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ANTHROPOCENE AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A READING OF *GUN ISLAND*

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Abstract

Anthropocene and its effect on climate change has been a matter of discussion and debate for long. How can a sensitive person like a writer stay unaffected by this fact? Amitav Ghosh, the author of ten highly acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction, is one such writer who is seriously concerned about the disastrous effects of climate change and therefore, through *Gun Island*, the latest of his novels, has voiced his concerns on the issue. It is a story about a world highly disturbed by climate changes due to anthropocene in which creatures of every kind whether human beings, animals or birds have been forced to leave their habitats and about the catastrophic results of their displacement. This paper is an effort to explore a world of shifting beliefs, shifting homes, increasing displacement and unstoppable transition in the novel through the journey of Deen, a dealer of rare books from Calcutta (or Kolkata, as it is now formally known). The novel is based on the life of *Deen*, who is a Brooklyn-based, ageing, lonely, Bengali man, a dealer in rare books and Asian antiquities in New York. *Deen* happens to hear a folklore of *Mansa Devi*, the goddess of snakes and a gun merchant. The folklore mentions a shrine of the goddess in *Sunderbans* and explains how a gun merchant or *Bonduki Sadagar*, who fled from the rage of local snake goddess *Mansa Devi*, had to pay a price for doing so. Deen found the folklore so interesting that he travelled to *Sunderbans* and then all around the world, including Venice to unravel its mystery.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Environment, folklore, Climate change, Migration

Merriam Webster's dictionary defines Anthropocene as "the period of time during which human activities have had an environmental effect on the Earth regarded as constituting a distinct geological age" most scientists agree that humans have had a hand in warming Earth's climate since the Industrial revolution- some even argue that we are

living in a new geological epoch dubbed the Anthropocene¹. The term is used to describe the most recent period in Earth's history when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet's climate and ecosystem.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Anthropocene>

Anthropocene and its effect on climate change are in everyone's mind now. But unlike most others who show their concerns just by discussing, blaming and forgetting; the ecocritics try their level best to deal with this crisis. The most fundamental point of ecocriticism is that the ecocritics reject the notion of sociologists and linguistics that everything is socially or linguistically constructed. For them the nature is the first and the greatest reality and has an existence like human beings. It is an entity that affects the humans drastically and which the humans can affect, perhaps fatally, if they mistreat it. Every sensitive person would like to sensitize the humanity about the devastating effect of mistreating or exploiting nature.

How can a sensitive writer, like Amitav Ghosh, stay away from his duties as an ecocritic? Amitav Ghosh, the author of highly acclaimed works of fiction and non-fiction, is a writer who is seriously concerned about the disastrous effects of climate change and therefore, through *Gun Island*, the latest of his novels, has voiced his concerns on the issue. The novel is about a world highly disturbed by climate changes due to anthropocene in which creatures of every kind whether human beings, animals or birds have been forced to leave their habitats and about the catastrophic results of their displacement. This paper is an effort to explore a world of shifting beliefs, shifting homes, increasing displacement and unstoppable transition in the novel through the journey of Deen, a dealer of rare books from Calcutta (or Kolkata, as it is now formally known).

Ghosh, while talking to the journalist and author Raghu Karnad, son of late Sri Girish Karnad, at the release of his book *Gun Island* (2019), emphasized " In this book, I'm dealing with the violence of a completely different kind, which another thinker calls 'slow violence', because that's what we are actually experiencing at the moment"....."If you think of a drought... this prolonged drought that we have in central India and in parts of Maharashtra, it is displacing hundreds of thousands, may be millions of people, but the way that it unfolds is not in the sudden violence of, say, a riot. It is the slow violence which eats into people's lives. That is the issue at hand,"¹

The novel is based on the life of *Deen*, who is a Brooklyn-based, ageing, lonely, Bengali man, a dealer in rare books and Asian antiquities in New York. *Deen* happens to hear a folklore of *Mansa Devi*, the goddess of snakes and a gun merchant. The folklore mentions a shrine of the goddess in *Sunderbans* and explains how a gun merchant or *Bonduki Sadagar*, who fled from the rage of local snake goddess *Mansa Devi*, had to pay a price for doing so. Deen found the folklore so interesting that he travelled to *Sunderbans* and then all around the world, including Venice to unravel its mystery.

Ghosh, very skillfully, intertwines the myth and the reality by basing the narrative around the myth of the goddess which has its far-reaching consequences in the *Sunderbans*, Venice and other parts of the world. Simultaneously, the narrative mentions devastating cyclones, tornadoes, endangered sea species like whales and dolphins, dead zones, strange appearance of poisonous snakes and spiders, acute poverty, human trafficking rackets, refugee crisis, forest fires and much more. The beauty of the novel lies in keeping the myth alive while highlighting the disastrous effects of climate change, due to the human apathy and greed, in the lives of the characters both humans and animals. The myth is in fact a reminder to human beings of the fatal consequences of their unmindful and selfish acts. Humans have to understand and accept that every life on this planet whether human or non-human has its significance and intrinsic value in the ecosystem.

