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Environmental Crisis and Forced Mobility: Human and Non-Human Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract

This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) as a captivating literary intervention into contemporary discourse on environmental crisis and forced mobility. Though the existing scholarship on climate-induced migration has largely focused on human displacement, the novel largely expands this framework by foregrounding the forced movement and habitat loss of non-human species. The paper argues that Ghosh challenges anthropocentric narratives of migration by situating human refugeehood within a broader multispecies ecology of displacement. Through myth, folklore, and contemporary realism, the novel exposes how environmental crises destabilise traditional livelihoods, disrupt migratory routes of animals, and blur the boundaries between natural and political causes of mobility. By reading human and non-human displacements as intertwined, the study highlights Ghosh's vision of planetary environmentalism, which calls for an ethical rethinking of responsibility, coexistence, and survival in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: forced mobility, multispecies migration, Climate change

Introduction

Environmental calamities have become more frequent and intense over the past few days and led to severe habitat loss, adversely affecting both human and non-human livelihoods and forcing increasing numbers of people and creatures to migrate. Climate-induced migration is gaining increasing attention within frameworks of global environmental governance. Various terms, like *climate refugee*, *environmental displacee*, *climate migrant*, and *environmental migrant* have been coined to refer to the people displaced by climate-induced disasters. The distinctions between these terms remain contested. Climate change and its effects are being discussed in a range of literary and critical works. Engagement with this subject through fiction anticipates critical debate and discussion; carefully crafted narratives foster our understanding,

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enable the exploration of imagined futures, and promote reflection on the kind of world we aspire to inhabit. There are very few writers today who are oblivious to the current disturbances in climate systems the world over. Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Barbera Kingslover and Amitav Ghosh are a few of them. While climate-induced migration of human beings has received increasing scholarly attention, the displacement and migratory responses of non-human species remain comparatively underexplored within literary studies, a critical absence that *Gun Island* seeks to redress by foregrounding the precarity of the non-human world. The paper analyses Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) as narrative that critically engage with the global crisis of climate-induced displacement of both human and non-human.

It is the story of a Brooklyn based middle aged rare book dealer, Dinanath Datta. Deen, as he is nicknamed, on his visit to Kolkata, his native land in order to escape from the bitter winter of Brooklyn. While attending a party in Kolkata, Deen is introduced to an unfamiliar version of a story that is known to him as a folk tale. It is the story of Bonduki Saudagar or the gun merchant who is said to have drawn the wrath of the goddess, Manasa Devi for refusing to become her devotee, and had escaped to a place called "gun island". The search for the etymology of the name Bonduki Sadagar launches Deen on a global quest to resolve the mystery. He sets out in search of the shrine of Manasa Devi, a Hindu goddess of snakes, persuaded by his aunt Nilima Bose. He has been assigned to record the structure of the temple and the shrine with its inscriptions for future. His journey unfolds a series of events that beautifully portrays the present reality of climate change and disruptive migratory patterns of both humans and animals induced by it. In the course of these findings Deen meets Nilima Bose, founder of a charitable organisation in the Sundarbans, and Piya Roy, the marine biologist who emerges as a strong voice in *Gun Island*, drawing attention to environmental crises such as "dead zones" and the changing migration patterns of aquatic animals. Egged on by Nilima, Deen travels by boat to the deep interiors of Sundarbans where he is introduced to Tipu, the son of a trust employee and Rafi who is the last of a family of Muslims looking after the gun merchant's shrine.

Demanding environmental justice both for humans and nonhumans across the planet, the novel travels through the muddy and unpredictable rivers of Bengal. The mangroves and the retreating islands of the Sundarbans. Fertile land being destroyed and submerged by environmental calamities. Tracing the Deen's journey the narrative travels from Bengal via Brooklyn and the fires of Los Angeles in America to and the puzzles the gun merchant poses to him are solved in Venice. Environmental depletion in the Sundarbans undermines agriculture and fishing through rising salinity, ruining livelihoods and compelling residents to migrate in search of work, thereby distorting traditional lifestyles and causing cultural dislocation. Venice in the novel represents the shared vulnerability of culturally significant cities to climate change, as rising sea levels threaten its existence, paralleling the plight of the Sundarbans and underscoring climate change as a universal, borderless crisis.

Ghosh showcases the consequences of ecological upheaval in the Sundarbans, foregrounding a parallel process of ecosystem destruction that is happening across the globe.

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He shows that agency is not limited to humans alone. Animals such as dolphins and snakes, spiders and even shipworms react to environmental changes and play active roles in the narrative. By highlighting their presence, the novel prioritizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and challenges an anthropocentric view of climate change. For example, the appearance of a cobra in a temple and the sight of dolphins in Venice's canals influence Deen's journey. The shipworms are shown in unfamiliar and unexpected habitats as differences in temperature and humidity disrupts their migratory patterns. An incident involving yellow bellied snakes washing up in the shores of Venice Beach is another example. "These snakes generally lived in warm 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" (134). These creatures are shown as living beings that react to environmental changes, highlighting the close relationship between humans and the natural world. Through this, Ghosh suggests that climate change affects all species, not just humans.

Gosh gives many instances of climate related catastrophes being inductors of migrations. During the journey of Deen, to the shrine of the goddess of Manasa, he learns about the damages caused by cyclones especially 'Alia' which destroyed and submerged a huge number of islands. "Alia'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 generation" (Ghosh 48).

The people of the Sundarbans have long lived in close harmony with nature, relying on traditional livelihoods such as fishing. However, rapid environmental changes and frequent natural disasters like cyclones and severe storms have transformed the landscape, making the land and waters they once knew increasingly unfamiliar and unstable. People are being compelled to migrate as life in the Sundarbans grows more difficult and uncertain. Characters like Tipu, Rafi and even the gun merchant are hurled outward by the violent force of nature. Tipu's journey represents the lives of climate refugees who are forced to leave their homes because of environmental change. Ghosh shows his difficulties in adjusting to new cultures and social conditions, highlighting the struggles migrants face in unfamiliar places. Like the climate refugees, Tipu and Rafi drive the plot at one level taking great risks, crossing land borders and oceans in search of a better life. Tipu's journey reflects the experiences of climate refugees who are forced to leave their homes due to environmental changes. Ghosh portrays Tipu's struggle to navigate new cultural and social landscapes, highlighting the challenges faced by migrants in adapting to new environments.

The novel underscores the need for empathy and support for climate refugees, who are often among the most vulnerable populations. Climate change is a hyper object in the story of Deen, Tipu and Rafi, through poisonous sea snakes, raging wild fires, killer cyclones, Ghosh poignantly depicts climate change as a powerful catalyst for migration. Ghosh compellingly presents climate change as a decisive force driving migration. The Sundarbans—marked by recurrent cyclones, rising sea levels, and severe land erosion—is depicted as a fragile landscape

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on the verge of ecological breakdown. As livelihoods become increasingly unsustainable, its inhabitants, particularly marginalized communities, are compelled to relocate in search of safety and stability. The narrative thus reflects contemporary realities in which climate-induced displacement is emerging as a widespread and urgent global concern. Ursula Kluwick in her essay, *The global deluge: floods, diluvian imagery, and aquatic language in Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide and Gun Island (2020)*, claims that the tale of the Gun Merchant functions as a review of climate change and it determines human reluctance to recognise the underlying and inextricable links between human actions and environmental alterations (Kluwick, 2020, p. 9).

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