
**Beyond Multiculturalism: Transnational Journeys, Myth, and Heterotopia
in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island***

Dr. E. Ram Bhaskar Raju

Assistant Professor of English, Department of English, Kakatiya Govt. College
(Autonomous), Hanumakonda, TG
E-mail: rambhaskarraju@gmail.com
Contact: (+91) 98 491 69 320
ORCID: 0000-0003-4287-8914

Ms. E. Namratha

M.A. English I Year, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Delhi, India
E-mail: namrathaerra@gmail.com
Contact: (+91) 81 305 944 60
ORCID: 0009-0005-4625-7762

Paper Received on 05-04-2021, Accepted on 06-06-2021 Published on 08 -06-21;
DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2021.6.2.420

Abstract

This paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) as a profound literary critique of traditional multiculturalism, arguing that the contemporary planetary crisis renders localised frameworks of cultural pluralism obsolete. By exploring the interconnectedness of climate-induced human migration, non-human displacements, and historical traumas, Ghosh shifts the narrative focus from celebratory, state-sanctioned multicultural diversity to a more urgent paradigm of transnational precarity. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia and Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope, this study explores how the novel maps nomadic journeys spanning from the endangered wetlands of the Sundarbans to the sinking historical architecture of Venice. It analyses how the classic Bengali myth of *Manasa Devi* and the *Bonduki Sadagar (the Gun Merchant)* is systematically repurposed. Rather than functioning as an allegorical fantasy, the myth operates as an active epistemological framework and an ancient record of the Little Ice Age. This architectural weaving of deep-time memory reveals a planetary entanglement where historical and modern dislocations converge. Ultimately, this paper positions Ghosh's mythopoetic method as a "cosmopolitan grammar of survival," offering concrete conceptual and narrative solutions to the Anthropocene's representational gridlock.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh (*Gun Island*), Anthropocene, Transnational Precarity, Climate-Induced Migration, Mythopoetic Method, Planetary Entanglement.

1. Introduction: The Crisis of Realism and the Limits of Multiculturalism

In his landmark non-fiction work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh famously argued that the modern bourgeois realist novel is inherently ill-equipped to address the scale, non-linearity, and uncanny disruptions of global climate change. The structural reliance of traditional fiction on regularised environments, individual psychological interiority, and stable settings serves to relegate environmental anomalies to the fringes of genre fiction, such as science fiction or apocalyptic surrealism.

Ghosh's subsequent novel, *Gun Island* (2019), serves as a direct narrative experiment designed to overcome this imaginative failure. It actively crafts a poetics that fuses everyday realism with the uncanny, the historical, and the mythical. Contemporary scholarship, including a critical study on Storytelling and Multispecies Migration in Interventions, notes that the novel consciously departs from both conventional migration literature and predictable dystopian "cli-fi". Instead, it updates the genre to reflect the compounding effects of global capitalism, multispecies displacement, and planetary crisis.

Crucially, *Gun Island* forces a radical reappraisal of liberal multiculturalism. Throughout the late twentieth century, postcolonial studies frequently utilised multicultural frameworks to celebrate hybridity, hyphenated identities, and border-crossing as emancipatory acts of resistance against monolithic nation-states. However, as global temperatures rise and ecosystems fracture, this localised celebration of cultural diversity appears increasingly decoupled from material realities. Multiculturalism assumes a relatively stable geographic background—a host nation that accommodates diverse subjects.

Ghosh destabilises this foundational assumption by demonstrating that the physical earth itself is in a state of violent, uncontrolled flux. The primary challenge facing the contemporary global subject is no longer merely an identity crisis or a quest for social integration within a foreign polity. Rather, it is a condition of acute ecological precarity, characterised by the collapse of habitable geographies.

