



Echoes of Eco-Critical Concerns in Amitav Ghosh's fiction: Gun Island

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Abstract: The terms “environmentalism” and “ecology” go hand-in-hand in the literature of recent days. The predominant theme of the ‘Return to Nature’ that shapes the writings of the Romantic Age in English literature, has revived itself once again into the literary discussions of recent days with growing concerns about nature and ecosystem besides rejoicing its beauty with fabricating words. Amitav Ghosh’s novel “*Gun Island*” depicts the environmental crisis and the ecological fluctuations resulting from the anthropogenic activities on earth that disturbs the man-nature relationship without providing any way outs to fix this issue. Drawing on this novel, this article emphasizes on how human-centric culture with its endless desire for living a ‘good life’ leads to devastating consequences of degenerating ecosystems and changing climatic conditions, their culminative impacts upon the territories of humans and non-human worlds.

Keywords:

Environmentalism, nature, anthropocentric, cultural symbiosis, displacement, climate change, restore, imbalance

The name of Amitav Ghosh in the field of Indian English fiction has become a significant one for his reflective insights into the alarming imbalance between human and non-human niches, adversely affecting the cultural identities and escalating the influx of immigrants in the era of socio-economic and cultural globalisation. This is a reiterated theme in his novels which is evident in the famous Ibis trilogy which consists of *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) demonstrating the catastrophic impact of opium cultivation on the environment and the different incidents which eventually lead to the first Opium War; *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is profusely obsessed with the more complicated theme of representation of nature interwoven with the aspects of man-nature relationship and cultural symbiosis. To talk of more recent, *Jungle Nama* (2021), the first ever verse novel of the author that depicts the locals of Sundarbans believe in a culture that requires a balance to be maintained between the needs of the natural world and those of humans, whereas, the reverberation of ecological anxiousness and agitation is firm enough in the non-fiction *Smoke and Ashes: Opium's Hidden Histories* (2023) where the unassuming opium poppy is to blame for much of the devastation that swept through China and India in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The novel *Gun Island* travels around space and time. While exhibiting the importance of achieving and establishing a harmonious interconnection between the natural world and social world for a better sustenance, he tends to analyse in this novel the fact that how the ecological crises

cause global warming and climate change, subsequently escalating the displacement of humans and non-human entities beyond their known territories.

Alike *The Hungry Tide*, this novel starts with the mystery of Sundarbans and in contrast, ends with the enlightenment in Sicily. Ghosh develops the plot of the novel with such intricacies where every major character in order to escape from one disaster falls into other disaster resembling the perplexes faced by the gun merchant himself, of seventeenth century, who elopes from the trap of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snake but gets restored to life at her mercy in the end. This novel is a combination of myth, fantasy, history and science. The protagonist Dinanath Datta's arrival to Calcutta during the winter, his meeting with his cousin Kanai Dutta in a wedding invitation and accordingly getting to Nilima Bose, the aunt of Dinanath (shortly as Deen) and the founder of Badabon Trust, the charity organization, drives the story taking up a trajectory, entering into the realms of mystery archived into the territories of woods beyond the water. Nilima Bose is the one who finds out the "Bonduki Sadagarer dhaam" during the Bhola Cyclone which happened in the 1970 in Sundarbans, "hitting both the Indian province of West Bengal and the state that was then called East Pakistan". Bose along with her acquaintance, Horen Naskar observes the dreadful scenes: "...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...now the flow turned into a flood, bringing many more hungry mouths into a region that was already desperately short of food". After the attack of the second storm called cyclone "Aila" (2009), much of the Sundarbans' flora and fauna were destroyed though the inhabitants took precautions beforehand to combat the might of the catastrophe. The repetitive occurrence of such natural calamities conveys a greater sense of devastation leading to climate change, migration and social change, affecting the cultural symbiosis of the inhabitants and the community as well.

The storm and flood are depicted in terms of a gradual ascendancy of environment over human agency. As in *The Hungry Tide* we see, Piya and Fokir, the two central characters, row across the increasingly choppy waterways, Piya initially has confidence in their own physical strength, but the waters do not continue to be so forthcoming, and Piya soon feels her own agency slipping away. Nature has its own supremacy and the unfettered human intervention to it brings in the outburst of its wrath on human beings with damage and destruction. According to Huggan and Tiffin (2010), postcolonial eco-criticism, environmental violence and the marginalization of indigenous communities are interlinked. Man is constantly left in stagger by cataclysmic events like drought, flood, storms, earthquakes and so forth which plunder the ecological pyramid and have left us near the precarious edge of desolation and destruction. The beauty of the dense mangroves and the placidity of the tidal scenario start waning when the aggressiveness of the violent nature seems to be engulfing the frugal human beings and non-human entities with its demonic rage. When the cyclone hit Sundarbans, where on Lusibari island Nilima and her husband lived, the entire community there suffered from a lot of destruction. Horen Naskar, a young fisherman, having acquaintance with Nilima had witnessed the devastation with his own eyes, island bereft of vegetation and dwellings turning into a bare land of despair and desolation.

