

# From Sundarbans to Venice: Climate and Cultural Migrations in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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## Introduction

Climate change is one of the most challenging environmental crises worldwide in recent years. There are many reasons for the increase in temperature, but very least, measures are taken to control it. While the scientific reports present the current situation and project the future scenario, the awareness created is not meeting the needs of the hour. It remains intangible. Climate Fiction (cli-fi) emerged as a genre of literature that creates a fictional world set in the future, dealing with the impacts of the climate crisis. The term climate fiction was coined by Dan Bloom, a journalist, in the early 2000s. "Cli-fi" sounds like "sci-fi", while science fiction focuses on the technological advances and the future, "cli-fi" has its focus on the environment and the issues surrounding it. Climate fiction has for its themes various ecological disasters like global warming, melting of ice caps, rising sea waters, nuclear radiation, etc., everything of which lead to a place uninhabitable to live. By presenting these environmental disasters through heart-wrenching stories, climate fiction paves the way to understand the imaginary futuristic world as a tangible living environment. The environment is no more a backdrop to the setting of the story, it is actively playing its role in the lives of the people.

## Objective

To highlight how climate fiction plays an important role in addressing the climate crises and to analyse the work of art through ecocritical and postcolonial lenses. Though climate change is experienced worldwide, the reasons behind it have to be analysed. It must also be noted that the effects of climate change experienced by people all over the world are not the same. This research paper focuses on these aspects by analysing Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019).

## Myth, History and the Anthropocene

Through a mythic tale, Ghosh establishes the ecological disasters that surround the Sundarbans. It is a significant work on environmental crisis, and in particular, can be seen as a contemporary climate fiction that situates

environmental crisis within the broader contexts of environmental degradation, migration, and human displacement in the backdrop of mythological situations. The novel bridges mythical imagination and modern ecological reality, and it projects how climate change disrupts natural, social, and cultural ecosystems. In his non-fiction, *The Great Derangement* (2016), Ghosh criticized modern literature for its inefficiency and failure to engage with the ongoing climate crisis. He argued that realism and the conventions of the bourgeois novel have made the contemporary writers blind to the uncanny, to the improbable. *Gun Island* may be read as Ghosh's own narrative response to that critique. It is an attempt to reconcile storytelling with the unprecedented scale of environmental transformation in the Anthropocene.

The novel revolves around the journey of Dinanath Datta (Dinu), a rare book dealer from Kolkata. He gets involved with the Bengali legendary tale about the "Gun Merchant", cursed by the snake goddess Manasa Devi. The climate crisis of the Sundarbans is depicted through various incidents in the process of Dinu's search to break the mystery of the snake goddess. When he visits the Sundarbans, Dinu sees how climate change, rising seas, cyclones, and loss of land are destroying people's lives and forcing many, like his cousin's son Tipu, to dream of migrating abroad.

Dinu's encounter with a Bengali folktale about the "Bonduki Sadagar", or the "Gun Merchant," is the key phenomenon, and it connects the past and the present. The gun merchant incurred the wrath of Manasa Devi for refusing to worship her. It can be compared to the present-day tendency of human beings to ignore nature. In the myth, the merchant was subjected to the wrath of the goddess, and in the age of Anthropocene, human beings are suffering the anger of nature in the form of various environmental crises.

Human beings have come to see themselves as the masters of the planet rather than as a part of the natural world. In the current geological epoch, the activities of human beings have become the dominant force shaping the Earth's systems. People have disrupted ecological balance through industrialization, deforestation, pollution, and technological exploitation of resources. Instead of respecting nature as a living system with its own intrinsic value, people treat it as a commodity, something to be owned, extracted, and used for economic or personal gain. Forests, rivers are dammed and polluted for industrial purposes, and the atmosphere is filled with greenhouse gases in the name of development and progress. A human-centered way of thinking that places humanity above all other forms of life is the root cause of climate change and other environmental crises - all of which threaten the very survival of human civilization. The mindset of the people has to change, i.e., they have to understand that nature exists not only to serve human needs. A shift toward eco-centrism, i.e., the belief that all life forms require earth and everything is dependent on one another for survival; and ecosystems have value beyond human utility, it has to be restored. Respect for nature must replace exploitation, and the journey of the merchant highlights this.

