



Review Article

Rising Seas and Shifting Lives: An Ecocritical Reading of Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island

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ABSTRACT:

This paper offers an ecocritical reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* focusing on the interconnected crises of rising seas, climate change and human displacement. Set against transnational landscapes stretching from the Sundarbans to the Mediterranean, the novel foregrounds how environmental degradation reshapes both ecosystems and human lives. Through an ecocritical lens, the study examines the fragile relationship between humans and the non-human world, highlighting how climate-induced disasters such as cyclones, sea-level rise and biodiversity loss disrupt traditional livelihoods and force migration. Ghosh portrays nature not as a passive backdrop but as an active agent that challenges anthropocentric assumptions and exposes the ethical responsibilities of humanity toward the planet. The novel's blending of myth, history and contemporary climate realities underscores ecological memory and the interconnectedness of global ecological systems. This paper argues that *Gun Island* urges readers to recognize climate change as a shared, transboundary crisis and calls for ecological awareness, empathy and sustainable coexistence in an era of accelerating environmental uncertainty.

Keywords: Ecology, Equilibrium, Resistance, Anthropocene, Exploitation

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Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) is a novel that bridges myth, history and environmental reality, offering a layered narrative capable of addressing contemporary crises in both local and global contexts. His novels frequently traverse geographical boundaries, connecting India's historical past to contemporary global challenges. In works such as *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and the *Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2015), Ghosh examines the movement of peoples across borders, the impact of colonial histories and the interconnections of culture, memory and geography. *Gun Island* continues this trajectory, blending myth, environmental awareness and global migration into a narrative that addresses twenty-first-century concerns.

The influence of humanity in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* on the ecology of the Earth from the perspective of the Anthropocene. As a result of the worldwide influence exerted by humans, the effects

of human activity alter the natural world, including animals, plants and humanity itself, in unpredictable ways. In this regard, Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* illustrates the consequences of human actions on the environment, linking the past to the present through a Bengali myth that demonstrates how human influence permeates the ecological landscape. Humanity has consistently been a part of the ecological system since its emergence on the earthly stage. The impact of human activity on the environment is now acknowledged as a significant factor, with the degradation of the earth's ecology serving as a testament to humanity's influence.

Ecology is regarded as one of the most significant scientific fields that aids in comprehending the relationship between living organisms and their environments. According to the *Introduction to Ecology: A Guide to the Study of Ecosystems*, "The term oekologie (ecology) was coined in 1866 by the German biologist, Ernst Haeckel from the Greek oikos meaning 'house' or 'dwelling' and logos meaning 'science' or 'study'. Thus, ecology is the 'study of the household of nature'.

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Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* serves as a compelling illustration of how literature weaves in ecological themes. The narrative traverses various geographies from the Sundarbans of Bengal to Venice in Italy yet at its core lies a singular truth: the connection between humans and nature is unbreakable and ecological imbalance inevitably influences human existence. In *Gun Island* Ghosh not only tells the tale of Deen, a rare book dealer, but also illustrates how environmental crises lead to social, cultural and political turmoil.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) is a groundbreaking work that awakened global awareness about the destructive impact of human activity on the environment. In her book she says, "Man has gone very far in his attempts to control nature. In the process, he has made of it a wilderness" (297). Through clear scientific evidence and evocative prose, Carson exposes the harmful effects of chemical pesticides, particularly DDT, on ecosystems, wildlife and human health. She argues that the unchecked use of such chemicals disrupts the natural balance, leading to ecological collapse and the 'silencing' of nature's voices.

Carson's work not only launched the modern environmental movement but also reshaped how people perceive the relationship between humanity and the natural world. In the context of literary ecology, *Silent Spring* serves as a vital foundation for understanding how environmental degradation can be addressed through narrative and moral responsibility. Her insights resonate with ecological themes in contemporary literature, where writers like Amitav Ghosh connect environmental crisis with myth, memory and human accountability. Carson's text thus underscores the urgent need for ecological awareness and ethical coexistence with nature.

