

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* : An Ecocritical Exploration

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Abstract

In literature, the representation of nature has played a significant role. With the advent of ecocriticism, the interaction of the physical environment with human beings became a focal point in literature. Amitav Ghosh is one among the few Indian writers who explore the effects of human being's inordinate use of nature for his/her selfish motives by using legends, myth, and history in his fiction. The present paper examines how the materialistic and anthropocentric attitudes of human beings cause extreme climatic changes and the displacement of human beings and other living beings. This study on Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* also aims at bringing awareness among the readers about the impending calamities of the global environment and thus a warning to mend exploitative attitudes towards our Mother Nature.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism; Displacement; Ecocriticism.

Introduction

Representation of nature both in art and literature is not a recent phenomenon, but it has been in practice since ages. Due to shifting perceptions and philosophies of human beings, the representation of nature varied in different periods of literature. The people who understood nature as a separate entity, independent of human society and human beings as just a part of this nature took shelter in the lap of nature. On the contrary, people who considered human needs and human society as the touchstone for humanity's attitude towards nature practised exploitative attitudes towards nature. The alarming environmental problems faced by the entire world paved the way to a new outlook in literature, which consequently led to the emergence of ecocriticism as a field of study. The present paper tries to evaluate how the environmental crises are man-made and how

these crises cause displacement of human beings and other living organisms.

The term ecocriticism was coined in the late 1970s and got recognition through the two seminal publications: *The Ecocriticism Reader* edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* by Lawrence Buell. William Howarth explains the etymological meaning of ecocriticism as: “*Eco* and *critic* both derive from Greek, *oikos* and *kritis*, and in tandem they mean “house judge,” ... so the *oikos* is nature, a place Edward Hoagland calls “our widest home,” and the *kritos* is an arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order...” (Howarth 69). *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines ecocriticism as “Ecocriticism studies literary texts with reference to the interaction between human activity and the vast range of natural or non-human phenomena which bears upon human experience encompassing issues concerning fauna, flora, landscape, environment and weather” (Childs and Fowler 65). Thus, in short, we can say ecocriticism as a field of study tries to explore connections between literature and nature. We can trace mainly two waves in ecocriticism. The first wave of ecocriticism focusses on nature poetry while the second wave focuses on environmental justice to degraded landscapes. The revisionist aspect in Ecocritical theory makes its role a prophetic one. It is prophetic by warning human beings regarding the cause of the environmental crisis as anthropocentric¹ and also encouraging to revive the false thinking of a conqueror of nature for a better future.

An Ecocritical Exploration of the Novel

Amitav Ghosh’s novel *Gun Island* is divided into two parts. Part one is named as ‘The Gun Merchant’ and second as ‘Venice.’ Part one focuses on Sundarbans² while part two focuses on Venice and the immigrants. In part one through the Dinanath’s exploration of *dhaam* of ‘Manasa Devi³,’ Amitav Ghosh limns the current situation of Sundarbans. The main focus is on the changing living conditions of the people, aquatic animals as well as

1. M. H Abrams and Harphams *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines Anthropocentrism as an ideology which is oriented to the interests of human beings. Anthropocentrism promotes superiority of human beings to Nature. Human beings being superior to Nature takes the freedom to exploit Nature without thinking it’s after effects. (Abrams 88)

2. “The Indian Sundarbans Delta is part of the delta of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin in Asia. The Sundarbans, shared between India and Bangladesh is home to one of the largest mangrove forest in the world. It is also home for over 4.5 million people” (Danda and Gayathri 1)

3. “*Manasa Devi is also known as the snake Goddess who is worshipped mainly in Bengal and other North-Eastern states of India. According to Devi Bhagavatam Manasa is the mind born daughter of sage Kashyapa and Kadru*” (Das “Manasa”).

the drastic changes in climatic conditions. Ghosh identifies the reason for the changing scenario in Sundarbans as demonic possession. The demon that possessed human beings is the demon of anthropocentric greed. The demon exercises its freedom to exploit nature for the greed, which in turn converts Sundarbans to a place which can be a home for neither human beings nor living organisms. The greed, Amitav Ghosh mentions, would bring *Pralaya* which will destroy the entire world. Tipu explains to Deen clearly about greed and his effects.

