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CRISIS IN CLIMATE VIS-À-VIS CRISIS IN CULTURE: CONCERNS ON
CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MYTH IN AMITAV
GHOSH'S *GUN ISLAND*

Swapnajeet Das

M.A. in English, Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata

Email: swapnajeetdas124@gmail.com

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Abstract

The era of the Anthropocene is characterized by an increasing awareness of the possible catastrophic consequences of climate change that is directly or indirectly influenced by inconsiderate anthropogenic activities. Though several national and international policies have been made to address the challenges of climate change, a more provocative consideration of this global issue needs to be internalized into the “collective un/consciousness” of the people. In this context, literature plays a crucial role in raising awareness and prompting introspection. Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* is such a literary text that features the impacts of anthropogenic pollution contributing to climate change, subsequent ecological disasters, and cultural erosion. It depicts a global condition in which every place, whether in Asia, Europe, or America, seems to be undergoing climatic and ecological crises, and creatures of every kind, whether human beings, animals, insects, or fish, are affected by these crises and forced to leave their habitats and immigrate towards a new place. The paper intends to illustrate the ways Ghosh, by deploying the Bengali folklore of Manasa Devi (the goddess of snakes) and 'Bonduki Sadagar' (the Gun Merchant) in the narrative and drawing parallels between the events in the past and the events in the present, posits the importance of religious and traditional beliefs in inspiring the conservation of biodiversity and the protection of ecosystems. Furthermore, the paper also aims to focus on the climate change-induced ecological and socio-economic factors that seem to be responsible for the migration of the young population from India and Bangladesh to Western countries, as is depicted in the novel. Alongside, by emphasizing how Ghosh's arguments in *The Great Derangement* are responded to in *Gun Island*, the paper proposes to critically comment on 'sustainable development' policies and the pivotal role of cosmopolitan intellectual characters of the novel in raising awareness about climate change and their collaboration with common people from local communities to effectively deal not only with environmental challenges but also with

complex socio-economic-political issues emanating from climatic and ecological catastrophes.

Keywords: Anthropocene; Climate Change; Ecology; Folklore; Policies.

Introduction:

The anthropogenic imprint on the global environment has now become so visible that it seems to influence the conditioning of the earth system more profoundly than even some of the great forces of nature. Although the global-scale human influence on the environment has been recognized since the time of the Industrial Revolution, roughly around the 1800s, the term 'Anthropocene', introduced a decade ago, has recently become widely popular and is informally used by research communities to indicate a new geo-historical era in which humans can be identified as largely responsible for climatic and ecological changes. The scientific examination of the causes of climate change declares the capability of contemporary human civilization to directly or indirectly influence the global environment at a large scale. The post-2nd World War worldwide industrialization, techno-scientific development and innovations, nuclear arms competition, population explosion, and capitalist profit-making enterprises, have aggravated the human contribution to global climate change. Thus, it has been rightly observed by the then President of the Geological Society of London: "The time in which we live would then, sadly and justly, surely become known as the 'Anthropocene'".

Despite the prevalence of humans as active 'geophysical agents' participating in climate change being witnessed, the whole gamut of the so-called "serious" literary canon has been centred only around the conventional human paradigms of bourgeois interests, ignoring how humans are responsible for ecological catastrophes. Thus, in the era of the Anthropocene, literature needs to be assigned the task of raising awareness and prompting critical introspection about the anthropogenic actions largely contributing to climate change and subsequent ecological catastrophes which, in turn, affect the lives of humans and non-

