

COLLAPSING ECOSYSTEM AND DISPLACED COMMUNITIES: MIGRATION AND SALVATION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *GUN ISLAND*

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Abstract

Ecocriticism is one of the most rapidly emerging fields of literary study as it is the need of the hour to look at literature through the prism of eco-consciousness. Amitav Ghosh is one of the most prominent writers of our times whose works are always vocal about environmental issues and critical of the growing rupture in nature-human relationship. His latest work of fiction Gun Island is once again a critique of man's anthropocentric attitude to nature. The novel not only questions man's role in the collapse of the ecosystem but also looks for possible solutions and salvation. Gun Island does not pose man just as the ruthless villain but also as a hapless victim trying desperately to survive through migration and dislocation just like the other 'inferior' animals. In my paper I would like to explore how Ghosh's novel is a study in universal strive for survival, both for man and animal and how it presents faith and spirituality as the ultimate solution to man's ever growing distance from nature.

Key words: *ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, migration, displacement, folklore, legend, gun merchant.*

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In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* Amitabh Ghosh writes:

But in the era of global warming, nothing is really far away; there is no place where the orderly expectations of bourgeois life hold unchallenged sway.... This, then, is the first of the many ways in which the age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense: the weather events of this time have a very high degree of improbability. (35)

The 'very high degree of improbability' that Ghosh here talks about is something that the world is experiencing in this time of pandemic. The fact that a mere virus can force the entire world into a complete lockdown for months has indeed defied every expectation of 'bourgeois life.' The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has made it very clear that no matter how much man tries to establish his mastery over nature, the threat of an ecological collapse is always breathing down his neck challenging his sense of superiority. The harmony that man once shared with nature has long been done away with by man's anthropocentric attitude to nature and his greed for wealth and power. As a result nature is forcing man to suffer the consequences of his apathy towards the environment. Global warming which is the direct result of industrial modernity is gradually leading to a destruction of ecological balance as frequent calamities like floods, famines, earthquakes are rendering man helpless, forcing both man and animal to migrate or relocate. Today as the world reels under this never-seen-before catastrophe because of a virus, the need for a re-establishment of man's bond with nature has become imperative. Man must 'go back to nature' or prepare himself for the 'unthinkable.'

As the environmental degradation has become an undeniable truth the importance of environmental literature and ecocritical approach to literature has also become indisputable. By putting Environment at the centre of discussion ecocritical texts aim to make readers aware of the environmental crises and how man's interference with nature and his endless exploitation of natural resources are resulting in an irreparable damage in the environment. Talking about the importance of ecocriticism Richard Kerridge writes:

Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an environmentalist viewpoint... Ecocritics analyse the history of concepts such as 'nature' in an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis. (13)

While the ecocritics are re-reading the literary texts through the prism of eco-consciousness writers like J. M. Coetzee, Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingslover, Amitav Ghosh and many more contemporary authors have been writing both fictions and non-fictions on environmental issues.

In Amitav Ghosh's works the environmental issues are often entangled with another crucial issue of present times, i.e. the migration crisis. In many cases human migration is a direct result of natural calamities caused by the drastic change in climate and just like animals humans too are forced to change their habitat. According to Ghosh the discussion on climate change and other environmental issues are incomplete without a discussion on migration crisis as the latter has too far reaching effect on the present world to be ignored or trivialised. In an interview to *The Indian Express* Ghosh explains why he considers the migration crisis to be one of the biggest events of this decade:

The first and most important thing about writing on this migration is that it has completely overturned the politics of the West. Ten years ago if someone had said to you that the entire political structures of the West would be shaken by a few hundred thousand people moving, you wouldn't have believed him . But this is what has happened.... The migration network is now the biggest, multi-billion dollar, clandestine industry in the world.

Therefore it is not surprising that *Gun Island*, the latest novel by Ghosh is not just a critique of man's growing rupture with nature but also a documentation of how the migration is slowly but steadily turning the conventional notion of the world upside down. However in *Gun Island* Ghosh does not pose man just as a ruthless villain in the drama of environmental devastation but also as a hapless victim trying desperately to survive through migration and dislocation just like the other 'inferior' animals. The novel is a study in universal strive for survival, both for man and animal and it also looks for answers to the problem of man's growing detachment from nature. Ghosh shows that in order to erase the distance between man and nature man must embrace faith and spirituality.