Hey, Pops, I got news for you: greed's real, it's big. You got greed, I got greed, we all got greed..., it's not parasites we got inside of us, it's greed! If that's what a demon is, there's no way It's imaginary. Shit no! We're all demons... That's really bad news, because according to Hindu mythology when demons take over is when the world ends. (Ghosh 113)

The greediness of human beings made Sundarbans a field of war. Ghosh points out this explicitly when he says "...where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought" (13). Converting everything for one's profit is a psyche of a coloniser. Coloniser never thinks about the *other* (Nature). In the colonial context, the *other* which is the colonised is inferior to self. The very existence of an inferior *other* gives identity to the self, which is superior. *Other* has no meaning beyond self; thus, it always remains at the mercy of self. This concept of *othering* is practised by human beings too. He considers himself as the crown of all creations. With self-proclaimed superiority, human beings try to load its power over the *other* even to the extent of exploitation of *other*. So the *other* becomes a mere object for the self. Being an object, the *other* becomes for you, merely an object to explore and use it until it is fruitless. Here *other* is nature and self is human beings. The self (human beings) who claims to be the subject thinks that everything is under him and created for him, thus defines *other* (nature) in relation to the subject (human beings).

The visit of Dinanath to Sundarbans *dhaam* of The Gun Merchant reveals the effects of greediness or the materialistic tendencies of the people. In the quest for better living conditions, human beings almost forgot/neglected nature. The bareness of Sundarbans is nothing but the repercussions of the exploitative quest undertaken by the people. The situation in Sundarbans is genuinely alarming. It is no more human who considered himself as the defining factor that controls Sundarbans but nature (*other*) who is a giver through furious climatic disasters started controlling land and making Sundarbans barren. Nature started reacting against the de-

mon of greed by not providing the abundance of its treasure. The people of Sundarbans started experiencing the cramp;

It seemed both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans. When people tried to dig wells, an arsenic – laced brew gushed out of the soil; when they tried to shore up embankments the tides rose higher and pulled them down again. Even fisherman could barely get by; where once their boats would come back with catch, now they counted themselves lucky if they netted a handful of fry. (54)

The staggering impacts reflected in the land of Sundarbans were caused not only by the sole greed of the people of Sundarbans but also by the populace outside the Sundarbans. The water transport and other amenities of Sundarbans attracted industries that fulfilled human greed. The chemical wastes were directly channelised to the rivers causing changes in the banks as well in the diverse population of plant and animal species, both terrestrial and aquatic.

When human beings crossed the limits of exploitation of nature, nature which is generally pictured as 'giver' started reacting and thus slowly became a 'destroyer'. Nature's reaction against the anthropocentric man caused not only barrenness of land but also poverty, migration, human trafficking and thus the displacement of human beings. Tipu puts this situation more clearly as

...I did have a passport back then. But it expired and I haven't renewed it. Who needs to spend all that time in government offices? There are easier ways of getting passport, and if you've got the money you can choose whichever kind you want - Bangladeshi, Indian, Malaysian, Sri Lankan, you name it... The people-moving industry, Pops, he said, grinning. It's already one of the world's biggest and still growing fast (64).

As a result the people end up in situations beyond human understanding not because they loved to be there as immigrants, sex workers or being trafficked but "What would anyone do? If you're young you can't just sit on your butt till you starve to death" (65). The alarming situation is that even nature's fury did not mend the ways of people but instead, they searched for further prospect in technology rather than turning to the Mother Nature. "... And one of them is called internet... the internet is the migrants magic carpet; it's their conveyor belt. It doesn't matter whether

they're travelling by plane or bus or boat: it's the internet that moves the wetware" (66).