humans across the globe. Though climate change is a global phenomenon causing ecological disasters such as sea-level rise, increase in the number of storms, ocean acidification, infertilization of fertile lands, loss of biodiversity, and forced migration of species, there is only a minimal amount of literature that deals with the anthropogenic reasons of the origin of these ecological crises and their devastating impacts. As a response to these climate change-induced ecological disasters, there has recently emerged "cli-fi" (climate fiction) that allows readers to engage with the disturbing dimensions of ambivalent environments which offer, according to Marco Caracciolo, "new story-driven experiences" of the Anthropocene.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island*, apparently inspired by different arguments of his non-fictional work *The Great Derangement*, is such a "cli-fi" text that features the impacts of anthropogenic pollution contributing to climate change, subsequent ecological disasters, and cultural erosion. Through writing this novel, Ghosh seems to respond to the questions he raised in *The Great Derangement*— why many literary writers are not focused on including climate change in their fiction? Why more of non-fiction is written on climate change whereas serious fiction lacks mention of human-induced climate change? How can literature contribute to raising awareness regarding the effects of human-induced climate change? The novel, by deploying the Bengali folklore of Manasa Devi (the goddess of snakes) and 'Bonduki Sadagar' (the Gun Merchant) in the narrative and drawing parallels between the events in the past and the events in the present, depicts a global condition, resultant of the cumulative effect of anthropogenic actions, in which every place,

whether in Asia, Europe, or America, seems to be undergoing climatic and ecological crises, and creatures of every kind, whether human beings, animals, insects, or fish, are affected by these crises and forced to leave their habitats and immigrate towards a new place. Ghosh in the novel deals not only with environmental challenges but also with complex global and local socio-economic-political calamities emanating from climatic and ecological catastrophes.

Concerns on Ecology, Climate Change, and the Importance of Myth:

Amitav Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement*, has traced “a complex genealogy of climate change, imperialism, and capitalism—all of them being rooted in European Enlightenment” which promoted scientific and secular ideologies. These ideologies accordingly, propagated through forms of fiction and scientific texts, immensely inspired Western individuals to make separation from nature and non-humans as a result of which they began to treat them as less important and matters of exploitation. These ideologies, Ghosh suggests, are in contrast to Hindu religious and mythical beliefs that promote establishing harmony with nature and non-humans. According to the Hindu perspective, “the concept of human separation from nature is viewed as an aberration rather than the norm”. In *The Great Derangement*, by investigating both the political consciousness driven by the capitalistic ideology of profit-making and the artistic consciousness driven by the adherence to “probable events” related to bourgeois lifestyles and consisting of a lack of interest in seriously addressing climate change and its devastating consequences to raise public awareness, Ghosh, understands the importance of mythical stories in inspiring staying connected to nature. He has talked, for instance, about the people of the Sundarbans, who “have never doubted that tigers and other animals possess intelligence and agency”. In their culture, there is the myth of “Bonbibi”, the

incarnation of the goddess “Prakriti”, which is revered by both Hindus and Muslims. She is believed to protect her devotees from tigers who are thought to be “Dakshin Rai” – ‘a demon in disguise’. Ghosh observes that, in the present time, this pervasive awareness about nature and non-humans as active agents in the cultural domains, is subdued by the apparatuses of modernity. Ghosh, in this regard, cites Bruno Latour who suggests a reason for this suppression in Western society: “Latour argues that one of the originary impulses of modernity is the project of “partitioning” or deepening the imaginary gulf between Nature and Culture: the former comes to be relegated exclusively to the sciences and is regarded as being off-limits to the latter” (16). Thus, to suggest the dangers of climate change induced by the limitless anthropogenic exploitation of nature and re-establish the traditional bridge between nature and culture, Amitav Ghosh employs the Bengali folklore of ‘Manasa Devi’ and ‘Bonduki Sadagar’ and its entanglement with the contemporary context in the narrative of his novel *Gun Island*.

Deen, the narrator-cum-protagonist of *Gun Island*, whose full name is Dinanath Dutta, is a Brooklyn-based dealer of rare books and Asian antiquities, who visits his extended family in Kolkata and gets deeply intrigued by the Bengali folklore of “Bonduki Sadagar” which is wrongly translated in English by him as the “Gun Merchant”. He is asked by Nilima, an aged family member, to visit the “dhaam” (shrine) of Manasa Devi built by Bonduki Sadagar (the Gun Merchant) in the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world, which is now under threat of being washed away by the rising seawater. The tale of the Gun Merchant, as Ghosh writes, is about:

a rich trader [in Bengal] who had angered Manasa Devi [the goddess of snakes] by refusing to become her devotee. Plagued by snakes 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... But not even on Gun Island had the Merchant been able to conceal himself from Manasa Devi. One day she had appeared to him out of the pages of a book and had warned him that she had eyes everywhere... The Merchant had escaped from Gun Island, on a ship, but while at sea he was once again captured by pirates... Manasa Devi appeared before him once again. She promised that if he became her devotee and built a shrine for her in Bengal, she would set him free and make him rich. Now at last the Merchant gave in and swore that he would build a temple for the goddess... So, she set him free and wrought a miracle: the ship was besieged by all manners of creatures, of the sea and sky... On his return to Bengal he brought with him a fortune so vast and a tale so amazing, that it earned him the title of Bonduki Sadagar. (16)

Deen, though initially hesitant, visits the shrine, accompanied by Tipu, the son of Moyna who works for Nilima's trust and is financially supported by Piya, an American-Indian cetologist, and Horen, a local boatman. On their way, Tipu elaborately tells Deen about the processes of illegal migrations to Western countries and also the critical reasons behind them. At the shrine, Deen meets Rafi, a young orphan boy, who has heard stories about Manasa Devi and the Gun Merchant from his grandfather. Meanwhile, during their conversation, a king cobra appears and proceeds with its hood erect towards Deen. Suddenly Tipu arrives and saves Deen but he himself gets bitten by the snake. While returning to Lusibari by ship, Tipu becomes delirious and starts having visions about Rani, an Irrawaddy dolphin upon whom Piya has been researching for a long time. Tipu gets admitted to a hospital and gets saved by the antidote Piya has brought from her friend. Meanwhile, Piya gets worried

about Rani, as she had received an alarm signal, at the time when Tipu had deliriously uttered her name, from the GPS device fitted on the body of Rani. Deen decides to go with Piya on her search for Rani. During their search, Deen comes to know from Piya that "dead zones"- namely the vast stretches of water that have a very low oxygen content, "have been growing at a phenomenal pace" even in the river "mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers" (96). She holds a refinery located in the vicinity, run by politically influential people, responsible for "dumping [these] effluents into the rivers". She has protested against this inconsiderate disposal of chemical fertilizers but has not been successful in raising any attention from the government. Piya's failure is indicative of how the concerns of ecologically conscious people are undermined by the large industrial corporations that damage ecosystems and contribute to the escalation of climate change. Observing the contaminated condition of seawater, she assumes that Rani must have felt that "everything she knew, everything she was familiar with- the water, the currents, the earth itself- was rising up against her" (97). This makes Deen realize that people in the climate crisis-affected Sundarbans might feel the same way Rani must have felt according to Piya. The landscape of the Sundarbans is integral to its inhabitants who feel a sense of connection to it because of their familiarity with it. The erosion of this place, a prevalent phenomenon in the contemporary time, caused by climate change, results in feelings of alienation and detachment from it. Rani and her pod are found dead as they seem to have beached themselves- a very unusual incident which, according to Piya, must have occurred due to the contamination of water. The slow extinction of Irrawaddy dolphins also contributes to the transition of the Sundarbans into an 'alien' place for its inhabitants because "rocks under our feet; the source of the waters we drink; the meaning of the different kinds of winds; the common insects, birds, mammals, plants, and trees; the particular cycles of the seasons..."- all are

important factors that make inhabitants feel connected to the place they live in. The more numbers of these elements of nature will disappear, the more alienated and detached the inhabitants will start to feel.