The myth is the central pivotal point around which revolves - the past and the present; the tension between the wrath of the Goddess and the pride of the merchant; the anthropocentric attitude of the current era, and the ecological crises resultant of the anthropocentric attitude. A legendary tale is turned into an allegory for the Anthropocene, the present planetary crisis is parallel to the happenings narrated through the travel of the merchant. The wrath of the goddess is reflected as a supernatural punishment for the merchant's irreverence to her, and the contemporary cultured society moving away from nature is now manifested through real-world crises in terms of rising sea levels, cyclones, earthquakes leading to mass displacement. The myth of Manasa Devi thus functions as an epistemological bridge, revealing how premodern cosmologies contained ecological wisdom that modernity has suppressed. By reactivating this myth in a contemporary setting, Ghosh resists the Western rationalist tendency to see nature as inert or subordinate. Instead, the novel proposes that nonhuman forces possess agency. This is what is referred, as vibrant matter by material eco-critics, that is capable of reshaping human destinies.

### **Material Ecocriticism and Postcolonial Ecocriticism**

Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" is central to understanding Ghosh's representation of the Sundarbans. As defined by him, the violence that occurs there gradually cannot be observed unless with a

closer observation, it is out of sight topically; only after deep analysis, delayed destruction can be understood, dispersed across time and space. It is a form of violence, the effect of which cannot be seen as a result of a flood or a cyclone, but its effects are seen only after a long duration. In the Sundarbans, there is not one catastrophic event; there has been a series of such activities, and the amalgamation of them has paved the way for steady deterioration that pushes communities into forced migration.

Inundation of water, frequent cyclones leading to loss of biodiversity, have made the Sundarbans an important zone of a climate-vulnerable region. Most of the traditional livelihoods have become impossible, and have forced the communities to migrate, leading to mass displacement. Migration, in Ghosh's world, is no longer a socio-political or economic phenomenon; it is an ecological imperative. It is an event of slow violence. Their displacement is not the result of a single-day cataclysm but of cumulative environmental degradation that has been happening for decades. As pointed out by Rob Nixon's "slow violence", the destruction has been invisible, and the communities were forced to leave the place. This climate-induced displacement is also a result of industrial and capitalist exploitation.

At its core, *Gun Island* portrays events that are not only about environmental degradation but also expose the cause for such exploitation. The mangrove forests of the Sundarbans protected a large number of wildlife species, including plants and animals. It is a source of livelihood for many people in and around the Bengal Delta. Its resources attracted the capitalists since the colonial period, and have become a land to be commodified. The vast mangrove delta, which once stood as a symbol of ecological richness, is now a place of human exploitation. Ghosh projects the Sundarbans not merely as a setting of the story but as a character alive and suffering, and the one that has become the victim of human greed, colonial legacies, and environmental fragility. The dense mangrove forest, which shielded the species, has been ruthlessly cleared for human needs and commercial purposes. This has been witnessed by Dinu while he visits the Manasa Devi temple. Environmental degradation is justified in the name of progress and development. The colonial rule and the greedy elites have transferred the ecosystem.

### **Human and Non-Human Migration**

Centuries ago, people crossed borders as traders and are now replaced by refugees and illegal migrants. The routes of the migration of the illegal people are similar to the land and sea routes once chosen by the traders in the past, and also by the gun merchant. The inhabitants of the Sundarbans, mostly fishermen or farmers, live at the mercy of shifting waters. It is pathetic to state the precarious life of people living in such a place that is frequented by floods, storms, soil erosion, salination of agricultural land. The high tides drown the place, in addition to the loss of lives. The disappearance of land underwater is happening consistently. The change in climatic conditions, environmental degradation, and other disasters are affecting the vulnerable species and the marginalized sectors to the most and induce their migration. The powerful institutions that catalysed these issues remain insulated. Non-human migration is similar to that of human migration; animals leave their habitats as their ecosystems are affected. They are also forced to move, suffer, or disappear and try to adapt elsewhere as environments transform. It is not only humans, but also the other living organisms in the Sundarbans are forced to leave their habitats.