In the novel, the characters Nilima and Piya are the social activists, who managed the NGO 'Badabon Development Trust' to help the displaced. This Trust, through its workshops and employment generation schemes, tried to rehabilitate people who out of poverty ended up as sex workers and victims of human trafficking but the trust could not offer much monetarily. So the rehabilitated victims started returning to their old conditions. "Unfortunately, Moyna told me, this was a losing battle. The trust's experience showed that many, if not most, of the rescued women, would soon go back to the lives they had been living before" (53). Thus, one thing to be very clear is that when nature turns to be the 'destroyer' no one can stand, even the helping hands like NGO, unless there is a mass movement to protect Mother Nature.

While depicting the devastations of climatic changes Amitav Ghosh wanted to give a warning to humanity. Through the characters of Piya and Nilima Ghosh tries to drive home the message that it is high time to stop the coloniser's attitude of dominating nature and start thinking that human beings are just an iota of the eco-system and not the sole dictator. Nilima's concern for writing about The Gun Merchants' *dhaam* comes from a fear of *dhaams'* future. Piya's concern for the displaced people as well as the aquatic mammals shows that human beings are not alone in this ecosystem. Our inordinate thirst for exploring and conquering gravely upsets the lives of other living organisms too. Piya's saving of the dolphin Rani from the nylon net and Rani's expression of appreciation to Piya and her perception of the rivers "Each of these rivers ... is like a moving forest, populated by an incredible variety of life forms... it carries traces of everything that happens upriver" (97 -98), must make our greedy heart melt. "Piya wasted no time in cutting Rani loose and after that, the dolphin had begun to make eye contact with her, ...a manner that suggested something more than mere recognition" (95).

Piya's concern for the aquatic animals and the way she is disturbed when she lost contact with dolphin Rani serves as a wakeup call to care for the *other* who is suffering by the anthropocentric explorations that would fetch the best to one's self i.e. *Other*.

Human being thinks that they are the sole rulers of the universe and often forgets that they are merely a part of a living matrix and thus subject to the law of reciprocity. The materialistic tendencies of human beings towards

nature not only affected human's existence but the existence of other living organisms as well. In Sundarbans, it is not only the human beings who are stricken badly but the living organisms in the river like dolphins, crab and other organisms too due to the creation of river dead zones. Due to the discharge of chemical fertilisers and factory effluents, river dead zones are created making these zones no more habitats for living organisms. The creation of such dead zones causes migration of living organisms that once inhabited the place. Migration is terrible for aquatic beings, especially dolphins like Rani and her Pod.

And it must be hardest on Rani knowing that the young ones depend on her. There she is, perfectly adapted to her environment, perfectly at home in it – and then things being to change, so that all those years of learning become useless, the places you know best can't sustain you any more ...everything she was familiar with the water, the currents, the earth itself – was rising up against her. (100-101)

Suffering due to one's own mischievous action could somehow be justified but suffering due to others mischievous and greedy actions can only be looked at with pity and anger. The industry's function for satisfying the insatiability of people affects marine mammals severely. Marine Mammals use echo location to navigate and the manmade sounds from submarines and sonar equipment disorient these mammals which cause the beaching. This has become a frequent phenomenon in Sundarbans now. The author puts this situation aptly saying "we're in a new world now. No one knows where they belong any more, neither humans nor animals" (100).

Amitav Ghosh while exploring the anthropocentric attitude of human beings which turns Mother Nature to a 'destroyer' from 'giver' even suggests how one can revive this fury of nature through the legend of 'The Gun Merchant.' In the novel, when the 'Bhola Cyclone' hit Sundarbans in 1970, the particular hamlet where the *dhaam* of 'The Gun Merchant' existed protected the people by alarming the people. Thus, even during the 'Bhola Cyclone', people who stayed closer to nature were protected. However, it was only an admonition given to the people to come closer to nature and accordingly carry on with the life based on bio-centric mentality rather than being anthropocentric.

