

**Myth as Ecological Archive: Reinterpreting the Legend of Bonduki Sadagar in
Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island***

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Abstract:

This article examines the intersection of myth, ecology, and climate discourse in *Gun Island* (2019) by Amitav Ghosh, focusing on the legend of Bonduki Sadagar as a form of ecological memory. It argues that the novel reconfigures traditional folklore as a narrative framework through which historical experiences of environmental instability in the Sundarbans are preserved and reinterpreted in the context of the Anthropocene. While myths are often dismissed as supernatural or pre-rational narratives, this study demonstrates that they encode cultural knowledge about landscapes, ecological patterns, and crises emerging from sustained human–environment interaction. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Claude Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, the article analyzes how myth in *Gun Island* operates simultaneously as cultural memory, symbolic structure, and interpretive lens. It explores the convergence of ritual space, animal agency, and migration narratives to reveal how the novel connects local ecological histories of the Sundarbans with global patterns of climate change and displacement. The protagonist's journey across geographically distant yet environmentally linked spaces underscores the transnational dimensions of ecological crisis. Ultimately, the study contends that *Gun Island* revitalizes myth as a critical mode of environmental understanding. By situating folklore within contemporary climate discourse, the novel demonstrates that traditional narratives can offer profound insights into ecological transformations and human vulnerability in an era of accelerating environmental change.

Keywords: Ecological Memory; Anthropocene; Multispecies Entanglement; Sundarbans; Myth and Environmental Discourse

Introduction

Myth has long functioned as a medium through which societies interpret natural phenomena and preserve collective memory. In many traditional cultures, stories about gods, spirits, and legendary figures encode knowledge about landscapes, ecological patterns, and historical crises. Such narratives often appear supernatural, yet they frequently emerge from long histories of interaction between human communities and their environments. In contemporary literature dealing with climate change, myth has acquired renewed significance. Writers increasingly revisit traditional narratives to explore how past cultural knowledge might illuminate present ecological crises. Among such works, *Gun Island* (2019) by Amitav Ghosh offers a striking example of how folklore can intersect with environmental history. The novel revolves around the mysterious legend of Bonduki Sadagar, a merchant who attempts to escape the wrath of the snake-goddess Manasa. As the protagonist Deen investigates the legend across locations ranging from the Sundarbans to Venice, the narrative gradually reveals connections between myth, climate change, migration, and ecological disruption. This article argues that the Bonduki Sadagar legend functions as a form of ecological memory that encodes historical experiences of environmental volatility in the Sundarbans. Drawing upon theoretical insights from Claude Lévi-Strauss, Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, the article examines how myth, ritual space, animal symbolism, and migration narratives converge in the novel to create a powerful environmental discourse. Through this analysis, the study demonstrates that folklore in *Gun Island* not only preserves cultural heritage but also provides a symbolic framework for understanding ecological transformations in the Anthropocene.

Myth as Cultural Memory and Environmental Knowledge

Myths frequently operate as vehicles for transmitting cultural memory across generations. In societies where, ecological knowledge is embedded in oral traditions rather than written records, folklore often preserves insights about environmental patterns and hazards. Such narratives may appear fantastical, yet they frequently emerge from long histories of human engagement with particular landscapes. Structural anthropology provides an important theoretical perspective on this phenomenon. Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that myth represents a form of intellectual activity through which communities organize and interpret their experience of the world. Rather than being irrational stories, myths function as systems that symbolically mediate contradictions between human aspirations and natural constraints (Lévi-Strauss 229). In *Gun Island*, the legend of Bonduki Sadagar initially

surfaces as a fragment of folklore that intrigues the protagonist Deen. The tale recounts how a wealthy merchant refused to worship the snake-goddess Manasa and attempted to escape her vengeance by traveling across distant lands. Yet the goddess continued to pursue him through serpents and disasters. At first, Deen approaches the story as a rational historian attempting to decode its historical origins. However, the narrative gradually reveals that the legend resonates with contemporary environmental disturbances. While recounting the myth, the narrative observes that Bonduki Sadagar tried to flee from the goddess by traveling across seas and distant lands, yet “no matter how far he went, the goddess’s messengers followed him” (Ghosh 63). This recurring motif of pursuit suggests that the myth encodes a deeper cultural understanding of environmental inevitability. Another passage describing the shrine reinforces the ecological dimension of the legend: Deen notices the presence of snakes around the temple and remarks that they seemed to be “watching silently from the undergrowth” (Ghosh 78). The novel thus invites readers to reconsider folklore as a form of ecological memory. The story of Bonduki Sadagar may encode earlier experiences of environmental volatility in the Sundarbans—a region historically marked by floods, cyclones, and unpredictable wildlife encounters. Through narrative symbolism, these ecological realities become embedded in cultural memory and transmitted through myth.

