

## Reimagined Narratives of Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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### Abstract

The research paper focuses on Amitav Ghosh's attempt to revive the practice of bringing back non-human elements into serious literature through *Gun Island*. The juxtaposition of human and non-human migration which brings the curtains down in the novel serves as an indicator of the future to ponder about in the globalized world of growing environmental concerns. The transition in the depiction of migratory movements from his fictitious Al-Ghazira depicted in his debut novel to *Gun Island* offers a fascinating scope to study his 'renewed recognition' of the agency of non-human in the serious literary form like a modern novel. As highlighted by him in his nonfiction *The Great Derangement*, his latest work of fiction sets forth to shift the focus from 'men in the aggregate' to a 'new non-human critical voice' in the era of global warming.

**Key Words:** Non-human, migration, climate crisis, displacement, foreground

In the era of globalization, the influx of technological advancements has made the boundaries porous and flexible. Indeed, we live in awesome times filled with rapid changes that proffer both grand opportunities and daunting challenges affecting everyone. More than ever, human beings are connecting with others on the planet through digital and Internet technology, becoming mobile in a variety of ways. The movement of the people between the continents and their eventual settling down in different cultural and social milieu has changed the perception of nationhood and its associated cultural and social trappings. The refugee and climate crisis has further intensified this movement across the borders. In this scenario, crisscrossing of the boundaries seems only a natural thing to happen not only for the human beings, but also for the non-human beings.

Amitav Ghosh's works yields scope for an insightful study of these cross-cultural movements. The Jnanpith awardee Amitav Ghosh, often described as a novelist with an extraordinary sense of history and place is one of the most important novelists of our time. From a student of history and anthropology, he became a novelist recognized for his "outstanding contribution towards literature", by Bhartiya Jnanpith: "Amitav Ghosh is a path-breaking novelist. In his novels, Ghosh treads through historical settings to the modern era and weaves a space where the past connects with the present in relevant ways." This paper explores the progression of his ideas on displacement of non-human from just being in the background to provide the setting for human displacement in his earlier works to be relocated to the foreground 'to serve as the motor of narrative' in his latest work of fiction *Gun Island*.

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh recreates this theme of displacement of not only human beings but also of all other creatures and beings. The diverse cast of characters, set in places that range from the Sunderbans to Venice where a series of uncanny incidents take place. Deen, a Brooklyn - based rare books dealer finds his life entangled with an ancient legend about the goddess of snakes, Manasa Devi. Events turn on the mention of a Bengali legend, the tale of a merchant fated to travel the world seeking a haven from the goddess of snakes, Manasa Devi. It is a story passed down through centuries, with which Deen has been familiar since childhood; its retelling sparks an adventurous and arduous journey similar to the one undertaken by the merchant himself. Throughout his journey from the mangrove swamps of the Sundarbans to Los Angeles surrounded by forest fires to a gradually sinking Venice, he too is pursued by poisonous reptiles of all sorts.

The issues of migrants from Bangladesh to European countries, refugee crises caused by Xenophobia, near extinction of Dolphins in the Ganges, wildfires raging through California, and displacement of creatures like water snakes, shipworms are all weaved in the narrative in such a way as to establish their connection with one another.

The human and climate crisis found in the work of fiction in fact anticipates the real-life incidents. While the freakish hailstorm and gusts of wind experienced by Deen in the novel became a reality in Venice in the year 2019, the wildfires had already ravaged Los Angeles in 2017. Ghosh's work of nonfiction *Great Derangement of Climate*, examined the failure at the level of history, literature, and politics to grasp the scale and violence of climate change. *Gun Island* deals with the same issue in the format of fiction. This work of fiction deals with the issues of migration and the plight caused both by human and non-human dislocation. The climate crisis asks us to imagine other forms of human existence a task to which fiction, Ghosh argues, is the best suited of all forms.

The refugee crisis, climate crisis, and the displacement of flora and fauna caused by the disruptions in the climate are all elaborately presented through various narratives and are brought together in the climax to resolve the man-made sociopolitical crisis. The crisis of human migration which Ghosh had elaborately dealt with within his Ibis trilogy is expanded further in the latest novel to accommodate the ecological crisis fast spreading across the globe at a lightning speed. The narrative on the wildfires in California, the habitat changes of the yellow-bellied snake, and later the invasion of shipworms eating the foundations of Venice, the beaching of Gangetic dolphins in faraway Sunderbans are interlinked. Deen's encounters with poisonous snakes, spiders, and other such creatures begins with his entry into the Manasa Devi temple. Tipu and his partner Rafi are also haunted by them right from the first encounter to their journey across the continents which culminates with the episode of the refugee boat. While Dinu, Cinta, Tipu, and Rafi sense something beyond reality, Piya, the scientist tries to ground them with her scientific explanations. What seems to be improbable or even uncanny for others as the refugee boat is caught in the cross current of one of the largest migrations of the whales and birds, Piya just feels grateful and relieved as it prompts the rescue of the refugees:

She stood still for what was perhaps only a moment, with a halo of birds spinning above her, while down in the water a chakra of dolphins and whales whirled around the boat. And then an even stranger thing happened: the color of the water around the refugee boat began to change. In a few minutes, it was filled with a glow of an unearthly green color, bright enough that we could see the outlines of dolphins and whales that were undulating through the water. (GI 282)

While the admiral who orders the rescue of the refugees deems the incident as nothing short of a miracle, the scientist Piya considers them just as a series of migratory patterns intersecting unusually. A similar incident however on a smaller scale provides the closure to Ghosh's first novel *The Circle of Reason*.

