

Climate change as a threatening factor in Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract

Since 1970 a new argumentative and flourishing interdisciplinary movement has been introduced in the field of literature called ecocriticism. The study of literature and environment explores the connection between human and non-human temperament by analyzing human behavior and response toward Nature. It also discusses the exploration of the impairment caused by the imprudence of humans towards the environment through critical writings in literature. It relates ecology with climate change to describe human action and its consequences through climate fiction, the most popular contemporary genre in literature.

Climate fiction is popularly known as cli-fi; it is represented with imagery, symbols, ideas, and narrative through literary outcomes to point out changes that affect the environment, such as natural disasters, calamities, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, storms, etc. The present research paper is an attempt to analyze the literary work of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, which highlighted the power of humans and the effect of environmental chaos arising across the universe through the displacement and migration of the characters. Through this, Ghosh flags the issue of the environmental crisis, human relations, and the urgent requirement to control environmental degradation under the influence of colonization, urbanization, and capitalism that is caused by an anthropocentric lifestyle.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Climate change, natural disaster, Displacement and migration, capitalism, anthropocentric lifestyle.

Literature is always inherited with the rich journey of knowledge, understanding, and interpretation of life through various theories associated with other disciplines merged with literature. It deals with the chain of events related to human life and is associated with every aspect directly or indirectly involved with Nature and the environment. Such Association of humans with the environment is evaluated, recognized, and studied as a separate discipline known as ecocriticism, where human behavior and environmental consequences could be associated with each other. It talks about the indemnities perpetrated on the environment through the actions of mankind. Since it is a very vast interdisciplinary study, it is evaluated

under many names, such as Environmental Literary Criticism, green Studies, deep ecology, and eco-poetics. The study of ecocriticism is the effectual contribution of writers, literary critics, anthropologists, and natural scientists, who drew attention to the natural and cultural structure.

Ecocriticism is identified as a separate discipline and literary theory in the late 20th century. It is also recognized as the Green Study, which deals with the concern of ecology and human behavior. The concept of ecocriticism came to light with the keyword “literary ecology” with the efforts of Joseph Meeker through his book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology*. In this work, he reflected his ideas of life through the metaphor of comedy and tragedy. He describes comedy not as part of dramatic actions but as adaptive behavior in the original world for the smooth endurance of life. For him, tragedy governs such actions of Human life reflects the strangeness and odd incidents of life that brings suffering and disastrous things in life. He related this concept to human behavior, which is responsible for making life either like comedy or tragedy. He associated this idea with natural ecology and resulted that men are considered as the sole responsible for ruining the environment. He declared that natural harmony could be achieved and that humans and animals lead a life with congruence to follow the comedy concept. In order to justify his statement regarding the comedy of life, he reviewed the Literature from Dante to Shakespeare and reflected on the universality of comedy in the harmony of humans with other species and natural objects. *Comedy of Survival* is actually a book of criticism on literature and the environment, and human is the central object to the chain in between. Meeker writes –

Ours has long been a predatory species. Living, for humans, depends upon the ability to kill as clearly as it does for lions or wolves. But lions and wolves, like almost all predatory species, normally limit their killing to prey animals, and they are equipped with elaborate ritual precautions to prevent the destruction of their own kind. Humans appear to be unique among predators in their enthusiasm to destroy members of their own species. Perhaps this unusual behavior can be attributed to some genetic deficiency which may lead humans ultimately to join the rest of Nature's failures in the biological graveyard of extinction. Pg.142

The description of Nature as subordinate to mankind is not a new concept in literature. In the eighteenth Century, Romantic writers like Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge declared the soothing effect of Nature on the human being. In fact, going through the history and development of literature, it is obvious that the Romantic period was the result to make mankind being free from the anxious and stressful life of people due to the consequences of political scenes like the French War and Industrial Revolution, etc. A natural theme for the literary work to soothe people from the ugliness of life has been recognized since that time. Later on, some transformation and the involvement of the other branches of the sciences with literature opened a new direction to evaluate the work of literature to associate with the theories of sciences and social sciences. Hence the concept of ecocriticism has germinated to

involve biology and environmental science with that of literature. In Britain, it came to light with the name of Green Studies', while in America, it was the effort of Cheryl Glotfelty, who is considered one of the establishers of the Association which was working for the study of Literature and Environment known (ASLE) on which the concept of ecocriticism was conferred. This Association was initiated for the self-published journal with the name Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment (ISLE). The objective of the journal was to bring attention to this concern of the environment and to draw attention to understanding and analyzing the requirement to be sensitive towards this issue. She established the complete theory of ecocriticism with her collaborative outcome with Harold Fromm through the edited collection of essays *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* in 1996. She acknowledged the crisis towards Nature.