Deen comes back to Kolkata and boards his flight to Brooklyn. He feels disturbed about what happened in the Sundarbans, as he says "some submerged aspect of time that had been brought suddenly to life when I entered that shine- something fearsome, venomous and overwhelmingly powerful, something that would not allow me to get rid of it" (103). This feeling can be interpreted as "the awareness of the uncanny, the first step towards the acknowledgment of the climate crisis". He is invited by Cinta, a renowned professor of history and his good friend, to attend a conference hosted by a museum in Los Angeles. At the point of his arrival, he learns that massive wildfires have been raging around Los Angeles for several days. However, the conference takes place successfully with only a few interventions and changes in the schedule. A young scholar speaks about the "Little Ice Age" in the seventeenth century. While conversing with Cinta about the scholar's arguments, Deen hears her say "The Little Ice Age is rising from its grave and reaching out to us" (125)- indicative of the inevitable impact of anthropogenic climate change in human lives across the globe. Thereafter, they visit Gisa, Cinta's cousin's daughter, who lives in Venice Beach, Los Angeles. They all together decide to go to the beach near her house. On the beach, Gisa's dog is killed by a venomous yellow-bellied snake, a creature uncommon in Los Angeles. Deen goes back to his hotel and calls Piya who enlightens him about the migration of yellow-bellied snakes due to the warming of oceans. The next day, Cinta's talk on the historical background of Shakespeare's Venice triggers Deen, who has been pondering over the Little Ice Age in the seventeenth century, to unfold the mystery of the Gun Merchant. After having learned that the Arabic name of Venice was "Banadiq" which

had travelled to Persia and parts of Asia where guns are known as "bundook", Deen realizes that he has misinterpreted "Bonduki Sadagar" as the "Gun Merchant" whereas if it is correctly interpreted, it should be "the Merchant of Venice" and more appropriately "the Merchant who visited Venice". While referring to the shrine in the Sundarbans, now the story of "Bonduki Sadagar" unfolds to be "an apocryphal record of a real journey to Venice", as Cinta explains:

The protagonist is a merchant, whose homeland, in eastern India, is struck by drought and floods brought on by the climatic disturbances of the Little Ice Age; he loses everything including his family, and decides to go overseas to recoup his fortune. On the way his ship is attacked and he is captured by Portuguese pirates who take him to Goa and put him up for sale, as a slave. He is brought by a well-travelled trader and sailor, Ilyas, who recognizes his qualities and sets him free. Ilyas is by origin a Portuguese Jew; his family had come to Goa to escape the Inquisition in Portugal. But now the Inquisition has come to Goa too, so he has decided to leave again and the Gun Merchant decides to accompany him. (141)

After many unsuccessful attempts to settle down in different places, Ilyas and the Merchant finally decided to leave for Venice. It is interesting to note that while combining both Nilima's narrative and Cinta's narrative about the Gun Merchant, the story appears to be a byproduct of historicized fiction and fictionalized history.

The entanglement of the story of the Gun Merchant with the contemporary time begins to become more vivid when Deen is asked by Gisa on Cinta's recommendation to visit Venice and work as a translator for her team that is willing to make a documentary on Bengali migrant workers in Venice as to know "Why are...[they]

coming, in such dangerous circumstances? What are they fleeing? What are their hopes?" (146). He accepts her offer and goes to Venice. While the airplane is about to land in Venice, he makes a striking observation, "from that height it was possible to make mistake the Venetian lagoons for the Sundarbans" (146), thereby making a comparison between Venice and the Sundarbans as both the places are prone to be flooded with seawater. Just like Los Angeles and Oregon which are disturbed by unwelcome yellow-bellied snakes and bark beetles respectively, Venice is disturbed by unwelcome shipworms. Cinta explains to Deen that "[m]ore and more of these [shipworms] are invading Venice, with the warming of the lagoon's water. They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities. It has become a big problem because Venice is built on wooden pilings. They are literally eating the foundations of the city" (230). The increase in temperatures around the globe forces animals and insects to migrate to places they are not supposed to live in and in such large quantities that they cause disturbance in ecosystems. It is also in Venice that Deen witnesses the miserable condition of migrants who have illegally arrived there from India, Bangladesh, and other parts of the Global South. He comes across Rafi, the orphan boy he met in the Sundarbans, who now works as a menial labourer day and night. Through Rafi, he also gets to meet Lubna under whom many Bangladeshi migrants including Rafi work. He meets two more Bangladeshi migrants Bilal and Palash. While talking to Bilal, he comes to know about the excruciating hurdles the migrants from the Global South have to face to illegally enter Western countries and then become "political refugees, social outcasts, and homeless and nameless entities" – the exploited labourers. He learns that Bilal, after receiving death threats due to his involvement in an argument, left his country with his friend Kabir. They were misinformed and subsequently, ended up getting stuck in an airport in Sharjah. Having been trapped in the complex web of border politics, they found no option but to