Deltaic Ecology and the Mythic Landscape of the Sundarbans

The ecological significance of the Bonduki Sadagar legend becomes clearer when situated within the geographical context of the Sundarbans delta. This region, formed by the confluence of major South Asian rivers, is one of the most dynamic and unstable environments in the world. Tidal currents constantly reshape the landscape, while cyclones and floods pose persistent threats to human settlements. The Sundarbans has long been associated with mythological narratives involving serpents, spirits, and protective deities. Such stories reflect the intimate relationship between local communities and a landscape characterized by both abundance and danger. Clifford Geertz’s interpretive anthropology helps illuminate this process. He argued that cultural symbols operate simultaneously as “models of” reality and “models for” reality (Geertz 93). In other words, they both represent existing conditions and guide human responses to them. In *Gun Island*, the shrine of Manasa in the Sundarbans serves as the focal point from which Deen’s investigation begins. The shrine is portrayed not simply as a religious site but as a cultural node where myth, landscape, and ecological memory converge. Describing the surrounding mangrove forest, the narrative notes that the place seemed “ancient and

alive, as though the stories attached to it had seeped into the very soil” (Ghosh 70). Another moment reinforces this connection between myth and ecology when Deen reflects that the Sundarbans felt like a place where “the boundary between land and water was always shifting” (Ghosh 72). This observation captures the environmental instability of the deltaic ecosystem. The mythic conflict between Bonduki Sadagar and the goddess can thus be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the struggle between human ambition and ecological limits. The merchant’s attempt to evade the goddess reflects a desire to escape the constraints imposed by nature, while the goddess’s relentless pursuit suggests the impossibility of severing human existence from environmental systems.

Serpents, Animal Agency, and Multispecies Entanglement

Animals occupy a central symbolic and narrative role in the legend of Bonduki Sadagar, particularly the serpent associated with the goddess Manasa. In *Gun Island*, encounters with animals recur throughout the narrative and often appear at moments when ecological stability seems to falter. Snakes, dolphins, spiders, and birds are not presented merely as background elements of the natural environment; rather, they participate in the unfolding ecological drama of the story. These episodes suggest that animal behavior may function as a signal of environmental imbalance. Recent developments in environmental humanities and multispecies ethnography emphasize that human and nonhuman lives are deeply intertwined within shared ecosystems. From this perspective, the unusual appearances and behaviors of animals in the novel create an atmosphere of uncanny ecological disturbance that reflects the broader disruptions of the Anthropocene. Anthropologist Anna Tsing argues that human existence is inseparable from relationships with other species, observing that “human nature is an interspecies relationship” (Tsing 144). This insight helps illuminate the narrative strategy of *Gun Island*, where animals emerge as active agents within complex ecological networks. In the Sundarbans, encounters with serpents illustrate this multispecies entanglement in particularly striking ways. When Deen encounters a cobra near the shrine of Manasa, the scene is described in a manner that blurs the boundary between myth and ecological reality: the snake appears suddenly with “its hood raised, swaying as though it were listening” (Ghosh 76). The description suggests both danger and communication, as though the serpent were responding to the human presence within its environment. This moment destabilizes the conventional separation between human observer and animal subject.

Within the cultural framework of the Bonduki Sadagar legend, serpents function as emissaries of the goddess Manasa, embodying divine power and vengeance. However, the novel simultaneously invites readers to interpret these serpents through an ecological lens. From a multispecies perspective, the snakes can be understood as representatives of environmental forces that resist human domination. Their presence reminds readers that the Sundarbans is a fragile ecosystem governed by complex biological relationships in which humans are only one species among many. The narrative extends this multispecies perspective beyond the Sundarbans when unusual animal behavior begins to occur in distant geographical locations. In Venice, for example, the characters witness dolphins behaving in unexpected ways within the canals. Deen observes that the animals' movements seemed "almost purposeful, as though they were trying to communicate something" (Ghosh 214). Such scenes suggest that ecological disturbances are not limited to a single region but are occurring on a planetary scale. The animals appear to respond to environmental changes before humans fully recognize their significance, thereby functioning as early indicators of ecological imbalance.