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on Nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires our understanding of those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform that. Historians s, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding. Pg xxi

Our society is progressing rapidly post-industrial revolution, with the impact of science and technology. Progress, on the one hand, through the consumerist tradition and materialistic attitude, brought the life of people easy and comfortable, but on the one hand, it has made our planet stand on the verge of disaster for the lives habituating on the earth and the life yet to come. Discussing the current burning issue in relation to ecocriticism, environmentalists have drawn attention to climate change and global warming. It has occupied its importance not only in environmental science but also in politics, scientific innovation, cultural representation, and literary fiction. The authors and poets play a critical role in discussing the issue of climate change through characters, themes, and plots to change the mind of the readers. The novel *Gun Island* is an effort to showcase the issues related to environmental degradation and its impact on living organisms.

The present paper is an exploration of the influence of climate change on mankind and all living beings and how it influences the life of people, animals, sea life, and flora and fauna through Ghosh's Novel *Gun Island*. It also talks about the disappearance of the Sundarbans due to deforestation and the scattering of the species from their homeland. It also focuses on the migration and displacement of the human being because of the rapid growth of materialism, urbanization, and industrialization.

Amitabh Ghosh is an incredible writer from Kolkata; having been impacted by many countries' environments on his personality has contributed literature with a rich treasure of writings. Through his writings, he tried to touch the triggered vices or issues of society. He acquired his education from various reputed universities in India and abroad. He enriched

literature with his precious collections of writings. His works always touched on the issues and concerns of contemporary society that could be proved as the essence to reform through it. He is honored to be the recipient of many prestigious awards. He has been honored to receive two-lifetime achievement awards and four honorary doctorates. He has been nominated for many more awards and honors, like the Man Booker Prize in 2008, the Crossword Book Prize, and the 54thJnanpith Award in 2018. Most of his novels are the representation of the theme of dislocation, colonial segregation, displacement, rootlessness, alienation, identity crisis, isolation, etc. As an individual, he spent his life in New York with his foreign wife, and he toured many countries and experienced the culture and civilization of different nations, But his inclination and attachment towards his homeland were remarkable. He could not detach himself from the route of his country. In almost every work of Ghosh, we can find a nostalgic glimpse of his homeland.

His novel *The Gun Island* is a masterpiece that very effectively connects his root to Bengal through Bengali folklore from the legend of Manasa Devi, 'the goddess of Snake' connecting to the Sundarban and discussing the issue of climate imbalance, Global warming, and anthropogenic impact on Nature. Through his work, he has depicted true literary scholarship to deal with the subject matter and its influences and consequences in relation to human civilization. The novel starts with a description of his hometown Calcutta, its culture, myth, social attachment, and tradition that transfers from generation to generation. He admits that...

The strangest thing about this strange journey was that it was launched by a word – and not an unusually resonant one either, but a banal, commonplace coinage that is in wide circulation from Cairo to Calcutta. That word is bundook, which means 'gun' in many languages, including my own mother tongue, Bengali (or Bangla). Nor is the word a stranger to English: by way of British colonial usages, it found its way into the Oxford English Dictionary, where it is glossed as 'rifle'. Pg.09

The novel has rich characters to embellish various occasions through the representation of events. Deen, the protagonist, is the embodiment of Ghosh himself. He has many similarities with the novelist. He traveled to the Sundarbans in West Bengal from America, and he has an inclination towards the book and academia directly or indirectly. He got the opportunity to come in contact with Piya and Nilima in Bengal. Piya being an American, came to India to do research on Irrawaddy Dolphins at the bottom of the Sundarbans. Nilima is the owner of the Badabon Trust and deputed his services to the shrine of the Manasa Devi, and Deen as a researcher of Bengali folklore, wanted to explore the history of the legend of the seventeenth-century merchant, also known as 'Banduki Sadagar,' which is translated in English as a Gun Merchant and his harassment through the Manasa Devi, 'The Goddess of Snake' at this Nilima declared that **"the village owes its good fortune"** pg.20

The superstitions that reflect through the novel are the well-woven plan of the novelist to manipulate the mythical figure, religious belief, and the cause of the suffering of the people to migrate from their homeland, which is well connected to describe the relation of human civilization and Nature. Nature works as a soothing factor for all living organisms, but at the same time, it could become the cause of disaster if distorted. Deen is haunted by the cobra, nightmares, and his dream. He seems to be cursed due to the teasing of Manasa Devi. He also experienced various problems faced by the villagers that compelled them to leave their native place and migrate. Deen, along with Cinta, bumps into the gigantic monster...

Beneath the embankment of the Punta della Dogana. 'Weren't we there a couple of minutes ago?' 'Yes.' Cinta laughed, tugging at my elbow. 'Come – let's go back and see if we can spot the creature.' She led me out of the gallery and went straight ahead to the point where the two big canals met. The tide was coming in, and the water was only a couple of inches below our shoes. 'Over the centuries,' said Cinta, 'there have been many reported sightings of il mostro in different parts of the Venetian lagoon. Some say that a giant squid – perhaps a whole Famiglia – had moved into these waters. The last sighting was in the 1930s, and the two fishermen who reported it claimed to have seen the creature near the Punta della Dogana. That was how the story grew that il mostro lived here.' pg.231