The *Gun Island* is replete with ecological events that intertwine myth, history and science. The Sundarbans, characterized by their mangrove forests and cyclones, symbolize the delicate equilibrium between humanity and nature. Venice, with its encroaching waters and shipworm infestations, exemplifies the susceptibility of urban environments to climate change. The migrants who traverse borders in search of survival represent ecological displacement, a phenomenon that parallels the

migration of species under environmental duress. Furthermore, the myth of the Gun Merchant, tormented by the snake goddess Manasa, transforms into an ecological allegory that serves as a reminder to humanity of the repercussions of disregarding natural forces.

To grasp these elements, it is essential to engage *Gun Island* in dialogue with ecological theories that elucidate the functioning of living systems. One of the core principles in ecology involves examining the interactions between organisms and their environment across various levels. At the individual level, organisms adapt through their physiological and behavioral traits. At the population level, groups of the same species face challenges in surviving under constrained conditions. At the community and ecosystem levels, various species engage with abiotic elements such as water, soil and air. This dynamic is exemplified in the Sundarbans, where humans, tigers, snakes and mangroves create a delicate ecosystem that is perpetually at risk from storms and rising sea levels. At the landscape and biosphere levels, ecology investigates extensive spatial patterns that link different regions of the planet. Ghosh employs this concept of interconnectedness by associating the Sundarbans of Bengal with Venice, implying that ecological crises are universal rather than limited to specific localities.

Ecological theories offer frameworks for understanding these interactions. The rule, introduced by David Tilman, posits that in the competition for a resource, the species capable of surviving at the lowest resource level will outcompete others. This concept is relevant to the Sundarbans, where both human populations and wildlife rely on limited land and resources. As saltwater intrusion renders farming unfeasible, individuals are forced to relocate, mirroring how weaker species are eliminated in ecological competition. Another significant framework is r/K selection theory, which differentiates between r-strategists that produce numerous offspring and flourish in unstable environments and K-strategists that focus on fewer offspring but necessitate stable habitats.

Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary*

Ecology (1996) is a foundational work that establishes “the critical study of literature in relation to the environment” (xviii). The editors argue that literary texts can both reflect and shape human understanding of ecological systems, emphasizing the ethical and cultural responsibilities embedded in storytelling. The collection explores how literature addresses the human-nature relationship, highlighting themes such as environmental degradation, sustainability and the interconnectedness of life.

In the context of ecological analysis, the essays demonstrate how myths, narratives and literary imagination can foster environmental awareness and ethical engagement with the natural world. For contemporary Indian English literature, including works like Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* Glotfelty and Fromm's framework provides a lens to examine how ecological crises, climate change and human intervention are interwoven with culture, history and narrative form.

In *Gun Island* invasive shipworms in Venice act like r-strategists, rapidly proliferating in warming waters, whereas dolphins and tigers, resembling K-strategists, face challenges in surviving in disrupted habitats. This conflict between opportunistic and vulnerable species reflects the larger ecological upheaval instigated by climate change. Metacommunity theory is also pertinent when examining the novel. This theory highlights that communities are interconnected rather than isolated, linked through dispersal and migration. In *Gun Island* human migration serves as a parallel to ecological dispersal.

Refugees abandon their homes in Bengal due to floods, cyclones and rising sea levels that render survival unfeasible. Their journeys to Europe reflect the ecological reality that when habitats deteriorate, populations relocate. Likewise, neutral theory and niche theory provide insights into species distributions. Neutral theory posits that species is ecologically equivalent and that patterns of biodiversity arise from random processes of birth, death and dispersal.

In contrast, niche theory focuses on the differences among species and the partitioning of resources. In Venice, the invasion of shipworms exemplifies both

theories: their spread is partly random yet also associated with specific niches formed by warmer waters. These theoretical frameworks demonstrate how scientific ecology can shed light on the fictional occurrences in Ghosh's narrative. The notion of ecological stability and resilience holds significant importance. Stability denotes an ecosystem's capability to revert to equilibrium following a disturbance, whereas resilience highlights its ability to withstand shocks without

succumbing.