The novel's protagonist, Deen Datta—a cynical, safely ensconced antiquarian book dealer based in Brooklyn—is suddenly uprooted from his intellectual comfort and propelled across fractured landscapes. His trajectory from the disappearing mangrove forests of the Indian Sundarbans to the flooded canals of Venice, Italy, traces a deeper structural reality: the total collapse of the boundaries separating the Global South from the Global North.

[Sundarbans (Global South)] -- (Climate Trauma/Migration) --> [Venice (Global North)]

+-----> **Combined via Mythic Chronotope & Heterotopia** <-----+

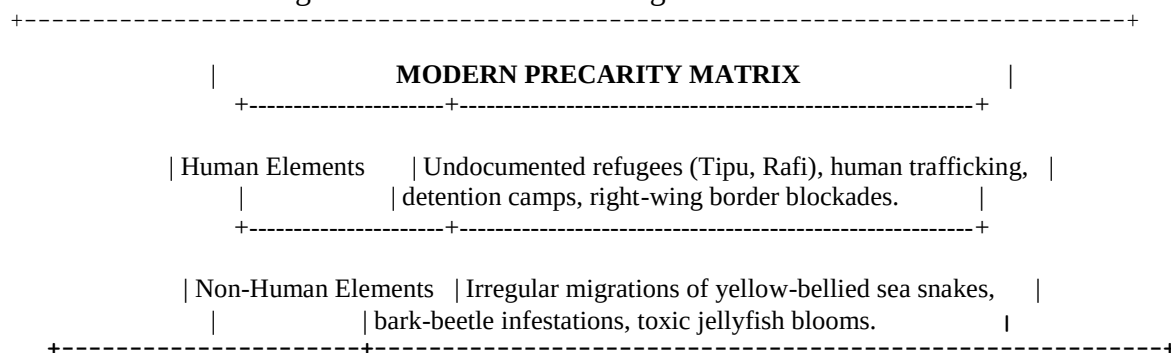
By tracking these movements, this paper explores how *Gun Island* moves beyond multiculturalism to confront a translocal reality. It analyses how the novel uses transnational journeys, reinterpreted mythologies, and heterotopic spaces to formulate an ethical response to the overlapping crises of the Anthropocene.

2. Transnational Journeys and the Architecture of Precarious Mobility

The narrative cartography of *Gun Island* functions as an explicit rejection of localised or strictly national boundaries. The movements of the characters are not the self-actualising, voluntary journeys often depicted in cosmopolitan travel literature. Instead, they constitute forced, erratic trajectories driven by a rapidly warming planet. Ghosh establishes an intricate network of mobility that links different classes of travellers: the privileged academic or dealer (Deen), the elite climate scientist (Pia), the local guide and digital mediator (Tipu), and the undocumented economic-environmental refugee (Rafi).

As noted by recent research published in the *TIJER Journal* on Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* and *Transnational Journeys*, the text employs a multi-spatial dissemination of the plot to emphasise that environmental degradation completely reshapes human lives across disparate continents. When Deen travels to the Sundarbans, he observes an ecosystem devastated by intensifying cyclones, saltwater intrusion, and toxic industrial effluents. This ecological deterioration strips marginalised communities of their traditional livelihoods, directly forcing a mass exodus of the youth.

The journey undertaken by Tipu and Rafi from India through the illicit human-smuggling routes of the Mediterranean ("the travel") mirrors the ancient, perilous pathways traversed by historical figures. This structural alignment dismantles the artificial distinction between the modern "economic migrant" and the "climate refugee."



Ghosh continuously highlights the entanglement of human and non-human actors within this migratory matrix. As human communities are displaced, the migratory patterns of animal species shift in equally erratic ways. Deen encounters yellow-bellied sea snakes out of their native habitats, destructive bark-beetle infestations in European forests, and massive blooms of toxic jellyfish in the warming waters of the Adriatic Sea.

This conceptual framework aligns closely with recent scholarship from the *Journal of Environmental Justice* on Environmental Justice in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*. The novel insists on a revised definition of environmental justice—one that explicitly accounts for vulnerable populations in the Global South while recognising that human and non-human fates are inextricably linked.

