

NARRATING THE ANTHROPOCENE: CLIMATE CRISIS IN *GUN ISLAND* BY AMITAV GHOSH

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary world, climate change has transformed into one of the most frequently discussed areas of research. Various disciplines such as science, economics and literature explore how anthropocentric actions have contributed to the advent of the Anthropocene. Literature being the mirror of society plays a crucial role in portraying the drastic changes in our environment and its effects on our planet. Green literature in particular focuses on the ethical responsibility that human beings must uphold in the Anthropocene. Science and related fields tackle the issue by using various scientific approaches and policies to mitigate the effects caused by it. Literature on the other hand brings out the immediacy and humane dimension of the impending catastrophe by incorporating narrative and subjective language. This paper analyses the powerful green literature text *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh to explore how the Anthropocene and the crisis of climate change are represented in literature. The novel set in the volatile background of the Sundarbans shows a vision of the near future where climate change becomes a global crisis affecting millions of people. Ghosh combines mythology and history to warn humanity about the deadly consequences of their anthropocentric behaviour. The concept of "great derangement" developed by Amitav Ghosh, "slow violence" by Rob Nixon and "hyperobjects" by Timothy Morton is used in this paper to analyse how the pressing issue of climate change is represented in literary narratives. In this technologically advanced era, literature supplements scientific discourses by infusing subjective sensibility to warn humanity of its impending destruction.

Key Words: *Anthropocene, green literature, great derangement, slow violence, hyperobjects*

"The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination".

- Amitav Ghosh

The phenomenon of climate change is the long-term shifts in the average weather patterns experienced both regionally and globally. The overall rise in temperature leads to widespread environmental disasters including floods, droughts and hurricanes. With time, the intensity of their occurrences becomes unpredictable and unmanageable. The earth is experiencing an unprecedented rate of rise in temperature as never before. The sensitive balance of weather patterns in nature is drastically altered by this drastic rise in temperature. This jeopardises the life of all the living beings on the planet. As the repercussions of climate change are yet to manifest, people often tend to dismiss it as an exaggerated idea. This fixation of people with their present time and their dismissal of the future has been pointed out by various experts in the field, including the widely acclaimed American journalist and author Elizabeth Kolbert, who critiques the tendency of the people to focus only on the here and now. They demand tangible proof of climate change, but once it becomes evident in daily life it indicates that human beings have failed to manage its effects, and this will eventually lead to much worse climate related disasters. The ongoing discourses related to climate change asks human beings as a collective to be aware of the immediacy and urgency of anthropogenic climate change.

Climate migration is one the most significant effects of climate change in the contemporary era. It refers to the movement of individuals and communities from their native spaces because

their land has become inhospitable due the adverse effects of climate change. Various natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, wildfire, desertification, droughts and rising sea levels force people out of their homelands. Unlike the other groups of migrants, such as economic migrants who move to other lands for better opportunities and economic resources, climate migrants are the victims of the destruction of their immediate environment. Anthropogenic climate change is the primary cause of the evolution of the Anthropocene. It refers to an unofficial unit of geological time in the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant adverse impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems. The Anthropocene forces human beings to reevaluate their anthropocentric activities and to reflect on its adverse effect on the natural world. Long term debates have been going on regarding the relationship between human beings and nature. Some contend that human beings and their natural world are both separate arenas, while some argue that human beings should develop an ethical responsibility towards our natural world and should act as its guardians. Another vantage point is that the environment should be left alone and nature will thrive on its own. Despite all these contending viewpoints the intrinsic link between human beings and nature has been substantiated undeniably through scientific research.

Literature, while giving much significance to aesthetic sensibilities, also plays a crucial role in addressing the social changes in any given time in history. Many writers have incorporated the problem of anthropocentric climate change in their fictional narratives. Green literature, as a genre in particular, is dedicated to explore the themes of environmental degradation, ecological concerns, and human beings' relationship with nature. The genre is instrumental in reflecting the development of environmental consciousness among people. It also weaves together a network of writers who are strong advocates for ecological conservation and peaceful coexistence between human beings and nature. Green literature also emphasises how storytelling can be used as an effective medium to raise concerns regarding ecological degradation and how it can evoke a sense of ethical responsibility towards environmental conservation.