Dinanath Datta's visit to Sunderban on being pressed by his aunt, more strongly driven by his own interest on recalling the riddle about the 'dhaam' while listening to his recorder, sets the lens of the story not just towards nature and its beauty but also the crude realities of survival amidst the roughness of nature accompanied with the constant threat of climate crisis, affecting the deltaic land and its inhabitants. The bareness of Sundarbans is nothing but the repercussions of the exploitative quest undertaken by the people. "It seemed both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans". Human efforts seem too feeble to protect and preserve the solidarity of nature when the larger part of the mass is deeply engrossed in the addiction of materialistic prosperity and attempting to quench the thirst of wanting more for self-consumption. This becomes evident when the author describes the present condition of the dhaam of Manasa Devi, shrinking into a fragile structure which provides a shelter to the young fisherman and in turn, he is deemed to be the caretaker of this heavenly abode on earth. Owing to the difference of theoretical perspectives, no matter what we define it as, either 'inter-relationship' or 'inter-dependence' between man and nature, if one does not conform to the agendas as decided by the treaty and deny to act upon the agreed principles, the repercussion is surely to be noticed and felt on the other side as well. When human beings exceed the limits of exploiting nature, then the latter which is generally pictured as 'giver'

gradually begins to transform itself into 'destroyer'. The intense impact of anthropocentric survival upon Nature is experienced through the calamities and catastrophes that washes away lands and settlements resulting in both climatic changes and crisis which ultimately leads to the displacement of human beings.

The protagonist of the story acts as a catalyst in the novel, playing an instrumental role in depicting the disparity between man-nature relationship through his acquaintances with the characters of Moyna, a single mother whose husband was killed while assisting Piya in her work in the tides; her son Tipu, "it was evident at a glance that Tipu was a creature of an altogether different kind; he had the probing eyes and darting movement of a hungry barracuda". People like Tipu who are smart and adroit know how to figure out their ways amidst all the challenges and difficulties, either anthropogenic or natural. However, hapless fellows like Moyna who end up their lives struggling against their misfortunes and hardships of sustenance, remain the sufferers all throughout enduring the wrath of the nature resulting from human activities and consequently leading to expulsion of people, races and communities from their native lands.

In the novel, Ghosh portrays the characters of Nilima Bose and Piyali Roy (shortly as Piya) as social activists running an NGO named 'Badabon Development Trust' which aims at helping and rehabilitating the displaced and poor people through its workshops and employment schemes, otherwise they would have fated to sex workers or have become the victims of human trafficking. The two female proponents of social and ecological justice in the novel come up with the message that the tendency to put on the role of colonisers and rule the ecosystem for the fulfilment of their demands, need to be stopped and checked in order to restore the man-nature relationship in harmony. Nilima's concern for the 'dhaam' and her determined attempts to protect this symbol of heritage by pursuing Deen to visit the shrine for once, with the underlying hope of some fruitful results from the visit; her concern for the survival crisis of the inhabitants, especially the women who were vulnerable to all insecurities and dangers lurking in the place, features the interdependence between man and nature, the disturbance of which gives rise to several environmental and anthropogenic disorders adversely affecting both man and nature. Similarly, Piya's concern for the aquatic animals, her keen interest in studying about the Gangetic dolphins, her perception of the rivers and the incident of her saving the dolphin Rani from the nylon net and the latter's expression of appreciation to Piya conveys the message that tenderness and care are the two principles that human beings should reflect in their thoughts and actions towards the nature. Exception to this is neither endurable nor curable; ceaseless efforts to quench the insatiable thirst of unbound prosperity at the cost of the environment and the ecological system supporting life on earth will experience a repercussion of annihilation on both living and non- living entities.

The novel's engagement with the environmental crisis and accordingly the need for the establishment of ecological justice to support the survival is well knitted through the projection of terrestrial and aquatic challenges of Sundarbans simultaneously, to be faced and combatted by its inhabitants, irrespective of their acceptance or denial of the processes and mechanisms of nature. The notable ecological mishap of Sundarbans sets an alarming tone about the impending danger upon the mankind and nature, if not the human-centric cultural patterns stop considering the nature or the environment around as an object of exploitation to fulfill the human desires. Gun Island also shows that environmental changes originated from human centred destruction of nature are not only today's problem, rather the cumulative effect of human impact since ages. The myth of 'Bonduki Sadagar' in the novel depicts the fact that the protagonist had to escape the fury of goddess Manasa Devi owing to his arrogance and ignorance of the law of nature and the compelling reasons for him to change places for seeking shelter was quite vexatious because of the global climate change that resembled "the little ice age" period as incidents such as the eradication of indigenous people of American continent and reforestation after European conquest to America contributed to the change of the climate for that time. Ghosh uses a well-known Bengali myth of 'Bonduki Sadagar' and 'Manasa Devi' in Gun Island as a reflection of modern fiction of migration and environmental change. While Manasa Devi in the Bengali myth symbolizes nature, the gun trader, who uses his wealth and influence to flee from it, stands in for modern humans who have nowhere to run from such a pervasive threat. Human activities are principally responsible for the increasing alterations of climatic conditions. In this situation, humankind must appreciate and care for the environment to avert an ecological catastrophe that would likely wipe out the species on earth. In this context, Gun Island serves

as a fictional warning to the human beings about the imminent perils to fall upon due to anthropocentric causes if not the approaches are reconsidered, so as to restore our relationship with environment, devoid of any dominance and control, desiring to encourage an admiration for the ecology.

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