

---

**Legends of Loss: Climate, Myth, and Displacement in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island***

---

**Dr. Santosh Kumar**

Assistant Professor (English)

Dr. Ambedkar Govt. Post Graduate College Unchahar Raebareli

---

**Article Received:** 17/08/2025**Article Accepted:** 19/09/2025**Published Online:** 19/09/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.09.342

---

**Abstract:**

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) marks a significant pivot in the author's oeuvre, explicitly framing the climate crisis through the lens of myth, migration, and deep history. This paper argues that Ghosh's novel functions as a critical intervention in Anthropocene literature, challenging the limitations of Western rationalism by reactivating a Bengali legend to render the climate crisis intelligible. The novel follows Deen "Dino" Datta, a rare books dealer, who is drawn into the mystery of the "Gun Merchant" and the goddess Manasa Devi, a myth of exile and reconciliation. This research posits that Ghosh uses this myth not as a metaphor but as an active, narrative framework that connects contemporary phenomena—from freak weather events and mass animal migrations to the displacement of human populations—to a timeless cycle of ecological and human disruption. By weaving together, the journeys of climate refugees from Bangladesh and Sundarbans with the ancient journey of the merchant, Ghosh forges a powerful link between climate-induced displacement (the "refugee") and mythological exile (the "wanderer"). The paper concludes that *Gun Island* proposes a radical epistemology: to comprehend the scale and strangeness of the climate crisis, we must turn to the narrative tools of myth and story, which offer a longer memory and a more profound sense of connection to the non-human world than the paradigms of modernism alone can provide.

**Keywords:** Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island*, climate change fiction (cli-fi), Anthropocene, myth, displacement, diaspora, climate refugees, ecocriticism, Bengali literature

**Introduction**

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) emerges at a critical juncture in global consciousness, situated in the aftermath of his trenchant non-fiction work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). In that earlier work, Ghosh issued a powerful critique, arguing that the contemporary novel, and modern culture at large, had proven itself incapable of grappling with the collective, uncanny, and planetary-scale realities of climate change. He questioned why the literary imagination had largely retreated

from the "non-human" and the "interspecies" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 63). *Gun Island* is Ghosh's formidable fictional response to his own challenge. The novel transcends the conventions of realist fiction to construct a narrative where the boundaries between past and present, human and non-human, the rational and the mythical, are deliberately and productively blurred.

This paper argues that *Gun Island* utilizes the reactivation of a Bengali folk myth—the legend of the Gun Merchant (*Bonduki Sadagar*) and the snake goddess Manasa Devi—as a central narrative strategy to render the complex and often incomprehensible realities of the climate crisis intelligible. Ghosh posits that the ancient tools of myth and story, often dismissed by Enlightenment rationalism, are in fact essential for understanding a phenomenon as vast, ancient, and strange as anthropogenic climate change. Furthermore, the novel forges a critical connection between this resurgent myth and the most urgent human consequence of the crisis: displacement. By intertwining the mythological exile of the Merchant with the contemporary plight of climate refugees from Bangladesh and the Sundarbans, Ghosh suggests that climate-induced migration is not a new anomaly but part of a deep historical pattern of human movement driven by environmental upheaval. Through this framework, *Gun Island* becomes more than a climate change novel; it is a profound exploration of how storytelling itself must evolve to help us navigate an increasingly unstable world.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Novel in the Anthropocene**

To understand Ghosh's project in *Gun Island*, one must first engage with his critique in *The Great Derangement*. Ghosh (2016) contends that the modern novel, with its focus on the probability of the everyday and the interiority of the bourgeois individual, is structurally ill-equipped to deal with the "wild, unthinkable" realities of climate change—events of such colossal scale and improbability that they seem like intrusions from the realm of the epic or the Gothic (p. 29). This "great derangement," he suggests, is a failure of imagination rooted in the very ideologies that enabled the climate crisis: a commitment to human exceptionalism and a disenchantment of the natural world.

Ghosh's fictional response aligns with the principles of ecocriticism, a theoretical lens that examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Ecocritics like Lawrence Buell (2005) argue for the need for an "environmental unconscious" in literature, a deep awareness of the non-human world. *Gun Island* actively cultivates this awareness. Moreover, the novel engages with the concept of the Anthropocene, the proposed geological epoch in which human activity is the dominant influence on climate and the environment. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) has famously argued that the Anthropocene forces a collapse of the traditional distinction between human history and natural history. Ghosh's novel operationalizes this collapse, showing how a 17th-century legend is directly relevant to 21st-century weather patterns.