In the novel, it is repeatedly seen that these animals are seen in distant lands and inappropriate environment. They are out of place, alone and confused. Dolphins, snakes and other marine creatures go to new territory, sometimes seen on land as the seas warm and the coastal regions erode. These are significant warnings of breaking down of ecological balance, and the climate crisis is beyond human imagination. While the trafficked migrants, refugees risk their lives, these displaced animals undertake dangerous routes. The fossil-fuel capitalism, colonial hegemony have led to non-human displacement too. Slow violence is done to every other species in the ecosystem and is no more just a human social problem.

### **Environmentalism of the Poor**

Another key feature to be brought into analysis is Rob Nixon's "environmentalism of the poor". Ghosh has created a plot that connects the site of colonial exploitation and contemporary vulnerability, with Venice, a trade centre that dominated the European sea routes. These two regions, though geographically similar, share a remarkable history shaped by sea trade as well as ecological fragility. The Sundarbans and the city of Venice have similar geographical features, mainly governed by water threatened by rising seas and, danger of getting submerged. Yet the fate of both the lands is quite the opposite and stands apart in the global economic and ecological framework. The Sundarbans, representing the global south, are marked by poverty, displacement, and ecological fragility. Venice, the global north, is an attractive tourist spot with growing wealth and prosperity, a rich heritage, and stability.

By juxtaposing the refugees of the Sundarbans with the economic security of Venice, Ghosh exposes the global inequalities of climate change, illustrating how wealth merely postpones, though cannot prevent, environmental collapse.

In the novel, it is seen that there are members in every family who died in a flood or in a cyclone, or someone who has migrated to European countries or Gulf countries illegally, putting their lives in danger. In order to survive, they are being exploited by those people. They were just refugees and were deprived of everything that any common individual would possess. Just for mere existence, they undergo all sorts of hardships throughout their lives. This is the effect of global industrial capitalism.

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, the young had drifted to cities, swelling already-swollen slums... (Ghosh 48)

Venice is a city of trade, commerce, art, centre for tourism and fashion of the world. It stands as a pillar of permanence and prosperity with a sound economy accumulated by its past mercantile wealth. Although the city is submerged in water, its place in the global picture makes it stronger even during climate crises. The inhabitants of Venice are not affected by any of these ecological disasters and are protected by wealth and technology.

The struggles of the marginalized and the economically challenged people in the context of climate change are not about money, luxury, advancement, or happiness; it's just survival. These displaced families have become invisible labourers without any documents. The poor need their environment because they depend on their land for survival. They become climate refugees and continue to relocate to different parts of the world. They are not welcome anywhere, so they live illegally with their lives at risk. Their labour is exploited by the consumer economy, who were the reasons behind their loss of habitat and identity.

Through two characters, Tipu and Rafi, Ghosh brings into the forefront how environmental degradation, loss of family, and poverty give rise to forced migration. Tipu and Rafi are examples of victims of slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor. Tipu is an ordinary boy involved in fishing, collecting honey, and doing agriculture in the Sundarbans. At the same time, he is atech-savvy, enthusiastic young man who doesn't want to drown in the submerging city. His life is in harmony with nature. Rafi is also like Tipu, having a life in peaceful co-existence with nature. But they are forced to migrate. For Tipu and Rafi, migration is not simply a matter of ambition but of survival. Rafi, in particular, voices his frustration and agony by commenting that the people there have no work, no land, no future.