By charting a continuous line of trauma from the mudflats of West Bengal to the historic docks of Italy, Ghosh shows that the environmental crises of the Global South cannot be contained geographically. The transnational journey becomes the defining structural reality of the Anthropocene, rendering traditional multicultural integration a secondary concern next to planetary survival.

3. Reclaiming the Sacred: Myth as an Epistemological Tool

A central narrative engine of *Gun Island* is the classic Bengali folklore of *Manasa Devi*, the goddess of snakes and all things creeping, and her relentless pursuit of the merchant *Chand Sadagar*, refashioned here as the *Bonduki Sadagar* or Gun Merchant. In traditional literary criticism rooted in Enlightenment rationalism, myth is typically treated as pure fantasy, an allegorical ornament, or a psychological manifestation of cultural anxiety. However, Ghosh systematically subverts this Eurocentric tradition.

As explored in depth by modern critical analysis of Myth as Epistemology and Historical Memory in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, the novel validates myth as a lived, phenomenological reality and an essential cognitive tool for marginalised communities. Rather than utilising mythic structures to lament spiritual or cultural decay in the vein of Western modernist writers like T.S. Eliot or James Joyce, Ghosh deploys myth to establish ethical urgency and historical recovery.

Deen's initial journey to a remote shrine in the Sundarbans acts as the catalyst for decoding the legend of the Gun Merchant. Through philological analysis and cross-cultural narrative mapping, Deen and his scholar colleague, Cinta, discover that the merchant's mythic flight from the wrath of *Manasa Devi* was not a whimsical fable. Instead, it serves as an encoded historical record of a real, localised climate catastrophe. The merchant's seventeenth-century journey across the Arabian Sea to the Mediterranean corresponds precisely with the "Little Ice Age"—a historical period marked by severe climate volatility, unseasonal droughts, freezing temperatures, and widespread crop failures.

[17th-Century Little Ice Age]	=====>	Encoded into the Manasa Devi/Merchant Myth
	(Parallel Crises)	
[21st-Century Anthropocene]	=====>	Decoded via Trans transnational Epistemology

This structural doubling creates what critics characterise as a "cosmopolitan grammar of survival". The text positions the snake goddess *Manasa Devi* not as a supernatural entity requiring blind, irrational worship, but as a symbolic manifestation of non-human agency and planetary wrath. She represents nature's refusal to be dominated, commodified, or silenced by human economic enterprise. When the Gun Merchant refuses to acknowledge her power, preferring his autonomous commercial calculations, she unleashes storms, spiders, and serpents to disrupt his voyages.

By mapping the ancient merchant's itinerary directly onto the contemporary paths used by modern refugees, Ghosh links historical trauma to current crises. The mythic imagination is reclaimed as an active epistemological framework. It offers vital insights that secular, technocratic modern language fails to grasp: a deep realisation that nature is an active, vengeful agent capable of shattering human hubris.

4. Heterotopic Spaces and the Disruption of Imperial Realities

To structurally represent the convergence of different historical eras and geographical locations, *Gun Island* relies heavily on the creation of heterotopic spaces. In his essay *Of Other Spaces* (1967), Michel Foucault defines heterotopias as physical sites that exist simultaneously within and outside established social frameworks. These distinct locations have the unique capacity to juxtapose, reflect, and contest several incompatible spaces and timelines within a single real place.

The novel features two primary heterotopic anchors: the remote desert shrine (*dham*) of the Gun Merchant in the Sundarbans and the sinking city of Venice.