Most of the characters of the novel are found encountering superstitions according to their areas of concern. Rafi, who is portrayed as an Icelander of the Gun Merchant, recalls the statements of his grandfather about the cobra. Only human suffering and migration are not described through the symbolic representation of fear and under the influence of the myth, but it causes marine life also to be disturbed by it. Piya, the microbiologist, found the loss of signal with the marine species and, later on, the untimely death of the Dolphin due to beaching in a different place. Ghosh, through the concept of magical realism, tried to represent the calamity and unwise use of natural resources through the symbolic representation of the history and myth of Manasa Devi. Manasa Devi, as the symbolic representation of Nature, becomes the cause of the disaster for the species surviving on the earth. When Nature is not tackled wisely by humans, it becomes the basic cause of global warming, climate change, and other natural disasters. Climate change results from the cause of migration for poor people to survive in a place without natural and lack artificial resources. It develops the Marxian tendency to make the poor poorer and the rich richer with the rapid growth of materialism, urbanization, and industrialization, which is considered the sole reason for global warming and natural imbalance. Trees are cut to convert forests into living places in the form of urbanization. Ghosh has raised the issue of cutting down on the Sundarbans, which is the shelter of many species, flora, and fauna that are surviving on mother earth. Industrialization, on the one hand, brings employment for many people, but on the other hand, it has snatched the home of many due to its stretch and establishment.

Religion and traditional beliefs, as portrayed in the novel *Gun Island*, play a vital role in increasing the problem of climate change.

Ghosh, in the novel *Gun Island*, has pointed out various terms like Sundarbans, Bioluminescence, Fish Kills, and Oceanic Dead Zones in spite of dealing with the traditional theme of myth and religious belief that spread terror in the society. He has touched on the most sensitive area of Sundarbans for dealing with the topic of climate change. The setting of the Sundarbans beside the low coastal area is appropriate to make it responsible for climate change. Natural calamities like floods, cyclones, the rise of sea levels, and coastline erosion are very common in the areas of Sundarbans. According to the report...

Currently, the Sundarbans is one of the highest impact zones for tropical cyclones in the Bay of Bengal. As a result, massive losses from recurrent cyclonic storms are one of the region's primary development challenges. In a changing climate, a rising sea level and increased ocean-surface temperature can be expected to further intensify storm surges. Planning for cyclone resilience is thus critical for the region's sustainable development. Pg. xvi

Cutting down the terebinth Sundarbans mangrove forest is affecting the life residing in it. The population having habitat in such forests is mostly poor and has fewer resources to lead a luxurious life. There is a lack of health care, education, and transport, and even people have to struggle a lot for daily commodities. They are completely depending on the resources cultivated by the forest. But the exploitation of natural resources is becoming a great threat and creating biotic pressure for mankind. Ghosh, in the novel *Gun Island*, has pointed out the issue and exploitation through the realistic representation of the various character and dialogues.

Because his legend is tied,' said Kanai, 'to a shrine – a dharma – in the Sundarbans.' 'The Sundarbans!' The idea that there might be a shrine hidden inside a tiger-infested mangrove forest was so far-fetched that I burst into laughter. 'Why would anyone build a dream in a swamp?' 'Maybe,' said Kanai coolly, 'because every merchant who's ever sailed out of Bengal has had to pass through the Sundarbans – there's no other way to reach the sea. The Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that's exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought. What could be a better place to build a shrine to Manasa Devi than a forest teeming with snakes?' pg. 14

Many scholars and writers have tried to draw attention to the natural degradation through literary texts from the 20th century. It is the most astonishing agenda to draw the attention of the common people towards the changes in the environment to save mother earth from great disasters. The concern has become an object to study parallelly with the theories of literature, which refer to the methodologies and epistemology to study the environment in a

literary way. Ghosh, Through his novel *The Great Derangement* and the *Gun Island*, has to portray the real evaluation of environmental philosophy. Gun Island is an attempt to pacify the readers on the issue of climate change with the question that has been raised in the novel **The Great Derangement**. The novel moved to represent the obscure entangling socio-natural engagement on the parameter of the capitalist industrialist system and the technological upliftment.

For a long time, we have been talking about climate change as a scientific question. In this magnificent book, Ghosh changes the conversation, moving it out of the narrow corridors of science and into the wide precincts of culture, politics, and power. Climate change, he argues, is the result of a set of interrelated histories that promoted and sustained our collective dependence on fossil fuels, and it is a kind of derangement to say we want a different world butact in a way that ensures the continuance of the present one.

Pg.5

To conclude, it can be said in the study of the novel **Gun Island** that the writer has made an effort to mingle the traditional cultural myth as a tool to analyze the cause of environmental degradation. At the same time, the author has drawn attention to the extinction of various species due to the exploitation of natural resources by focusing on the degradation of Sundarbans and life habituating in them. There is suffering due to the change of climate and the threat of capitalists for materialistic approaches and urbanization. Through the interwoven thought of human relations with the environment, Ghosh concludes that there must be a mutual kinship between humans and the environment for survival and natural conservation. All living organisms can achieve salvation with intelligent, liberal, and moral preservation of biodiversity and natural resources.

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