This paper analyses how Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019) explores the critical problem of climate change through fiction. The protagonist of the novel is the rare books dealer Dinanath Dutta (Deen Dutta) who is settled in Brooklyn. Upon his arrival in Kolkata, he gets fascinated by the Bengali folklore of The Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar). Piyali Roy and Nilima Bose persuades him to delve deeper into the folklore as it is his area of interest. He visits the shrine of Manasa Devi which is located in the Sundarbans. This shrine is intrinsically linked to the folklore, and his visit sets in motion various events that blends myth and reality. Deen resolves to solve the mystery of the folklore along with his Italian friend and historian Cinta. The novel emphasises the urgent problem of climate migration through various characters such as Tipu and Rafi. Both of them flee from the Sundarbans to Europe due to the extreme weather patterns of their land. It also portrays the drastic adverse effect of anthropogenic climate change by illustrating natural disasters such as cyclones and wildfires. It highlights how human beings and other species are forced into climate migration due to the destruction of their immediate environment. Ghosh sets the novel in the major locations of the globe such as West Bengal, Venice and Los Angeles to underscore the universal effects of the climate crisis faced by humanity.

The paper employs the concepts of "the great derangement" by Amitav Ghosh, "slow violence" by Rob Nixon and "hyperobjects" by Timothy Morton to explore how *Gun Island* explores the problem of climate crisis. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh contends that modern civilization is in a state of "derangement", a collective irrational failure to comprehend or act upon the climate crisis. He argues that modern literature, politics and history dismiss the reality of extreme weather patterns as an improbable condition. He observes that "when novelists do choose to write about climate change, it is almost outside of fiction" (Ghosh

8). Modern novelists are hesitant to weave the urgent reality of climate change into fictional narratives. In this aspect *Gun Island* becomes exceptional by blending myth and reality to address the modern reality of the climate crisis. Ghosh uses the Bengali medieval folklore of BondukiSadagar and illustrates how the characters' life parallels with that of the characters in the 21st century novel. The novel emphasises how storytelling is a powerful medium for conveying urgent messages to human society. Ghosh argues that no one should underestimate the potential of stories. The unfathomable and fundamental aspect of storytelling is a gift to human beings. He contends that the gift of storytelling is what segregates us from animals.

In the text *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh explores the problem of climate migration faced by people residing in ecologically sensitive regions. He states that his ancestors were also ecological refugees even before the invention of the term. He calls the Sundarbans "the great mangrove forest of the Bengal Delta". He portrays it as a volatile space which experiences constant shifts in weather patterns leading to natural disasters such as cyclones that destroy the lives of the people and their lands. The people of the Sundarbans are forced to become climate migrants because of its extreme weather patterns. Ghosh portrays the harrowing imagery of the Bhola cyclone using vivid imagery. On each outing they saw horrific sights: hamlets obliterated by the storm surge; islands where every tree had been stripped of its leaves; corpses floating in the water, half eaten by animals; villages that had lost most of their inhabitants. The situation was aggravated by a steady flow of refugees from East Pakistan. For several months people had been coming across the border, into India, in order to escape the political turmoil on the other side; now the flow turned into a flood, bringing many more hungry mouths into a region that was already desperately short of food (Ghosh 14).

He makes a clear distinction between those who had to migrate to India for political reasons and those who had no other choice than to flee their land for survival. The natural disasters in the Anthropocene leave the victims with only the choice of escape. Ghosh also underscores that the marginalised communities are the primary victims of anthropogenic climate change. "The Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us; it is they who confront most directly what Thoreau called 'vast, Titanic, inhuman nature'" (Ghosh 63). Ghosh uses the character of Tipu to highlight how the climate crisis affects the marginalised groups. Tipu sees the natural disaster-prone Sundarbans as an area of immense opportunities. He becomes an entrepreneur in the "people-moving" industry, where he helps the marginalised people to migrate to various European countries. Tipu's job highlights the helplessness of the marginalised people and how their vulnerability is exploited for monetary profits. What I'm doing is I'm offering an essential service. In these parts, there's a whole bunch of dirt-poor, illiterate people scratching out a living by fishing or farming or going into the jungle to collect bamboo and honey. Or at least that's what they used to do. But now the fish catch is down, the land's turning salty, and you can't go into the jungle without bribing the forest guards. On top of that every other year you get hit by a storm that blows everything to pieces. So what are people supposed to do? What would anyone do? If you're young you can't just sit on your butt till you starve to death. Even the animals are moving — just ask Piya. If you've got any sense you'll move and to do that you need someone who can help you find a way out (Ghosh 65).