The world of Ghosh's *Gun Island* has been built upon a structure of dualities. This duality is discernible both in his characters and his treatment of the main theme of the novel i.e. the migration crisis. From the ecocritical point of view Ghosh's characters in the novel can be divided into two groups – the voice of science represented by Piya and also to some extent the narrator himself, and the voice of nature represented by Tipu, Rafi and especially the character of Prof. Cinta. Here however science and nature are not opposed to each other but rather Ghosh presents them as two different perspectives from which his characters look at the world. The character of Piya which was first introduced to the readers in Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide* is an Indian born American marine biologist and a cetologist. Piya's scientific mind does not allow her to give in to the ideas of 'miracle' as she believes that there is a scientific explanation for everything. Her science is a belief system that is sceptical of the world of faith that Cinta or Rafi stands for. At the opposite end of the spectrum stands the character of Prof. Giacinta Schiavon or Cinta, as the narrator Deen endearingly calls her. Cinta is a celebrated scholar of the history of Venice with a mind always open to see beyond the realm of reasons. In the novel her erudition allows for a belief in precognition and the existence of a superpower that manifests itself through nature. Her faith does not refute science but enables her and also the other characters to embrace the metaphysical.

Cinta's friend and the narrator of the novel, Deen is a scholar and an antiquarian. As his mind oscillates between reason and faith it is his friendship with Cinta that finally brings about in him a spiritual transformation. The two young men Tipu and Rafi share Cinta's faith. Tipu is a young enterprising man who surely knows the ways of the modern world. Little

slippery in the beginning, Tipu is a picaro who challenges the narrator not only by the way he behaves but also by the connection that his character forms with nature after being attacked by a cobra in the shrine of the Gun Merchant. In his delirium Tipu sees visions that baffles both the narrator and Piya's scientific mind. Like Cinta, Tipu too gains precognitive power that makes him closer to that side of nature which eludes the compassionate yet stubbornly rational Piya. Rafi who eventually becomes Tipu's lover is someone who never questions the probability of the improbable. While living in the Sunderbans Rafi never questioned the presence of the cobra as a benevolent protector of the shrine of Manasa Devi nor does he discard Tipu's visions as mere deliriums. Through all these characters Ghosh allows his readers to look at the events of the novel from the dual perspectives of reason and faith. However it is faith that finally triumphs as in the final chapter of the novel Piya's scientific scepticism too finally gives in when she fails to explain the 'miraculous spectacle' in scientific terms and mutters bafflingly, 'I really don't know. All I can say is that I'm grateful that it happened the way it did.' (284)

Ghosh follows the structure of dualities also in his treatment of the theme of migration. Generally in Amitav Ghosh's works the readers can notice two types of migration - 'forced' or involuntary and 'voluntary'. In *Gun Island* Ghosh documents both human and nonhuman migration. Unlike in the animal world, the migration in the human world of the novel is mostly voluntary. From the Gun Merchant of the ancient world of the folklore to the characters of present times – all of them are influenced by a 'pull' factor that draws them to migrate voluntarily to foreign countries. However the voluntary migration is also influenced by various 'push' factors of which the most prominent is the adversities rising from various natural calamities such as flood, drought etc. Both in *The Hungry Tide* and in the present novel Ghosh writes about the ecological plights of the Sunderbans region. The world's largest continuous mangrove forest and home to a wide variety of flora and fauna the Sunderbans is now almost on the verge of extinction as the region is losing its battle against climate change. The cataclysmic effects of climate change that result in frequent cyclones and floods render both the human and the animal inhabitants of the region homeless. In *Gun Island* Ghosh shows how the environmental devastation in the Sunderbans has dwindled the economic prospects of the place, forcing its residents to migrate.

Both Tipu and Rafi are the victims of the precarity of life in the Sunderbans and therefore they decide to escape the place and look for greener pastures in a foreign land. The promise of a better life in a better world pushes the characters of the merchant, Tipu, Rafi, Palash *et al.* towards a foreign shore where they struggle to relocate. It is this 'pull' factor of a better life, as Ghosh shows in the novel, that becomes the basis on which is built 'the multi-billion dollar migration industry' linking organisations in Europe, Africa and Asia. Though Ghosh's novel chronicles the murky details of the 'migration industry' showing how human trafficking and migration often go hand in hand, he does not judge his characters who willingly set in this perilous journey of displacement and relocation. Rather he tries to find a humane solution to all the uncertainties of future that torment the migrants like Palash or Bilal who regret their decision to leave their home land. And this solution lies in faith and spirituality as Cinta says, 'Remember these words, *caro*, think of them whenever you despair of the future: *Unde origo inde salus* - "From the origin salvation comes"' (222). This origin, as Ghosh shows is nothing but nature. The salvation will come only when man comes closer to nature and surrenders himself to its endless mysteries.