In *Gun Island* both the Sundarbans and Venice exemplify ecosystems teetering on the brink of collapse. Ghosh narrates, “The Sundarbans was a place where land was steadily being reclaimed by the sea (23) and “Venice had become a city that lived in a state of permanent emergency (264). In Bengal, cyclones and saltwater intrusion consistently devastate livelihoods. Families are compelled to abandon their land and migrate, indicating a lack of ecological resilience. In Venice, rising sea levels and invasive species undermine the city's physical and cultural foundations. Ghosh illustrates through these events that ecological resilience is constrained when human activities exacerbate climate change.

One of the core principles in ecology involves examining the interactions between organisms and their environment across various levels. At the individual level, organisms adapt through their physiological and behavioral traits. At the population level, groups of the same species face challenges in surviving under constrained conditions. At the community and ecosystem levels, various species engage with abiotic elements such as water, soil and air. This dynamic is exemplified in the Sundarbans, where humans, tigers, snakes and mangroves create a delicate ecosystem that is perpetually at risk from storms and rising sea levels. Ghosh narrates, “...the islands of the Sundarbans have been repeatedly swallowed up by the sea ...” (18). At the landscape and biosphere levels, ecology investigates extensive spatial patterns that link different regions of the planet. Ghosh employs this concept of interconnectedness by associating the Sundarbans of Bengal with Venice, implying that ecological crises are universal rather than limited to specific localities.

The novel is replete with specific ecological events that illustrate these theories. Early in the story, Deen journeys to the Sundarbans and contemplates the clash between commerce and the wild. Ghosh states: "The Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that's exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought." (8–9). This instance underscores the concept of political ecology, which examines how economic and political dynamics interact with environmental conflicts. The Sundarbans serve not only as a natural habitat but also as a site of conflict where human avarice confronts ecological equilibrium.

Another significant ecological event is highlighted when the novel refers to the seventeenth century as a period marked by extreme climate upheaval. Cinta informs Deen that the legend of the Gun Merchant may indeed encapsulate recollections of the Little Ice Age. She states: "The seventeenth century ... was a period of such severe climate disruption" (135). In this context, Ghosh associates myth with historical ecology, indicating that age-old narratives frequently retain memories of previous environmental crises.

By linking the Little Ice Age to contemporary climate change, Ghosh illustrates that ecological disturbances are recurrent, yet their severity is intensified by current human actions. The episodes set in Venice further enhance the ecological aspect of the novel. Deen discovers the threat posed by shipworms that are deteriorating the wooden structures of Venice. As Cinta notes: "An increasing number of these are invading Venice, due to the warming of the lagoon's waters" (142). This serves as a clear illustration of invasion ecology, which examines the spread of non-native species and their disruptive impact on ecosystems. The rise in water temperatures, attributed to climate change, provides favorable conditions for shipworms to flourish, jeopardizing the stability of the city. Consequently, Venice emerges as a representation of how even ancient urban settings are susceptible to ecological influences.

Migration stands out as one of the most significant ecological themes in the novel. The experiences of Bangladeshi migrants, along with North Africans making their way into Europe, encompass not only

political aspects but also ecological ones. Families are uprooted from Bengal due to their land being consumed by floods or rendered unproductive due to saltwater intrusion. This aligns with ecological migration theory, which acknowledges that humans, similar to other species, alter their ranges when their environments become uninhabitable.

Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) introduces the concept of 'slow violence' to describe environmental degradation that occurs gradually and often invisibly, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. Nixon argues that the cumulative effects of pollution, deforestation, climate change and industrial exploitation unfold over long periods, making them less perceptible and less urgent in mainstream discourse. He emphasizes how literature, journalism and activism can make such slow violence visible, giving voice to those who suffer from ecological injustice.