Through these recurring animal encounters, *Gun Island* demonstrates how mythological symbolism and ecological observation can intersect. The serpent in the legend of Bonduki Sadagar operates on multiple symbolic levels: it represents divine agency within traditional cosmology while simultaneously embodying ecological forces that challenge human control. By linking these dimensions, the novel suggests that myths may encode long-standing observations of environmental patterns that were historically interpreted through religious symbolism. The repeated presence of snakes therefore functions as a warning embedded within cultural memory. Just as the mythical merchant cannot escape the goddess's serpents, modern humanity cannot evade the consequences of ecological disruption.

Myth, Sacred Time, and the Anthropocene Imagination

Another theoretical framework for interpreting the legend of Bonduki Sadagar can be drawn from the work of Mircea Eliade, who argues that myths function as sacred histories that communities repeatedly reenact through storytelling and ritual. Eliade proposes that mythic narratives collapse historical time into what he calls "sacred time," allowing past events to remain symbolically present in the cultural imagination (Eliade 68). In this sense, myth does not simply recount a distant past; rather, it continually renews the presence of foundational events in the present. In *Gun Island*, the legend of Bonduki Sadagar appears to operate in precisely this

manner. Although the story originates in an earlier cultural past, its themes—serpents, storms, exile, and relentless pursuit—recur in contemporary ecological circumstances. At one moment, Deen reflects on the strange convergence between myth and the events unfolding around him, observing that what he was witnessing seemed uncannily similar to the ancient story of the merchant who tried to escape the wrath of the goddess (Ghosh 302). The recurrence of serpents, climatic disturbances, and migration within the narrative suggests that the myth is not confined to the past but continues to resonate within present ecological realities. Deen eventually wonders whether the legend might be “not merely a story but a pattern that repeated itself through time” (Ghosh 305).

This cyclical dimension of myth becomes even more significant when considered alongside contemporary debates about environmental temporality. The environmental historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that climate change fundamentally challenges conventional understandings of historical time, because it collapses the long-standing distinction between human history and natural history. As Chakrabarty observes, the climate crisis forces us to recognize that “the distinction between natural history and human history has collapsed” (207). Human activity now shapes planetary processes on a geological scale, making it increasingly difficult to separate environmental change from historical narrative. Within this context, myth emerges as a particularly powerful narrative form for representing ecological time. Unlike modern historiography, which often privileges linear chronology and empirical documentation, myth operates through patterns of recurrence, symbolic repetition, and cyclical return. Events described in myth frequently reappear in altered forms across different historical periods, thereby preserving collective memories of crisis. In *Gun Island*, the legend of Bonduki Sadagar functions precisely in this way. The merchant’s desperate attempts to flee the goddess by traveling across seas and distant lands echo the journeys of contemporary migrants who are forced to leave their homes because of ecological devastation. As Deen begins to recognize these parallels, he reflects on the possibility that the legend might preserve memories of earlier environmental upheavals. At one point he wonders whether the story might represent “a way of remembering events that had long ago been forgotten” (Ghosh 295). This realization gradually transforms Deen’s understanding of myth. What initially appeared to him as a fragment of superstition begins to resemble a narrative structure capable of preserving ecological knowledge across generations. The legend becomes a cultural mechanism through which societies remember environmental

catastrophe and transmit those memories into the future. By juxtaposing mythic narrative with contemporary climate disasters, *Gun Island* demonstrates how traditional storytelling can illuminate the temporal complexity of the Anthropocene. The legend of Bonduki Sadagar thus bridges mythic past and planetary future, suggesting that ancient narratives may contain forms of environmental insight that remain profoundly relevant in an era defined by accelerating ecological transformation.

Migration, Displacement, and Climate History

Another crucial dimension of the Bonduki Sadagar legend is its emphasis on migration. In the traditional narrative, the merchant attempts to flee the goddess by traveling across distant lands and seas. This motif of flight acquires new meaning within the context of contemporary climate change. Communities in the Sundarbans face growing environmental threats from sea-level rise, cyclonic storms, and river erosion. These conditions have already forced many residents to migrate in search of livelihood and safety. In the novel, such displacement becomes part of a global network of migration linking South Asia to Europe. Describing the journeys of migrants encountered in the Mediterranean, the narrative observes that many were “driven by forces far beyond their control—storms, failing crops, and disappearing land” (Ghosh 246). The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that climate change collapses the traditional distinction between natural history and human history (Chakrabarty 207). This insight helps explain why migration in *Gun Island* cannot be understood solely in economic or political terms. The journeys of migrants in the novel echo the mythic wanderings of Bonduki Sadagar. Another passage describing the merchant’s travels suggests that he journeyed endlessly across oceans in an attempt to escape the goddess’s curse (Ghosh 61). Through this parallel, the novel suggests that folklore may contain memories of earlier patterns of migration triggered by environmental change. The legend therefore functions as a historical echo that resonates with present-day climate displacement.