The novel's use of myth can be understood through the work of anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, who saw myths as logical systems for resolving cultural contradictions. In the Anthropocene, the central contradiction is between human comfort and planetary

health. Ghosh suggests that old myths, which often deal with human arrogance and natural retribution (like the story of the Merchant who defies a goddess), provide a narrative template for this new reality. As scholar Pippa Marland (2021) notes, Ghosh uses "mythic thinking to bridge the gap between the scale of human lives and the scale of planetary processes" (p. 112). This paper will extend this analysis to show how this mythic thinking specifically illuminates the trauma of displacement.

### **Re-enchanting the World: The Gun Merchant Myth as Narrative Framework**

The plot of *Gun Island* is catalysed by the protagonist Deen's reluctant investigation into the legend of the Gun Merchant. The myth, originating in the Mangal Kavya tradition of Bengal, tells of a wealthy merchant, Chand Sadagar, who refuses to worship the snake goddess Manasa Devi. In his arrogance, he incurs her wrath, which manifests as a series of ecological and personal catastrophes: storms sink his ships, snakes kill his sons, and his fortune is destroyed. He is eventually driven into exile, becoming a wanderer. The term "Gun Island" itself is a folk etymology of the Merchant's destination, the Venetian island of Giudecca, which Deen's uncle translates as "Gun Island," linking it to the Merchant's trade in firearms (Ghosh, 2019, p. 25).

Ghosh does not merely reference this myth; he resurrects it as an active force within the narrative. The myth ceases to be a story from the past and becomes a key to interpreting the present. For instance, freak weather events—like the tornado that hits Los Angeles or the sudden storm on the Venetian lagoon—are not just symptoms of climate change within the novel's logic; they are manifestations of the same divine fury that plagued the Merchant. This is not to suggest Ghosh promotes a literal belief in Manasa Devi, but rather that the myth provides a cultural and narrative schema for understanding a planet that is suddenly, violently responsive to human action.

The novel systematically breaks down the rationalist scepticism embodied by Deen, a scholar who initially dismisses the myth as superstition. He is constantly confronted with events that defy his worldview: characters like Tipu and Rafi seem to be guided by the legend; a king cobra appears protectively in a library; dolphins lead a boat to safety. As Deen's journey progresses, the mythical and the real converge. Cinta, his academic mentor in Venice, provides the theoretical framework, explaining that the Merchant's story is a "story of climate change" and that "the elements themselves had turned against him" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 182). She explicitly connects the divine wrath of the myth to the planetary feedback loops of the Anthropocene. Through this, Ghosh argues that re-enchanting our view of the world—seeing agency in animals, weather, and ecosystems—is not a regression but a necessity for ecological awareness.

### **From Mythical Exile to Climate Displacement: Weaving the Patterns of Loss**

The most powerful work of the reactivated myth is its ability to reframe contemporary climate migration. The Gun Merchant's story is, at its core, a story of forced displacement. He is not a voluntary traveller but an exile, driven from his home by environmental catastrophe. Ghosh draws a direct parallel between this ancient pattern and the modern-day characters who are displaced by climate change.

This is primarily explored through the characters of Rafi and Tipu. Rafi, from a village in the Sundarbans, is a direct victim of climate change. His family's home and livelihood are destroyed by cyclonic storms and rising salinity, forcing him to migrate. His journey is perilous, taking him through brutal human trafficking networks across the Middle East and into Europe—a quintessential 21st-century climate refugee narrative. Tipu, charismatic and tech-savvy, becomes a facilitator of such journeys, a modern-day version of a sailor guiding people to new lands. Their stories are not separate from the myth; they are its contemporary incarnation. When the group in Venice performs a play of the Gun Merchant legend, it is Rafi, the climate refugee, who plays the role of the Merchant, solidifying this symbolic connection (Ghosh, 2019, p. 265).

By layering these narratives, Ghosh makes a profound historical argument. Climate displacement is not an unprecedented crisis but the latest manifestation of an ancient human experience: being forced to move by a changing environment. The myth provides a deep historical context that prevents us from seeing refugees as a temporary "problem" and instead frames them as protagonists in a long, ongoing story of human resilience and adaptation. This challenges the often-xenophobic political narratives surrounding migration in the Global North by grounding it in an inescapable planetary reality. The refugee, like the mythical wanderer, is a figure of loss but also of survival.