In the context of Indian English literature, Nixon's ideas are particularly relevant, as writers like Amitav Ghosh depict environmental crises such as rising sea levels, human displacement and biodiversity loss not as isolated events but as interconnected processes that shape human and non-human lives alike. His work provides a critical framework for understanding ecological narratives that highlight both the vulnerability of communities and the ethical imperatives of environmental responsibility.

Ghosh depicts migration as a natural ecological phenomenon; however, it is accompanied by profound human suffering when associated with climate-related disasters. Wildlife encounters depicted in the novel further emphasize the fragility of ecosystems. Deen's observation of the Gangetic dolphin holds particular importance. This species faces endangerment due to factors such as pollution, dam construction and habitat destruction. Its infrequent appearance in the narrative symbolizes the delicate endurance of biodiversity within compromised ecosystems. Likewise, snakes, linked to the goddess Manasa, serve as a reminder of the influence of nonhuman entities in determining human destiny. These creatures function not only as symbols but also as reminders of the intricate connections between humans and other species.

The frequent flooding of Venice further highlights the ecological crisis. Rising sea levels pose a threat to the city's cultural heritage and its very existence. From an ecological perspective, this signifies a critical juncture, where urban ecosystems are unable to adapt any longer. The field of urban ecology, which examines cities as ecosystems, becomes pertinent in this context. Ghosh posits that no area, regardless of its construction or historical significance, can evade the impacts of climate change. Venice, akin to the Sundarbans, stands as a frontline in the battle against ecological vulnerability.

The narrative of the Gun Merchant transforms into an ecological allegory. The merchant defies the demands of the snake goddess Manasa, symbolizing human hubris in the face of nature. Manasa's relentless pursuit of the merchant across various seas and lands illustrates the unavoidable influence of ecological forces. The myth serves as a cautionary tale, indicating that humanity cannot outsmart nature; the equilibrium of ecosystems must be honored, or disaster will ensue. This allegorical interpretation situates the myth within the realm of ecological storytelling, where Venice and the journeys of migrants all underscore the idea that humans are inextricably linked to ecosystems.

The myth of the Gun Merchant serves as cautionary tale, reminding us that ecological hubris can lead to catastrophic outcomes, while the current crises of displacement and climate change highlight the tangible human implications of ecological theory. Ghosh explains, "Stories are important because they make us aware of our connections with one another and with the world around us—connections that are often invisible but no less real for that" (291). By weaving together science, history and myth, Ghosh reveals that ecology is both a field of study and a narrative that exposes our collective vulnerability and shared responsibility.

The ecological interpretation of Gun Island can be further enhanced by the lens of deep ecology, a concept introduced by Arne Naess during the 1970s. Deep ecology posits that nature holds intrinsic value that exists independently of human utilization. It calls for a departure from an anthropocentric perspective in favor of a more eco-centric viewpoint. This philosophy resonates within the

Sundarbans, particularly through the myth of Manasa. The snake goddess does not merely punish humans for their defiance; she represents the reality that nature is not intended for human exploitation.

The Gun Merchant's refusal to honor her reflects the contemporary industrial society's disregard for ecological boundaries. When storms, floods and invasive species afflict humanity, these occurrences are not simply random events but serve as reminders of ecological truths. Ghosh, therefore, aligns with deep ecology by illustrating that the nonhuman realm possesses agency and authority. Furthermore, ecofeminism enriches this interpretation. Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant contend that patriarchal systems exploit both women and nature, regarding them as passive resources.

