘Chand Sadagar - who is said to have fled overseas in order to escape the persecution of Mansa Devi, the Goddess who rules over snakes and all the poisonous creatures” (Gun Island-05). On one hand the author emphasizes the importance of ecological responsibility by illustrating the legend of the Gun Merchant as cultural memory, encourages its readers to re-evaluate modern attitude towards nature and recognizes the importance of collective ecological responsibility, while on the other hand he portrayed Manasa Devi as a symbol of nature’s revenge and Goddess Mansa represents the power and resilience of nature, embodying the natural forces that respond to human exploitation with consequences. Her character is a mythological symbol of ecological reprisal, suggesting that nature will react to imbalances caused by human actions, a view supported by eco-critical scholars who advocate for an ethical approach to environmental management (Buell, 2005).

In "*Gun Island*", Ghosh portrays the Sundarbans as a character in its own right, one that breathes, shifts, and endures, even as it is battered by human-induced ecological changes. Similarly, in *The Hungry Tide* (2004) Ghosh describe that the tide, which is always hungry come twice a day and resulted in reshaping the land and uprooting the plants. According to the article published in Ecology and Environment Journal, the unique mangrove ecosystem in the Bengal Delta is constantly under threat from rising sea levels, changing salinity, and increasingly severe cyclones are the consequences of climate change (Chakraborty & Ghosh, 2019). Floods, cyclones, rising sea level are very common in Sunderbans and nearby areas causing great loss to humans and non-humans. In the novel Ghosh describes cyclone Aila which hit the Sundarbans in 2009 and caused great loss. He writes that –

“Aila’s long-term consequences were even more devastating than those of earlier cyclones. Hundreds of miles of embankment had been swept away and the sea had invaded places where it had never entered before; vast tracts of once fertile land had been swamped by salt water, rendering them uncultivable for a generation, if not forever. The evacuations too had produced effects that no one could have foretold. Having once been uprooted from their villages many evacuees had decided not to return, knowing that their lives, always hard, would be even more precarious now. Communities had been destroyed and families dispersed”. (Gun Island-48)

Ghosh vividly describes the Sundarbans’ mangrove forests, marshes, and the wildlife that inhabits this precarious landscape in "*Gun Island*". They are not simply a backdrop for the story; they are integral to its structure, embodying the tension between human existence and

environmental fragility (Mukherjee, 2010). Ghosh finds the reason for the changing condition of Sundarbans and identified it as the “demon” of anthropocentric “greed”, which captured the human beings and exploits nature to fulfil their need which later on turns in greed. He used the word “Demon” which is the metaphor of “Greed” (Gun Island-111). Ghosh writes that “Greed” would bring “Pralaya” which will destroy the entire world. Tipu clearly explains about greed and its effects to Deen and says “Hey, Pops, I got news for you: greed’s real, it’s big. You got greed, I got greed, we all got greed..., it’s not parasites we got inside of us, it’s greed! If that’s what a demon is, there’s no way It’s imaginary. Shit no! We’re all demons...That’s really bad news, because according to Hindu mythology when demons take over is when the world ends” (Gun Island-111).The narrative of the novel shows how the legend encapsulates the war between profit and nature that defines the modern world as Kanai Cooly said that “the Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and wilderness look each other directly in the eye, that’s exactly where the war between profit and nature is fought” (Gun Island-8). Due to the greediness of human beings Sunderbans became a field of war, thus creating alarming situation in Sunderbans.

In "*Gun Island*", Ghosh describes that Venice is the second primary landscape, presents a stark contrast to the Sundarbans, which are wild and untamed while Venice, a city built by human hands, a testament to human imagination and artistry is celebrated for its cultural heritage yet endangered by rising sea levels due to climate change. This portrayal resonates with eco-critical perspectives that question the stability and permanence of human civilization in the face of ecological crises (Clark, 2020). Deen’s journey to Venice not only broadens the geographical, and socio-economical scope of the novel but also highlights the universality of environmental challenges, through the comparison of the Sundarbans and Venice, "*Gun Island*" underscores that climate change knows no boundaries (Clark, 2020). Ghosh’s portrayal of Sundarbans and Venice as characters in "*Gun Island*" reinforces the interconnectedness between humans and landscapes. This interconnectedness is central to eco-criticism, which challenges the separation of human and non-human worlds and argues for an understanding of nature as a co-creator of human life and culture (Plumwood, 2002). Through the interconnected journeys of Deen, Rafi and other characters, Ghosh illustrates the ripple effects of climate-induced displacement. They migrated to different areas with the hope of making their lives better and safer but they suffered a lot and drawn between ‘*dalals*’. Thus, we can say that climate migration has become a global issue because of climate change and environmental degradation. Rob Nixon environmental philosopher describes climate crises as “slow violence” the gradual, often invisible destruction of environments that impacts marginalized communities over long periods. (Nixon, 2011)

In "*Gun Island*", central to the novel is the character of Piya Roy, who is an American, visited India for conducting research on Irrawaddy Dolphins at the bottom of the Sundarbans. Over the many years she mapped the pods movements and observed their diurnal seasonal and annual migration. Piya, the microbiologist, noticed that water pattern of Sunderbans are being contaminated by the chemical effluents threaten the lives of the aquatics areas resulted in migration of marine species. Ghosh uses the term “Oceanic Dead Zone”, which is the most pressing issue of the current era and Piya explains to Deen that “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 pace, mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers... those patches of water are known as dead zones” (Gun Island-104). Thus we see that the narratives of the novel encourage its readers to adopt a more ecologically mindful worldview, urging us to deal with the urgent environmental crises which our planet is facing and emphasizes that life’s meaning and sustainability are surrounded in an ecological balance.

Conclusion

In conclusion "*Gun Island*" serves as a profound eco-critical text, using literature as a medium to bridge the gap between mythology, migration, and environmental crisis. Ghosh urges readers to engage with issues related to ecological challenges of our time like climate-induced displacement, the interconnectedness of ecological systems both at intellectual and emotional level. Novel inspires readers to adopt a more responsible and empathetic attitude toward the planet by fostering an ecological consciousness and promoting environmental stewardship. In doing so, "*Gun Island*" becomes a call to action, inviting readers to recognize their own role within the global ecological web and to commit to protecting Earth's ecosystems for future generations. Ghosh demonstrates that literature can be a vital tool for promoting environmental awareness through this eco-critical approach encourages us to maintain sustainable and ethical relationship with the natural world.

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