Ghosh does not let Venice remain a mere symbol of privilege completely. He signals that the fate of the people of Venice should also be that of the people in the Sundarbans. It can be noted that the same waters that swallow the banks of the delta, rise beneath the Venetian canals. In front of the climate crisis, everything is on a temporal scale, and it can be projected that what the Sundarbans experience now will be experienced by Venice tomorrow. It has to be understood that the divisions between North and South, rich and poor, will be drained in front of natural disasters. The reality is that the Third World refugee and the First World tourist both inhabit the same endangered planet. The climate crisis is a global phenomenon.

It is not only their physical displacement, but they also undergo emotional and cultural exile. The sense of rootlessness is felt by them, but is not entertained. It is a form of escape from their haunting past memories. Their departure from the Sundarbans is not their individual choice; their ancestral land failed to nourish them, the state has neglected its duties to restore equilibrium, and at the same time, it is an indictment of global environmental protection failure. They work in a hostile environment, with no security for their lives, contributing to Europe's comfort. They clean, cook, serve, rear, and build but remain silent and unseen. The political dimension of climate migration is to make a community that will do all the odd jobs without questioning. It's like modern-day slavery where the migrants sell themselves for a place to hide. They are unaware of their exploitation, of the inequalities prevailing, and of a way to exit their problems. Like a machine, they run, produce, and keep up their economy, and will be thrown away if they stop working.

The situations of Tipu and Rafi are not isolated incidents but form a part of a larger planetary pattern of displacement that is occurring in different parts of the world. People affected by ecological disasters endure mental and emotional trauma. Their adaptation to a foreign land is beyond imagination. These are some of the aspects which should not be overlooked in analysing the climate fiction. Ghosh connects the travel of the gun merchant in the mythical story and the travel in modern era, while the former symbolize trade and exploration, the latter symbolize desperation and survival in the Anthropocene. The routes of global trade have become the routes of global flight. Their story illustrates that climate change is not only about rising temperatures or melting ice caps but about the movement of people - from the exploited zones of the world toward its centers of power.

### **Climate Crisis, Social Problems and Planetary Injustice**

Another social problem that joins displacement is human trafficking. People in need of displacement will be vulnerable as they are in need of a safe place and a secure job. These are cunningly used by the human traffickers, and thus people like Tipu and Rafi become preys. People living in the endangered zones are the potential targeted victims. The journey of Tipu and Rafi can also be seen as a journey of an odyssey. They come through many zones of danger, exploitation, and ill treatment in the name of class, race and colour. They pass through the perilous routes of twenty-first-century climate refugees. They are caught in the hands of the global trafficking network that ferries desperate people toward Europe. Tipu and Rafi, like countless others, are lured by the false promise of jobs and stability abroad. Later they find themselves caught in a transnational web of exploitation. In this way, Ghosh connects the local environmental crisis of the Sundarbans to the global machinery of migration. It can be understood that the climate crisis is interlinking many social problems like poverty, displacement, climate refugees, and human trafficking.

In addition to this, loss of morality and humanism is also focused on in the narration. The mediators involved in human trafficking, after getting their bargained money, force the migrants to sell their few possessions or make them take on unpayable debts to pay smugglers. It was once goods were shipped to enrich Europe, now people were trafficked as disposable labour. Rafi's words capture this sense of despair: "They take our money, our bodies, our souls — and we still go, because there's nothing left at home" (Ghosh 213). This movement through hostile terrain marks the beginning of their transformation from citizens into stateless bodies, stripped of rights and identity.

When Tipu and Rafi finally reach Venice, their arrival marks not an end to their suffering but the beginning of a new kind of peril - the invisibility of the undocumented migrant. It is a reminder that the privileges of one are built upon the suffering of the other. Environmental justice is treating everyone as the same, irrespective of class, race, gender etc. But in the novel, the people in the Sundarbans are symbols of planetary injustice. Young migrants like Tipu and Rafi bear the marks of the Anthropocene - scars of both climate and capital. From the flooded villages of the Sundarbans, they go to the glittering canals of Venice, for which they pay a lot. They traverse not just continents but also the moral geography of a divided world. Each stage of their journey - the drowning delta, the desert camps, the Mediterranean Sea, and the European city - exposes a different face of modern peril.

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