In Gun Island the character of Manasa stands against this exploitation. She is both a marginalized goddess venerated by the impoverished and overlooked by the elite and a formidable ecological force. Her relentless pursuit of the merchant across the seas symbolizes the resurgence of women's silenced voices as ecological alerts. Additionally, the women in the Sundarbans who gather honey, fish and firewood bear the brunt of ecological upheaval. Their experiences reflect the exploitation of the land itself. Ghosh narrates, "It was the women who bore the greatest risks: they were the ones who went into the forests to gather firewood, who stood waist-deep in the rivers to fish, who followed the honey collectors into tiger territory. Climate change had made all of these tasks far more dangerous than before" (40). Ecofeminism uncovers that Ghosh's narrative encompasses not only ecological themes but also the gendered aspects of the environmental crisis.

The Anthropocene, a concept introduced by Paul Crutzen, refers to the present epoch where human activities have emerged as the primary influence on the Earth's systems. The rising sea levels in Venice, devastating cyclones in Bengal and the displacement of millions exemplify phenomena of the Anthropocene. Ghosh's narrative illustrates that human history and geological history are now intertwined. Venice, a representation of cultural magnificence, is sinking not due to divine retribution but as a result of warming driven by

fossil fuels. The Sundarbans are disappearing not solely due to natural processes but also as a consequence of climate change induced by human actions. By weaving these occurrences into a literary narrative, Ghosh enables readers to understand the Anthropocene not as an abstract scientific concept but as a tangible experience.

Postcolonial ecocriticism links ecological issues with the legacies of empire, capitalism and global inequality. The susceptibility of Bengal to climate-related disasters is not only a natural occurrence but also a historical one. The colonial exploitation of forests, rivers and lands has resulted in fragile ecosystems that are now succumbing to contemporary pressures. Migrants escaping from Bengal and Africa are victims on two fronts of ecological degradation and of postcolonial global systems that obstruct their safe passage. When they seek to enter Europe, they are regarded as illegal trespassers, akin to how invasive species are perceived as threats. This unsettling yet intentional parallel highlights the intersection of ecological and political categories.

The symbolism of wildlife in Gun Island warrants further examination. The infrequent sighting of the Gangetic dolphin represents not only an instance of ecological splendor but also what environmentalists refer to as a charismatic species. Such species, including dolphins, tigers and elephants, act as emblems of biodiversity conservation due to their cultural and emotional significance. Therefore, Deen's encounter is both ecological and spiritual: it serves as a reminder to him and to the reader that life continues even in the face of severe adversity. However, the dolphin is also at risk, with its existence precariously hanging in the balance. This delicate coexistence mirrors the vulnerable survival of migrants whose lives are endangered by ecological disasters.

The cyclones in the Sundarbans merit a more in-depth ecological analysis. Within the narrative, storms devastate homes and livelihoods, compelling families to migrate. Ghosh intricately intertwines these realities with fiction, illustrating that ecological catastrophes are not isolated incidents but persistent forces that shape human existence. Such occurrences align with resilience theory, which investigates how systems adjust to shocks. For the

impoverished population of Bengal, resilience is minimal, as each cyclone inflicts enduring harm. In contrast, in Venice, technological initiatives such as the MOSE barriers exemplify human efforts to cultivate resilience, although Ghosh implies that these may ultimately be inadequate against relentless seas. Venice's flooding can also be understood through systems that obstruct their safe passage. When they seek to enter Europe, they are regarded as illegal trespassers, akin to how invasive species are perceived as threats. This unsettling yet intentional parallel highlights the intersection of ecological and political categories.

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Venice's flooding can also be understood through the lens of urban ecology, which perceives cities as ecosystems governed by ecological principles. Structures, waterways and human communities interact with water, soil and climate in a manner similar to that of forests or wetlands. The invasion of shipworms illustrates that even heavily constructed environments are susceptible to ecological disturbances. Venice thus emerges as a representation of the Anthropocene city, where human heritage confronts natural forces.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that Ghosh employs language itself as an ecological medium. His metaphors likening storms to armies, seas to insatiable mouths and myths to memories uncover the profound interconnection between nature and narrative. In this context, literature serves as a means of ecological consciousness, enabling readers to grasp the urgency of the crisis.

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