Although Amitav Ghosh majorly focusses on Sundarbans, he never forgets the ecological crisis that happens in the west too. Global warming

severely affected the West as well; however, it is not as dreadful as in the colonised nations. The attack of bark beetles in the vicinity of Oregon city, the appearance of a yellow-bellied snake in the beaches of California due to warming up of seas in the west and forest fire are all part of the crisis that is being seen in the West too. Colonisers' aggression although ended geographically but it has taken newer shapes. The instance of librarians' utterance "we have to show the Mother Nature that we're not quitters" (127) attests it.

In the part, two of the novel named 'Venice' we see how climatic changes lead to migration of people to faraway lands. Millions of people are forced to move from their homes due to shoreline erosion, coastal flooding, agricultural disruption, droughts and natural disasters. In the novel, the Sunderbans is also undergoing various climatic changes. The People of the Sunderbans had to migrate in search of better habitat. The experience of Tippu and Raffi while migrating to faraway lands depicts how horrifying migration can be. When they move illicitly from one place to another, they risk their life from the gunshots of the territorial army "... you have to run like crazy, over steep slopes. The soldiers on the Turkish side shoot if they see anyone trying to cross" (93).

The life of Tippu and Raffi in the novel gives us a picture of how climate change brings disruption in the human population. Tippu and Raffi, who migrated to distant lands in search for a better future, suffer badly. They are drawn between 'daalals' and hunted as 'jihadis'. They overcome all this to reach to a safer place. "For the next year and half we were beaten, tortured, and sold by one gang to another. They made us work from morning to night, paying us almost nothing and giving us only bread to eat. We were like slaves; what we went through was something that should not happen to any human being" (195).

The sacrifice that Raffi is ready to undertake for bringing his friend Tippu to an agreeable spot is admirable and should be replicated in our relation to Mother Nature. Human beings need to do certain sacrifices to keep Mother Nature safe even to the extent of killing the demon called 'greed'. Tippu's gesture of keeping his mother happy by sending photoshopped group photos of Tippu being happy in Bangalore awakens in the reader the love and responsibility for keeping Mother Nature safe and happy. Both Raffi and Tippu is concerned more about the other and others safety and happiness. The mindset of Raffi and Tippu to keep the other happy even if they are going through difficult times of their life is something to be copied by every individual in their relation to Mother Nature to keep

her safe and happy.

Conclusion

The study is intended to remind the entire humanity the old story of *The Kalidas Mistake*, in which Kalidas, started cutting the branch on which he was sitting. It is common sense not to cut the branch of the tree on which one is sitting. Similarly, Human beings are doing what Kalidas and sometimes even exceed their act of destroying nature than Kalidas. In Kalidas's case, only Kalidas reaped the fruit of his foolishness but the anthropocentric attitude of human beings is not only going to bring doom to human beings but the entire living organisms are going to be affected. Mankind's desire to conquer is bringing far reaching undesirable changes in the climate which are detrimental to human beings as well as other living organisms. We have to put a full stop to the culture of death that is creeping into our culture. The longer we wait, the harder it would be to put things in order. *Gun Island* reminds us that we are going through a man-made existential crisis that threatens one's own existence and that of other living organisms. The novel warns us not to be a bait to 'greed'. Our Mother Earth is giving ample signals through different climatic disasters about what the future holds for us if we go in the pace of gratifying our own comforts at the expense of nature. The alarming situation of our generation is that even if some activists want to speak or work against the disastrous moves, the system that is controlled by money tries to target them and thus killing their enthusiasm, which is showcased through the character of Piya in the novel. Piya faced it while working against the refinery that polluted the Sundarbans. Like Piya many of us are also facing it but we have to bell the cat "Maybe now, while there's still time to make changes, people will wake up and see what's going on" (201), otherwise the future generation would ask like Greta Thunberg the climatic activist from Sweden "How dare you?" ("*Greta*" 0.26-27).

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