Ritual Space, Liminality, and Sacred Geography

The shrine associated with the legend of Bonduki Sadagar functions not merely as a religious structure but as a ritual space where myth, belief, and ecological awareness intersect. Anthropological studies of ritual often emphasize the importance of liminal spaces—sites where ordinary social structures are temporarily suspended and new meanings emerge. The anthropologist Victor Turner describes liminality as a transitional phase in which individuals move between established identities and social categories (Turner 94). Such moments often occur in ritual contexts where

participants encounter symbolic representations of transformation. In *Gun Island*, Deen's visit to the Manasa shrine in the Sundarbans functions as a liminal experience. The place appears simultaneously sacred and unsettling, evoking the sense that myth and reality overlap. The narrative notes that the shrine stood in a secluded clearing surrounded by mangroves, giving it the atmosphere of a threshold between worlds (Ghosh 71). During his visit, Deen senses that the site carries layers of cultural memory embedded in its landscape. The shrine appears "ancient, almost as if it had grown out of the forest itself" (Ghosh 73). Through this imagery, the novel suggests that ritual sites serve as repositories of ecological knowledge and collective memory. The shrine becomes a symbolic point where past myths and present environmental anxieties converge.

Reinterpreting Myth in the Age of the Anthropocene

As the narrative progresses, the protagonist Deen gradually reconsiders his initial skepticism toward the legend of Bonduki Sadagar. What he once regarded as a relic of superstition begins to appear as a symbolic narrative that captures patterns of ecological disruption unfolding in the present. At one point, Deen reflects that the legend might not simply be a fantastical story but "a way of remembering events that had long ago been forgotten" (Ghosh 295). Another moment reinforces this insight when Deen considers the strange coincidences between the myth and contemporary ecological events, wondering whether the story had preserved "some fragment of a forgotten history" (Ghosh 298). Such reflections highlight the novel's broader argument that myths may encode cultural memories of environmental upheaval. In this sense, *Gun Island* demonstrates how myth can serve as an interpretive framework for understanding ecological transformations that transcend ordinary experience. By linking folklore with contemporary climate crises, the novel reveals the continuing relevance of traditional narratives in the Anthropocene.

Storytelling as Environmental Warning

Beyond its narrative function, the legend of Bonduki Sadagar also operates as a cautionary tale about the consequences of human arrogance toward nature. In the traditional story, the merchant's refusal to honor the goddess Manasa symbolizes a rejection of ecological balance. Within the novel, this motif resonates with contemporary patterns of environmental exploitation. Modern industrial society often behaves in ways that disregard ecological limits, leading to climate change, habitat destruction, and biodiversity loss. At one point in the novel, Deen reflects on the uncanny coincidences linking the ancient myth to present ecological disturbances, remarking that the story seemed to contain "a warning that had traveled across

centuries” (Ghosh 310). The narrative therefore reinterprets the legend as a form of environmental prophecy. The merchant’s futile attempt to escape the goddess becomes a metaphor for humanity’s inability to evade the consequences of ecological damage. Through this reinterpretation, *Gun Island* demonstrates how storytelling can function as an ethical reminder of humanity’s dependence on the natural world.

Conclusion

The legend of Bonduki Sadagar in *Gun Island* illustrates how myth can operate as a complex repository of cultural memory, ecological knowledge, and historical experience. What initially appears to be a supernatural tale gradually reveals deeper connections with environmental patterns, migration histories, and climate crises. Drawing upon theoretical perspectives from structural anthropology, interpretive anthropology, ritual theory, and environmental history, this article has examined how the novel reinterprets folklore as a symbolic framework for understanding ecological change. The legend encodes observations about the unstable deltaic landscape of the Sundarbans, the unpredictable behavior of animals, and the recurring displacement of human communities. Through the journeys of its protagonist across the Sundarbans, the Mediterranean, and Europe, the novel demonstrates that environmental crises are not confined to local landscapes but are interconnected within global ecological systems. Ultimately, *Gun Island* suggests that myths should not be dismissed as relics of superstition. Instead, they may preserve valuable insights about human relationships with nature and the consequences of ignoring ecological limits. By reviving the legend of Bonduki Sadagar within a contemporary climate narrative, Amitav Ghosh transforms folklore into a powerful tool for reimagining environmental responsibility in the Anthropocene.

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