continue their journey. Their "dalal" (agent) advised them to pass through Libya like many other Bengalis, but a civil war was raging at that time, and they were captured by human traffickers once they entered Tripoli, the capital of Libya. They were impelled to work from day to night, and were beaten and treated like slaves. The 'inhuman' treatment that they received, as Ghosh notes, is "something that should not happen to any human being" (193). Despite all these challenges, they managed to escape from the gang of traffickers and paid a local dalal who arranged for them the way to Europe by boat. Unfortunately, the boat they had boarded started slowly sinking and by the time, the passengers were rescued, Kabir had already drifted away, and since then no information about whether he survived or died has been found. Now, Bilal works in Venice and sends a portion of his earnings to Kabir's family. The struggles that Bilal and Kabir had to undergo are similar to the struggles that Rafi and Tipu had to face. During their journey, Rafi and Tipu got separated at the Turkish border. Rafi managed to cross the border and later arrived in Venice but Tipu got hurt and moved back to Iran. Rafi now works for Lubna and keeps wondering what Tipu is doing. These poignant narratives of illegal migration make Deen realize how privileged international-legal migrants like him are in contrast to the miserable condition of illegal migrants in foreign countries, and empathize with the refugees who are victims of environmental and socio-economic crises. Meanwhile, a socio-political debate occurs regarding a Blue Boat carrying refugees including Tipu on the Mediterranean Sea which has become, as Ghosh notes, "a symbol of everything that's going wrong with the world– inequality, climate change, capitalism, corruption, the arms trade, the oil industry" (199). The conflict is between the activists who are in favour of allowing the boat to board the Italian coast and the right-wing members who are against this decision. The debate seeks the attention of international 'sustainable' policy-makers to more precisely

look at the social, political, economic, and environmental reasons that force marginalized people to leave their homeland and seek refuge in foreign countries with the hope of a better life which gets shattered when they begin to “frequently experience different forms of racial, cultural, and political persecution and economic exploitation”. The concern on these issues raised by the novel entails profound reflections on the importance of the intersection of the convention on climate change and the convention on border politics.

Throughout the novel, resemblances between the events from the myth and the events in the present time have been delicately portrayed to draw attention to the perils of climate change. The Gun Merchant left his homeland in India because it was struck by drought and floods caused by the climate crises of the Little Ice Age. From this angle, it can be contended that he was an ‘ecological refuge’. The situation of the Merchant resembles that of Tipu and Rafi who decide to leave the Sundarbans whose “islands are constantly being swallowed up by the sea” and are “disappearing before our eyes”. Tipu justifies the act of illegal migration undertaken by the young people by depicting the miserable condition of the Sundarbans: Yet 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 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 (48). However, the difference between the Merchant and young people like Tipu and Rafi is that the former, according to the myth, was responsible for his own misery because of his excessive pride that led him to disobey the goddess Manasa but the latter, despite even being humble to nature, cannot be safe due to ecological catastrophes caused by anthropogenic climate change occurring on a global scale. Moreover, unlike the Merchant, they are “ecosystem people” who

completely depend on local ecosystems for their survival and will have to miserably suffer if these ecosystems are damaged. This indicates the powerlessness of the individual concerns in the face of the collective indifference towards the climate and the environment. Despite this prevailing skepticism, the novel attempts to potentially invoke a collective concern towards nature by referring to numerous present-day incidents in which the presence of Manasa Devi is felt: Tipu is bitten by a king cobra; he has visions of an Egyptian lady; Deen daydreams about snakes and screams in the airplane; he hallucinates about “brown recluse”—a kind of venomous spider in his hotel; Gisa’s dog is killed by a yellow-bellied snake; Cinta makes a comparison between the dark-skinned Madonna in the Basilica Santa Maria della Salute, Italy and Manasa Devi based on the fact that both of them stand as mediators between humans and the incarnate earth. Furthermore, through the metamorphosis of the character of Deen, the reference to the myth of the Gun Merchant is implied. Deen initially, though having much knowledge about myths and climate change, appears to be detached from the world of common people and skeptical about the impact of mythological stories in people’s lives. However, his encounter with a series of coincidences related to the myth and his interactions with Cinta help him understand the symbolic and cultural significance of myths and mysteries. Thus, Deen, like the Merchant, undergoes a transformation from being a skeptic detached from reality to a believer who is active enough to take action to solve problems in his surroundings. In other words, he can be said to have an ‘ecological epiphany’. This becomes evident when he, despite not being an ‘activist’ in the literal sense, decides to join Lubna’s activist team and embark on the mission to rescue the refugees in the “Blue Boat” on the Mediterranean Sea. The participation of Deen, Piya, and Cinta— all major cosmopolitan intellectual characters along with Lubna, Bilal, and Palash in the critical mission to rescue the helpless migrants is a microcosmic