Ghosh emphasises on the global impact of climate change by arguing that a majority of people still live under the misconception that the aftereffects of climate change will not impact their bourgeois life. Through the novel, he dismantles these notions by illustrating how the elite localities of the world will also face the same consequences. "I am in a nice lounge, in a big chair—my flight is delayed because of some flood somewhere" (Ghosh 26). Deen's Italian friend Cinta dismisses her situation of being stranded in a Venetian airport as a mere inconvenience. Similarly,

her cousin Gisa expresses her disbelief when their dog dies of snake bite on a seashore. "I don't believe it. The dog is dead, of a snake bite! Here in LA" (Ghosh 145). Spotting a yellow-bellied sea snake on a beach in southern California is considered as improbable by Gisa. Piya later explains the reason for such a strange occurrence as; These snakes generally lived in warmer waters, to the south, but sightings in southern California had become increasingly common: their distribution was changing with the warming of the oceans and they were migrating northwards. This was bad news for southern California because yellow-bellies were indeed extremely venomous — but fortunately fatalities were vanishingly rare. My friend's dog had been very unlucky (Ghosh 147-148). Subsequently, people express their utter disbelief when they learn that an extreme weather condition has developed in Italy. The relative sense of security felt by the western countries is shattered by the report on extreme weather patterns; Soon we learnt that the strange weather was not just a local phenomenon: all of Italy had been affected in different ways. Some northern cities had been deluged with rain and hail; many parts of the country had been struck by gale-force winds; in the mountains of the Sud Tirol entire forests had been flattened; elsewhere too trees had been knocked down, damaging houses and blocking roads (Ghosh 276).

Later, Gisa's house gets destroyed as a result of a storm, and their family seeks refuge in the house of their acquaintances. "Can you believe it? In Rome – of all places! - my family have become refugees" (Ghosh 278). Through these instances Ghosh emphasises that the situations which were dismissed as "improbable" and "uncanny" by the bourgeois classes are now manifesting before them as extreme weather patterns and species migration. In the Anthropocene the unchallenged lives of human beings, irrespective of spatial and class distinctions, get shattered by the impact of the climate crisis.

Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, explores environmental harms that occur gradually and invisibly, including deforestation, toxic drift and climate change. "By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (Nixon 2). *Gun Island* depicts a slow ecological degradation occurring in the Sundarbans. "The islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they're disappearing before our eyes" (Ghosh 19). He emphasises that climate change has the potential of erasing an entire geographical region. The human activities that happen "out of sight" lead to the gradual destruction of the earth's delicate ecosystems.

In the novel a refinery in the Sundarbans dumps industrial waste into the water bodies, which in turn develop into an ecological crisis. The oceanic dead zones are created as a result of contamination of water bodies due to industrial run off. Piya explains the adverse effects it has on the delicate marine ecosystem; Have you heard of oceanic dead zones? No? Well they're these 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. When they're washed into the sea they set off a chain reaction that leads to all the oxygen being sucked out of the water. Only a few, highly specialized organisms can survive in those conditions — everything else dies, which is why those patches of water are known as "dead zones". And those zones have now spread over tens of thousands of square miles of ocean — some of them are as large as middle-sized countries (Ghosh 104).