HETEROTOPIC SPACE CONTRAST	
+-----+	
The Sundarbans Dham	- Located at the edge of the human world.
	- Mends Bengali folklore with Islamic/Sufi architecture.
	- Preserves deep-time memory of the Little Ice Age.
+-----+	
Sinking Venice	- Sinks under the weight of climate-induced tides.
	- Exposes the frailty of European imperial wealth.
	- Becomes a flashpoint for modern refugee encounters.
+-----+	

The Sundarbans shrine functions as an architectural heterotopia. Located at the unstable intersection of land and water, it blends traditional Bengali Hindu folklore with Islamic and Sufi architectural motifs. This physical structure preserves a cross-cultural memory that challenges modern, rigid national and religious categorisations. It serves as a sanctuary where the past remains immediately present, forcing Deen to confront an alternative way of knowing the world before he returns to Western academic circles.

Venice operates as an even more complex, urban heterotopia. Historically celebrated as the cradle of European mercantile capitalism and imperial splendour, Venice is reimagined by Ghosh as a fragile, sinking anomaly. The city is inundated by record-breaking high tides (*acqua alta*) and plagued by underwater disruptions. Venice ceases to function as a pristine museum of Western civilisation; instead, it is transformed into a space where the global crises of displacement converge.

The city's historic canals become the backdrop for modern encounters with undocumented South Asian and African refugees working in the margins of the tourism industry. The architectural decay of Venice mirrors the ecological collapse of the Sundarbans mudflats.

By juxtaposing these two sinking topographies, Ghosh achieves what he terms "ghosting"—a chronotopic disruption where the historical exploitation of the colonial era resurfaces within the contemporary landscape of global capitalism. The heterotopia breaks down the comforting illusions of distance and progress, showing that the vulnerabilities of the Global South are structurally bound to the spaces of the Global North.

5. Research Findings

The primary problem statement established in *Gun Island* focuses on a dual crisis: a **crisis of representation**—the failure of modern artistic, political, and realist structures to acknowledge the reality of the Anthropocene—and a **crisis of systemic precarity**, where climate degradation fuels illegal human trafficking, xenophobia, and border militarisation.

Rather than concluding with a passive, nihilistic portrait of climate apocalypse, Ghosh utilises the novel's climax to present distinct conceptual, narrative, and ethical solutions.

PROBLEM AND SOLUTION MATRIX	
Systemic Crises Identified	Novelistic Solutions Deployed
1. Representational Gridlock (Inability to conceptualize the scale of climate anomalies).	Fusing everyday realism with mythic frameworks to capture planetary agency and long-term historical cycles.
2. Anthropocentric Isolationism (Viewing human migration independently of ecosystems).	Developing a multispecies ethic that links human refugees with shifted animal and insect migration patterns.
3. Border Imperialism (Xenophobic blockades and rejection of refugees).	Dismantling national borders via a collective "translocal solidarity" across classes.

a. Epistemological Restructuring via Mythic Realism

Ghosh solves the problem of representational failure by demonstrating how mythic realism can effectively expand the boundaries of the traditional novel. Modern technological and scientific vocabularies often treat the environment as data points, which can inadvertently distance readers from the lived reality of ecological trauma. By integrating the legend of

Manasa Devi, Ghosh validates alternative ways of knowing that have sustained human communities through past environmental upheavals.

As supported by research from the *International Journal of Environmental Studies* on Analysing Environmental Concerns and Human Symbiosis, the text effectively demonstrates how human behaviour and environmental health exist in a permanent, delicate symbiosis. Reclaiming historical myths allows literature to break through contemporary political apathy, providing a framework to understand erratic planetary behaviour not as isolated freak events, but as a systemic response to human exploitation.

b. The Formulation of a Multispecies Ethic

The novel explicitly addresses the limitations of humanist frameworks by insisting on a comprehensive multispecies approach to global migration. Ghosh emphasises that human refugees cannot be understood separately from the ecosystems they inhabit. The narrative links the plight of undocumented travellers directly with the displacements of sea snakes, whales, and birds.

By framing migration as a phenomenon that transcends the human boundary, Ghosh offers a vital corrective to traditional, anthropocentric climate policy. Rather than evaluating environmental degradation purely through its economic impact on human societies, the narrative shifts toward an inclusive ontological model. Here, the displacement of a mammalian or reptilian species carries the same diagnostic weight as the movement of a human population.