representation of a possible large community of cosmopolitan intellectuals who will make a collective effort along with local people to raise awareness about the perils of climate change and resolve the social, political, economic calamities emanating from climate change-induced ecological catastrophes.

Gun Island, towards the end, presents a direct implication to the myth of the Gun Merchant. At the end of the mythical story, the Merchant surrenders to Manasa Devi and builds a shrine for her. Therefore, it can be argued that Manasa Devi is successful in her wish to keep human beings from turning away from the natural world. Her role is actually to mediate between different forms of life, notably the humans and the nonhumans, to maintain a balance between them and protect them from a world ruled by greed and profit. Manasa Devi needs human beings to acknowledge her voice 'for if he [the Merchant] and others like him, were to disavow her authority then all those unseen boundaries would vanish, and humans - driven, as was the Merchant, by the quest for profit - would recognize no restraint in relation to other living things'. The Gun Merchant's act of finally abandoning resistance is reflected in Admiral Vigonovo's act of disobeying the orders from the Minister not to let the refugees in the Blue Boat enter the Italian coast. Whereas the Merchant gave in when he could no longer endure the suffering induced by 'the accumulation of natural disasters and strange encounters with the nonhuman, i.e. snakes and spiders mainly', Vigonovo, along with all the other people on that part of the sea getting astonished by the ethereal scene caused by "millions of birds encircling above" and "schools of dolphins [somersaulting] around the Blue Boat", "whales [slapping] their tails on the waves", bioluminescence making the seawater glow green, decides to rescue the migrants in the miraculous moment. The end of *Gun Island*, like the end of the mythical story, acknowledges the agency of non-human beings manifested through birds, and marine mammals and the

ethereal effect of natural phenomena reflected through bioluminescence. The momentary scene is symbolic of a new 'eco-cosmopolitan Third Space' in which humans of different nationalities, classes, and cultures; animals of various kinds; and natural forces make a harmonious and 'non-hierarchical' bond with each other, transcending all sorts of binaries, borders, and boundaries. However, the momentariness of this "miraculous" event is suggestive of the fact that climatic crises and the resultant socio-political-cultural challenges are not solved, and thus, relentless efforts to address and solve these issues need to be effectively undertaken for the spread and sustenance of this 'eco-cosmopolitan Third Space'.

Conclusion

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh has employed the Bengali folktale of Manasa Devi and Bonduki Sadagar in the entanglement with present-day events to portray the cumulative impact of anthropogenic activities on ecosystems and climate change and the necessity to become aware of the importance of maintaining harmonious relations with non-humans and nature. Ghosh has also evoked the importance of taking governmental initiatives to economically support marginalized poor communities who are affected by climatic crises most terribly and thereby forced to migrate illegally to foreign countries. At the same time, by setting the plot of the novel in different locations across the globe, he has suggested that although a certain number of people seem privileged from economic and geographical standpoints, in reality, they will also get affected, in one way or another, by climate change because it is a global phenomenon. The novel, being a mysterious mythical allegory set in the present context of global capitalism and techno-scientific evolution, can be contended as a distinctive 'cli-fi' tale, imbued with moral, philosophical, social, political and cultural insights, which posits the importance of the re-establishment of the bridge between nature and culture, and calls for the concomitance of

traditional beliefs and modern scientific thoughts to effectively address and resolve the causes of climate change and its consequences in the era of the Anthropocene.

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