By expanding on slow violence, Nixon contends that it will lead to long term conflicts where sustaining healthy living conditions becomes extremely difficult. The novel illustrates how the young generation of Sundarbans are migrating in masses towards better living conditions; Making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find

them work elsewhere. Some were slipping over the border into Bangladesh, to join labour gangs headed for the Gulf. And if that failed they would pay traffickers to smuggle them to Malaysia or Indonesia, on boats (Ghosh 53). Ghosh illustrates the migration of Bonduki Sadagar in the mediaeval times due to drought to highlight the pervasive nature of climate change. This establishes the core theme that humans of all times have been prone to the detrimental effects brought by climate change. Through Deen Dutta, Ghosh bridges the gap between the past and the present where climate change becomes the focal point of his reality as well as the folklore; He remembered vividly, for example, the disaster that had forced the Gun Merchant to flee his homeland: a drought so terrible that the streams, rivers and ponds had dried up and the stench of rotting fish and dead livestock had hung heavy in the air. Half the people had died of starvation; parents had sold their children and people had been reduced to eating carcasses and cadavers (Ghosh 60).

Timothy Morton's concept of hyperobjects gives a more nuanced vantage point on the problem of climate change. It is a phenomenon that is massively distributed in time and space. Viscosity or its ever-present nature is one of the primary characteristics of hyperobjects. In the novel Deen flees from the Sundarbans to escape the wrath of its volatile landscape to Brooklyn, which is relatively secure. But the abrupt manifestation of extreme weather conditions shatters his illusion of safety. He is informed about the breakout of a wildfire as he boards a flight for Los Angeles. "Now, looking at my smartphone, I learnt that massive wildfires had been raging around Los Angeles for several days. Thousands of acres of land had been incinerated and tens of thousands of people had been moved to safety" (Ghosh 126). The wildfire triggers a sudden realization in Deen that no geographical location on the globe is safe from the threat of natural disasters and climate change.

The weirdness of things is another important characteristic of a hyperobject. The occurrence of certain events begins to seem strange and improbable. When Deen finds a spider on his table in Venice, it is regarded as uncanny and weird because it does not belong there. Climate change forces people to confront the "weird" in their everyday lives. Piya explains how spotting a brown spider in Venice is directly associated with climate change; Larry says this is the first time he's heard of one turning up so far north. But he's not surprised either. He says the brown recluse has been increasing its range very quickly because it's getting so much hotter in Europe. And there's a related species, the Mediterranean recluse, that's already widespread across Italy (Ghosh 223).

When extreme weather patterns begin to manifest in relatively safer geographical spaces of the globe, it is met with bewilderment as well as terror. Deen experiences a hailstorm in Venice, and his reaction to it shows just how strange the event itself is; Running to the side of the square, I took shelter under the awning of a café. There were some other people there and we watched in astonishment as the hailstones came hammering down, shattering windows and cracking shopfronts. Then someone shouted, "*Guarda! Attenti!*", and I looked up to find that the awning above had filled up with hail and was sagging dangerously downwards. I managed to move away just as the awning tore open, sending down an avalanche of hailstones (Ghosh 268). Thus, Morton's concept of hyperobjects reveals that climate change has evolved into a powerful entity which can adversely affect the entire planet. As human lives are intrinsically linked to their natural world, it is impossible for human beings to evade the detrimental effects of anthropogenic climate change. The extreme weather patterns which were once dismissed as improbable and uncanny are gradually manifesting in the daily lives of people.

In conclusion, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* is a powerful reminder to humanity that the fate of human beings rests at the mercy of nature itself. Even in an era of unprecedented technological

innovations and developments, human beings fail to realise that climate change is one of the most potent threats that they are facing in the modern era. Ghosh effectively blends the folklore of BondukiSadagar into the narrative to highlight the pervasive nature of climate change. The novel serves as a powerful reminder that the ultimate destruction of our ecosystem is not a distant threat but a highly probable event. Climate change is a hyperobject that is constantly reshaping our worlds. The problem of climate migration is also highlighted by Ghosh to show that communities across the globe are forced out of their homelands due to climate change and extreme weather patterns. The novel reminds humanity that in an interconnected world, no one is immune to the adverse effects of environmental degradation caused by climate change. Storytelling, thus, becomes an effective medium for emphasising environmental stewardship and recognising the persistent need for a collective global response to the climate crisis.

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