*The Circle of Reason*, Amitav Ghosh's debut novel was published in 1986. The first part, Satwa: Reason, spans several decades, the second Rajas: Passion, unfolds over a few weeks, and the third, Tamas: races through a day. Ghosh's debut novel centres on Alu, an orphan enlisted by his foster father as a soldier in his crusade against the forces of myth and unreason. When eight-year-old Nachiketa Bose first arrives in the East Bengali village of Lalpukur, he receives the name Alu—potato—for the size and shape of his extraordinary head. His uncle Balram, the local schoolmaster and phrenology enthusiast, sends Alu to apprentice as a weaver, and the boy soon surpasses the skill of his master. But when a tragic bombing leaves Alu suspected of terrorism, he flees across India to Bombay and the Arabian Sea, followed by the dogged policeman—and avid ornithologist—Jyoti Das. From East Bengal to the Persian Gulf and North Africa,

In his *The Circle of Reason*, the narration moves in circles replicating the Indian philosophy. In the cyclical pattern, the present incidents trigger the memories of the past simultaneously altering the time frame of the narrative. The first of the three main threads of the narrative is that of the rationalist Balram's, a journalist turned school teacher whose belief in phrenology, (the study of a human skull to understand what his subjects of study are destined for) lands him into more and more trouble than his belief in the supremacy of reason. For the idealist Life of Louis Pasteur by Rene, Vallery Radot becomes the bible and carbolic acid, the sacramental wine. Alu, his orphaned nephew is so-called due to the shape of his head which resembles that of potato or Alu in Bengali.

The trail of disaster and catastrophe left behind by the central character Alu, who unites the different threads of the narrative is nothing less than that of uncanny. The second part of the novel set in Al-Ghazira brings in the cartload of new characters. A slice of the Indian diaspora comprising mostly of the illegal migrants under the control of Zindi the erstwhile prostitute turned trafficker planning to settle down in life for good. She manages to control things around her till the arrival of Alu and his eventual trapping under the massive construction site of the mall called 'The Star'. He is miraculously saved by the sewing machines which prevents the roof from collapsing on him. He emerges out of the ruins as much altered man who revives his old passion for weaving and his new passion for talking., almost echoing his uncle Balram's ideals of rationalism. The cycle of life comes to a full circle with the reappearance of Louis Pasteur and carbolic acid as the supposed anti-rationalist Dr. Uma Verma, the daughter of the

staunch rationalist Dantu manages a coup of sorts against the corrupt system represented by Dr. Mishra. The policeman Jyotidas in hot pursuit of Alu is yet another chain that links the narrative thread. An artist and avid bird watcher are forced into the government services to realize his dreams and free himself in the end:

.... Then he looked down and saw a humped back caracoling through the water. Then he saw another and another and suddenly there was a whole school of dolphins racing along with the ferry, leaping, dancing, standing on their tails. He looked up at the tranquil sky and gloried in the soaring birds, the sunlight, the sharpness of the clean sea breeze, and the sight of the huge rock growing in the distance. It was very beautiful; he was at peace. (CR457)

*The Circle of Reason* which depicts the impact of displacement caused by human migration ends with the parallel movement of dolphins providing a sense of calm and tranquility to those who witness it. In *Gun Island*, a similar movement acts as a catalyst to bring about a solution to the refugee crisis. The narrative of the later novel however does not end with this resolution of the crisis, but with the last words spoken by Cinta moments before her death: "From the beginning, salvation comes, and I understand what she had been trying to tell me that day: that the possibility of deliverance lies not in the future but the past, is a mystery beyond memory." (GI 286)

In *Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh argues that Improbability is not the opposite of probable, but rather an inflection of it, a gradient in a continuum of probability. He quotes Ian Hacking, a prominent historian of the concept, who puts it as a manner of conceiving the world constituted without our being aware of it. "Probability and the modern novel are in fact twins, born at about the same time, among the same people, under a shared star that destined them to work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of experience..... but what is distinctive about the form is the concealment of those exceptional moments that serve as the motor of a narrative." (GD, 22)

The novel thus takes its modern form through the 'relocation of the unheard-of toward the background ... while the everyday moves into the foreground. However, the present climate crisis demands the relocation of the background to the foreground. He further argues that the novel as a form would seem to be the natural home for the uncanny. He distinguishes the environmental uncanny from that of the supernatural, as it pertains to non-human forces and beings. "we are confronted suddenly with a new task: that of finding others in which to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era." (44). This reimagined narrative of migration of human and non-human beings found in *Gun Island* restores the place of 'unheard-of' toward the forefront.

The reason for the almost contrived miraculous intervention which provides a solution to the refugee crisis is indeed a resultant occurrence caused by the climate crisis. In *Great Derangement*, he has already provided a curtain-raiser to the events which sets the backdrop for the action in *Gun Island*:

Can anyone write about Venice anymore without mentioning the aqua alta, when the waters of the lagoon swamp the city's streets and courtyards? Nor can they ignore the relationship that this has with the fact that one of the languages most frequently heard in Venice is Bengali: the men who run the quaint little vegetable stalls and bake the pizzas and play the accordion are largely Bangladeshi, many of them displaced by the same phenomenon that now threatens their adopted city-sea-level rise. (GD 84)

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh brings back the "phenomena that were long ago expelled from the territory of the novel-forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space." (GD 84). He provides the place for the non-human agencies in serious literature similar to the ancient epics and traditional narratives and reverses the literary trend which became radically centers on the human. The revival of the ancient practice to "rediscover their kinship with other beings, and that the vision, at once new and ancient, will find expression in transformed and renewed art and literature." (GD217). To quote his own words, "It is difficult for a writer to use a case of "extreme improbability" without it seeming contrived. *Gun Island* is his response to provide 'a form, an approach that grapples with climate change'.

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