The novel mention Deen's journey to Sundarbans, which is an archipelago of hundreds of scattered islands, some densely populated while others completely uninhabited, stretched almost three hundred kilometers from the Hoogley river in West Bengal to the shores of Meghna river in Bangladesh. It is called 'India's doormat, the threshold of a teeming subcontinent'. For hundreds of years the foreigners – the Dutch, the Portuguese, the English - have taken this eastern route to enter the Indian subcontinent. It is a liquid landscape where surfacing cyclones like *Bhola* in 1970 and *Aila* in 2009 have wiped out thousands of lives, 'where animals and humans, myth and reality merge into each other in a ritualistic struggle for survival' (*Gun*

Island). In Ghosh's another novel *Hungry Tide* he remarks "in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week and islands are made and unmade in days" (224).

The rich gun merchant mentioned in the narrative along with his family must have fled overseas to escape the wrath of goddess *Mansa Devi* through Sundarbans sometime around in 17th century before Calcutta was founded in 1690 by Britishers. Before Calcutta came into being, Dhaka was the urban centre of East India. Gun merchant being a rich trader must have resided somewhere in Dhaka of 17th century. At that time, because of Little Ice Age the place and its people were tormented by storms, droughts, famines, plague and other kinds of calamities. The city rose to prominence in the 17th century as a provincial capital and commercial centre of the Mughal Empire in South Asia. Dhaka was the capital of Mughal Bengal for 75 years and was one of the most prosperous cities in the Indian subcontinent. Bengal of those times which included both West Bengal and present day Bangladesh was a major centre of economics and commerce and Sundarbans played vital role in this. As stated in the novel, 'the Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eyes; that's exactly where the war between profit and nature is fought.'(8) The little ice age of 17th century becomes more demonic by the times the narrative of the story enters 21st century Bengal and Sundarbans. The part of Bengal to which gun merchant belonged, no more is part of India and half of the islands of Sundarbans have been wiped away. The island on which the mythical temple of Mansa Devi is built has also suffered in the hands of development. The communities which inhabited in the islands of Sundarbans, despite being helped by timely forewarnings of cyclone and mass evacuation, suffered and moved away in search of better life. As Moyna tells Dinanath about the aftermaths of the cyclone Aila which hit the Sunderbans in 2009, how people either took to begging or ventured into illegal activities such as prostitution and human trafficking:

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 where 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.

The evacuation too had produced effects that no one could have foretold. Having once been uprooted from their villages many evacuees had decided not to return, knowing that their lives always hard, would be even more precarious now. Communities had been destroyed and families dispersed; the young had drifted to cities, swelling already-swollen slums; among the elderly many had given up trying to eke out a living and had taken to begging on the streets.

The Sunderbans had always attracted traffickers, because of poverty, but never in such numbers as after *Aila*, they had descended in swarms, spiriting women off to distant brothels and transporting able-bodied men to worksites in faraway cities or even abroad. (GI, 48-49)

These inconsiderate human activities have brought havoc to not only their lives but also to animal lives. The same can very clearly be felt when talking about the pitiful existence of the fishermen, Moyna tells, "even fishermen could barely get by; where once their boats would come back loaded with catch, now they counted themselves lucky if they netted a handful of fry."(GI,49)

Replying to Deen's question on the option for young people Moyna informs, "Making a life in the Sunderbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere. Some were slipping over the border into Bangladesh, to join labour gangs headed for the Gulf. And if that failed they would pay traffickers to smuggle them to Malaysia or Indonesia on boats." (GI, 49) Tipu and Rafi are the representative of those neglected communities of Sundarbans who after suffering the burns of climate change and economic crisis are forced to leave their homeland and move abroad for better opportunities. It's really shocking and terrifying to

hear from Tipu about the 'people-moving industry (human trafficking)' (p.60) as a growth industry which is flourishing at a fast pace as the poor and illiterate people of that region who are dependent upon fishing, farming and honey collecting, now barely get their living by these means as "the land's turning salty....on top of that every other year you get hit by the storm that blows everything to pieces...if you're young you can't just sit on your butt till you starve to death. Even the animals are moving... If you've got any sense you'll move and to do that you need someone who can help you find a way out." (GI, 61) Further he informs Deen how all this has led to illegal migration of thousands of people and a lot of middle men like Tipu, known as *dalals* are involved in these activities.