#### **Interspecies Kinship and the Non-Human Narrative**

A crucial aspect of Ghosh's project is de-centering the human protagonist. The climate crisis is, by definition, an interspecies crisis, and *Gun Island* reflects this by giving narrative weight to the non-human world. The novel is filled with "more-than-human" actors (Abram, 1996, p. 10), and their movements are intricately tied to the human drama.

The most striking example is the mass animal migration that occurs throughout the novel. spiders swarm across continents, dolphins behave strangely, and whales appear in unexpected waterways. These are not background details; they are central plot points that mirror and often guide the human journeys. The spiders, for instance, are a constant, uncanny presence, weaving their webs across geographical boundaries just as the novel's narrative weaves together different storylines. Their movement signifies a planetary disturbance that affects all life, not just humans.

This creates a sense of interspecies kinship, a realization that humans are not facing the climate crisis alone but are part of a much larger community of life that is also struggling to adapt. When the characters are rescued by dolphins in the Venetian lagoon, it symbolizes a breakdown of the human/non-human hierarchy and a moment of alliance in the face of a shared threat (Ghosh, 2019, p. 241). This resonates with post humanist theory, which seeks to overcome human exceptionalism. Scholar Ursula Heise (2016) argues for the importance of "multispecies empathy" in environmental narratives (p. 62). Ghosh generates this empathy by presenting animals not as resources or symbols, but as co-inhabitants of a distressed planet, whose fates are inextricably linked to our own.

#### **Venice and the Sundarbans: Landscapes of Flux**

---

The novel's geographical settings are not arbitrary backdrops but active agents in the narrative. Ghosh deliberately chooses two iconic landscapes that are supremely vulnerable to water: the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest at the delta of the Ganges, and Venice, a city built on water now threatened by rising seas.

The Sundarbans represents the front line of the climate crisis. It is a place where land is not solid; it is constantly being eroded and reshaped by tides and storms. It is a landscape of perpetual flux, making it an apt birthplace for stories of displacement like Rafi's. Venice, though a symbol of Western culture and art, is in a similar predicament. It is a city that has always lived with water but is now drowning because of it. By shuttling his narrative between these two seemingly disparate locations, Ghosh makes a powerful geopolitical point: the climate crisis does not respect the boundaries between the developed and developing world. While the impacts are felt first and most acutely in the Global South (the Sundarbans), they are ultimately universal, threatening even the cherished treasures of the West (Venice).

Both landscapes serve as physical manifestations of the novel's themes. They are places where the solid ground of certainty gives way, forcing inhabitants to become adaptive and nomadic. They are the real-world "Gun Islands"—places of trade, connection, and profound vulnerability. Setting the climax of the novel in Venice, where the myth of the Merchant culminates and where the paths of all the characters converge, suggests that the Global North must finally acknowledge its deep entanglement with and responsibility towards the worlds it has historically exploited.

### **Conclusion:**

*Gun Island* is a ambitious and necessary novel that answers Ghosh's own call for a literature adequate to the challenges of the Anthropocene. By resurrecting the legend of the Gun Merchant, Ghosh does not retreat into fantasy; instead, he harnesses the power of myth to expand our imaginative capacity. The myth provides a narrative framework that connects the dots between a 17th-century merchant's defiance, a sudden storm in the 21st century, and the journey of a boy from the Sundarbans. It allows us to see climate displacement not as a isolated emergency but as the latest chapter in a deep history of human interaction with a volatile planet.

The novel argues that the tools of modernity—science, politics, economics—while necessary, are insufficient on their own. They must be complemented by the older, deeper wisdom embedded in stories, folklore, and myth, which remember how to speak of non-human agency and which retain the memory of past catastrophes. By weaving together the journeys of humans and animals, of past exiles and present refugees, Ghosh creates a narrative of interspecies kinship and collective fate. He suggests that to find our way in a world of increasing instability, we must, like Deen, learn to listen to the old stories again. For it is in these legends of loss and wanderings that we may find the maps, however fragile, to guide us toward a more humble and connected future. *Gun Island* ultimately proposes that in the face of an unthinkable crisis, we must think differently, and that process begins with telling different kinds of stories.

**References**

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in a more-than-human world*. Vintage Books.
- Buell, L. (2005). *The future of environmental criticism: Environmental crisis and literary imagination*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2009). The climate of history: Four theses. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), 197–222.
- Ghosh, A. (2016). *The great derangement: Climate change and the unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ghosh, A. (2019). *Gun Island*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Heise, U. K. (2016). The android and the animal. *PMLA*, 131(2), 462–479.
- Marland, P. (2021). ‘A counter-history of the modern world’: Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* and the climate-imperialism nexus. *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 25(2), 105-120.