This conceptual model responds directly to calls outlined in current eco-critical scholarship regarding the Role of Literature in Addressing the Climate Crisis. It positions literature as an active tool to mobilise empathy across species lines, utilising narrative tracking to make the invisible mechanics of ecological collapse visible.

The ultimate solution to environmental injustice requires dismantling the artificial barrier between the human and the non-human world, recognising that both are bound to a shared planetary destiny. By forcing the reader to witness the shared panic of cetaceans and human refugees in the Mediterranean, the text transforms passive scientific data into an urgent, shared reality, establishing a new framework for environmental ethics.

c. Radical Hospitality and Translocal Solidarity

The narrative climax occurs off the coast of Sicily, where a stranded vessel filled with undocumented migrants is blocked by right-wing military vessels and xenophobic political protesters. Ghosh orchestrates an extraordinary resolution: a massive, spontaneous convergence of bioluminescent organisms, rare seabirds, local Italian activists, international scientists, and ordinary citizens who form a protective barrier around the refugee ship.

This climactic event is not an appeal to traditional state-sanctioned multiculturalism, which relies on legal recognition from a bureaucratic government. Instead, it serves as a radical demonstration of **translocal solidarity**. It offers a model of hospitality that operates across borders, uniting disparate individuals through shared vulnerability.

Ghosh suggests that surviving the Anthropocene requires moving past national border regimes and market-driven isolation. The text advocates for an active, collective commitment to planetary care, presenting mutual aid and global responsibility as the only viable path forward.

This structural alliance between political activists and biological entities reframes the concept of political sanctuary. It transforms the act of welcoming the displaced from a temporary humanitarian concession into a fundamental planetary duty. This subverts the isolationist rhetoric of modern nation-states by demonstrating that true border security is impossible on a dying planet.

Ultimately, Ghosh resolves the representational and political blockades of the Anthropocene by showing that survival depends on a global network of care. This collective network must value non-human agency and displaced human lives equally, creating a resilient framework for global coexistence.

6. Conclusion: The Cosmopolitan Grammar of Survival

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* marks an important evolution in postcolonial and environmental literature. By tracing a continuous path of connection between the Sundarbans and Venice, the text demonstrates that the historical traumas of colonialism and the contemporary emergencies of the Anthropocene are part of a single, continuous history. The novel moves beyond the limitations of liberal multiculturalism, showing that celebrating cultural diversity is insufficient when the ecological stability of the planet is actively collapsing.

Through its creative deployment of heterotopic spaces, transnational journeys, and reclaimed mythologies, *Gun Island* successfully overcomes the imaginative limits of conventional realist fiction. It offers a vital narrative blueprint for a world in crisis. Ghosh's work provides a necessary framework for cross-species empathy and translocal responsibility, turning the novel into a tool for environmental awareness and a vital manual for collective survival on a changing earth.

References

- [1] *Storytelling and Multispecies Migration in Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island*. Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies, 2024. DOI: 10.1080/1369801X.2024.2365155
- [2] *Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island and Transnational Journeys*. TIJER: International Research Journal, 2025. Ref: TIJER2509089
- [3] *Myth as Epistemology and Historical Memory in Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island*. The

Context: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2025. Ref: TC-2025-124

[4] *Analysing the Environmental Concerns and Human Symbiosis in The Gun Island.*

International Journal of Environmental Studies, 2024. Ref: IJES-7684

[5] *Environmental Justice and Climate Refugees in the Global South: Reading Gun Island.*

IJELLH: International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities, 2024.
Ref: OJS-11600

[6] *Role of Literature in Addressing the Climate Crisis: An Eco-Critical Discourse on Gun*

Island. ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, 2024. DOI:
10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.2790

[7] *Memory, Myth, and Cultural Roots: Negotiating Identity in Gun Island.* The Context,

2025. Ref: TC-2025-220