Amitav Ghosh on his personal visit to Venice observed 'one of the things that really struck me and completely took me aback is that every where I looked I heard people speaking Bangla. In fact the entire working class of Venice is now Bengali. It is an extraordinary thing.'ⁱ Large chunk of people from Bangladesh and inlands of Sundarbans migrate to Venice in prospects of better life. Today Bangladeshis form one of the largest immigrants' populations in Italy. As of 2016 there were more than 1 lakh Bangladeshis living in Italy mostly concentrated in the regions of Venice, Rome and Milan. Venice has become home of largest Bangladeshi community in continental Europe. Most of the population came through undocumented migration. The service sector absorbs over 70% of the workers belonging to the communityⁱⁱ. Rafi, Bilal, Kabir, Tipu are few of those individuals who come to Venice through illegal routes putting their lives at stake. Climatic and the resultant economic reasons forced these people to leave their lands and take refuge, legally or illegally, in an alien land. There also, the political conditions have become unfavorable for them because these migrants are taking hold of the jobs and other resources which could have been in the hands of the local people. So the local administration is harsh with these migrants. The intolerance that exists in the political domain towards the immigrants is explicit from these lines, "our new right wing government came to power because they promised to be tough on

migration." (G I,145) "the interior minister in the newly formed government in Rome..... had declared that he would not allow refugees to land in Italy at any cost."(G I,173)

Like humans, animals at Sundarbans, are also the victims of climate change, resulting in their migration. Due to the changes in the composition of the water of the Sunderbans, the patterns of their movement, which earlier used to be regular and predictable, had now become increasingly erratic. Consequently, they are losing so many members of their families that many species are becoming endangered. Talking about Rani, the dolphin, Piya informs Deen:

As the sea levels rose and the flow of fresh water diminished, salt water had begun to intrude deeper upstream, making certain stretches too saline for the dolphins. They had started to avoid some of the waterways they had frequented before; they had also slowly, begun to venture further and further upriver, into populated, heavily fished areas. Inevitably some had been ensnared by fishermen's nets and some had been hit by motorboats and steamers. Over the last few years the pod had lost so many members that its numbers were now down to Rani and just two others.(GI, 92)

As Rani is missing and Piya, along with Deen is on a motorboat in search of the dolphin, she tells him that the rivers are populated by an incredible variety of life forms and then expresses her worry about them as the 'dead zones' which are oceanic phenomenon have now started appearing in the rivers too. Describing 'dead zones' she tells:

They are those vast stretches of water that have a very low oxygen content- too low for fish to survive. Those zones have been growing at a phenomenal pace, mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers. When they are washed into the sea they set off a chain reaction that leads to all the oxygen being sucked out of the water. Only a few highly specialized organisms can survive in those conditions-everything else dies, which is why those patches of water are

known as dead zones". And those zones have now spread over tens of thousands of square miles of ocean-some of them are as large as middle-sized countries..and they're not just out in mid-ocean any more..they've started appearing in rivers too, especially where they meet the sea, as in the estuaries of the Mississippi and Pearl Rivers...because it's through rivers that agricultural effluents reach the oceans.(G I, 95)

Another cause of dead zones is the refineries which are being set up at the river sides and the discharge of their effluents into the rivers has caused the death of thousands of fish. She tells that it's happening all around the world as the owners of these refineries are powerful people and they manage even the politicians. The comment of Tipu seems to be quite fit here "We all got greed. It's not parasite we got inside of us, it's greed"

Further, during the course of the novel we come to know about the apathetic and careless attitude of the local administration resulting in wild fire, which took lives of thousands of innocent animals and also killed human beings and burnt down many houses. So much is the cost of technological advancement and development. All the happenings indicate a bleak future.

Thus, the book, through the life and experiences of Deen, Tipu Rafi and others, highlight the crisis the world is in the middle of today. Ghosh is conscious of the fact that all the human development is happening at the cost of ecosystem and the resultant degradation may be horrible. He, therefore, through the events in the novel points out the impact of climate changes/temperature rise on the lives of both humans and animals, several reasons for the environmental degradation and its

aftereffects like havoc causing cyclones, unpredictable weather conditions, frequent wildfires, migrations, unemployment, corruption, prostitution, exploitation, life risks, shipworms eating up the foundations of a city and more ; and, with the inclusion of the folklore of the Goddess Mansa Devi, seems to be suggesting how religious and traditional beliefs play a crucial role in the conservation of biodiversity and environment and can be taken into consideration while dealing with the climate change. The myth is in fact a reminder to human beings of the fatal consequences of their unmindful and selfish acts. Humans have to understand and accept that every life on this planet whether human or non-human has its significance and intrinsic value in the ecosystem.

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