Any discussion on *Gun Island* would be incomplete without focusing on the dualities of myth and modernity - the world of the gun merchant's folklore and the present world inhabited by Ghosh's characters. The seventeenth-century legend of *Bonduki Sadagar*, translated as the the gun merchant, is an eternal fable of human greed in conflict with nature. Ghosh uses the Bengali folklore of the merchant and the snake goddess as a trope to emphasise the dual themes of migration across ages and human profit versus environment. Manasa Devi, the mythical snake goddess who persecutes the merchant all the way from Bengal to Venice and forces him to bow down to her wrath symbolises nature's ways of making man aware of, to quote ecocritic U. Sumathy's words, 'the voice of the "nonhuman other"' (1). She is almost like an interpreter who connects humans to the natural world. As Ghosh writes:

She was in effect a negotiator, a translator – or better still a *portavoce* – as the Italians say, 'a voice-carrier' between two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her mediation there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression. (152-3)

The snake Goddess Manasa plagues the merchant's world with all sorts of natural calamities and Ghosh shows that it is not just the mythical world of Banduki Sadagar but the real world was also reeling under innumerable natural and man-made disasters during the seventeenth century. Described as the Little Ice Age the seventeenth century is marked by severe climatic disruptions throughout the world – famines, droughts, earthquakes, epidemics etc. The modern world of the novel seems just a continuation of that century not just in terms of the natural tribulations but also in the way the paths of the novel's modern characters like Tipu, Rafi and Deen cross with the adventures of the merchant. And in both cases faith wins over scepticism and nature triumphs over humanity.

The fact that the origin of the legends of *Banduki Sadagar* can be traced back to 1660s is very significant in the context of the environmental cataclysm of the seventeenth century. This century saw major environmental upheavals throughout the world as a result of the decline in temperature after the Medieval Warm Period. Known as the Little Ice Age this period had a permanent effect on the history of human civilisation, as experts believe that the catastrophes throughout the world disrupted economic and social structures globally and this in turn gave rise to the modern world. (note). Extreme weather caused drought and crop failures resulting in famines which in turn gave way to plagues and forced migrations. All these calamities created huge political and social chaos in global scale – the fall of the Ming dynasty in China, the devastating Thirty Years War in central Europe, the civil war in England etc. As the merchant's journey covered a wide and varied region from Bengal to Venice via Goa, the Maldiv Islands, Egypt and Turkey, his story becomes a metaphor for the global effects of the seventeenth century catastrophes. It also acquires a precognitive significance when Ghosh describes how the modern day illegal immigration works where the migrants from India or Bangladesh set on perilous journies through the same route which the merchant once followed. The merchant set out from Bengal to escape the goddess Manasa Devi whose rage unleashed not only venomous snakes but also droughts and floods to punish him by making him suffer loss in his trade. The modern migrants too leave their home land to flee the curses of nature. In both cases the migration also offers nothing but precarious and meagre life. Ghosh indicates that as the merchant's plight came to an end only when he

bowed down to the angry snake goddess who symbolises the wrath of nature, the plight of the modern man too will end only when he would stop destroying nature.

In *Gun Island* Ghosh emphasises that whenever calamities and catastrophe, whether natural or man-made, hit the human world it is faith that rescued humanity. In order to drive his point home he uses the reference of the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute, the greatest landmark of Venice. As Prof. Cinta tells the narrator that the Basilica which was built in the late seventeenth century is actually a commemoration of a great catastrophe i. e. the plague of Venice. In the words of Prof. Cinta it is 'a monument to a catastrophe, a memorial to the terrible afflictions of the Little Ice Age.' (222) Ghosh ends his novel with an optimistic note as he rejects the apocalypticism for the faith in spiritual salvation. The image of the Santa Maria della Salute becomes a symbol of hope not just for the migrants tormented with uncertainties but also for the entire world with its human and nonhuman ecology. Built during the great plague of Venice the salute not just functions in the novel as a bridge between the worlds of the merchant and today's migrants but also as a bridge between man and nature. If Manasa Devi stands for the wrath of nature the Madonna of Good Health symbolises nature's capacity to show mercy. By these dual images of the ever-vengeful Manasa Devi and the ever-merciful Santa Maria della Salute Ghosh establishes his belief that it is only through faith in the origin or nature that we will find salvation from the sins of damaging the environment. As talking about the idea of looking at the problem of climate change from a spiritual perspective Ghosh asserts in one of his interviews:

I do think that we have to be able to open up those parts of our lives, or those parts of our minds, or those parts of our consciousnesses that can actually accommodate different ways of thinking about the world.

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