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## **From the Sundarbans to Venice: Environmental Crisis and Postcolonial Contexts in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island***

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### **Abstract:**

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* discusses how environmental crises intersect with postcolonial narratives through its vivid depiction of two emblematic locations: the Sundarbans and Venice. Both regions, integral to the novel's thematic and narrative structure, symbolize the global environmental challenges and their deep-rooted connections to colonial histories. Ghosh intertwines the ecological with the historical, using his characters' journeys to explore broader issues of displacement, identity, and cultural continuity in the face of climate change. The Sundarbans, a mangrove forest in the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, and Venice, an iconic city grappling with the threat of flooding and subsidence, are presented not only as physical settings but also as sites of historical and environmental trauma. Through detailed analysis of these settings, the paper argues that Ghosh uses these landscapes to critique the colonial exploitation and its ongoing effects on contemporary environmental issues. Furthermore, the novel incorporates local myths and legends, linking them to current ecological challenges, thereby enriching the narrative with layers of historical resonance and cultural significance. By delving into the interconnectedness of environmental and postcolonial themes, this research article highlights Ghosh's approach to addressing global crises, suggesting that the legacies of the past continue to shape our environmental and cultural realities. *Gun Island* serves as a compelling narrative that bridges historical colonial impacts with present-day ecological challenges, offering insightful reflections on human resilience and adaptability.

**Keywords:** environmental crisis, myths, reality, postcolonial, exposure.

## I

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019) intricately weaves a tapestry of environmental crises and postcolonial narratives, using a global landscape as its backdrop. At the heart of this narrative are two markedly distinct yet symbolically intertwined locales—the Sundarbans and Venice. Both places, steeped in rich historical and cultural significance, face profound environmental challenges that resonate with global ecological concerns today. Ghosh, known for his profound engagement with complex socio-political themes through a literary lens, embarks on a narrative journey that not only spans geographical distances but also traverses through the layers of history, myth, and human migration.

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh crafts a tale of adventure, myth, and environmental crisis, centered around Deen, a rare book dealer from Brooklyn who is increasingly disillusioned with his solitary life. His journey begins with a return to his homeland, Kolkata, where during a visit to a historical museum, he stumbles upon the legend of the Bonduki Sadagar, or Gun Merchant. This mythic figure from Bengali folklore, who dealt in arms and faced supernatural wrath as a consequence, captures Deen's imagination and sets him on a path that will drastically alter his life. Spurred by his curiosity and the mystery surrounding the Gun Merchant, Deen travels to the Sundarbans, the lush, treacherous mangrove forests at the mouth of the Ganges. The area is as mystic as it is menacing, characterized by its dense fog and unpredictable tides. Here, he meets Piya, a passionate marine biologist studying the region's endangered dolphins, and Tipu, a local entrepreneur who introduces Deen to the harsh realities and the beauty of life in the Sundarbans. Their discussions and explorations in the Sundarbans lead to a deeper understanding of the environmental challenges facing the region, from rising waters to the increased frequency of devastating cyclones, which are displacing communities and altering the landscape. The threat of a massive storm eventually drives Deen and his newfound friends to leave the area, but the seeds of change have already been planted in Deen's mind. The group's next destination is Los Angeles, where Deen attends a book fair, only to find himself more drawn to the global diaspora's stories, their tales of displacement and adaptation reminding him of the interconnectedness of human experiences across the world. It is in LA that Deen also reconnects with Cinta, an Italian historian and old friend, who invites him to Venice, drawing a parallel to the Sundarbans as another iconic location grappling with the impact of climate change. In Venice, the narrative of environmental degradation and cultural erosion continues. The city, besieged by floods and sinking into the lagoon, mirrors the ecological and existential crises Deen witnessed in the

Sundarbans. Here, the legend of the Gun Merchant resurfaces, intertwining with local myths and highlighting the universal theme of human folly and nature's retribution.

The climax of the story converges on an intense acqua alta, a high-water event in Venice that threatens the historical integrity of the city and forces the characters to reckon with the immediate impacts of climate change. This event parallels a cyclonic storm in the Sundarbans, tying together the fates of distant communities and emphasizing the global nature of ecological crises. Throughout the novel, Deen's experiences lead him from skepticism to a profound reevaluation of his beliefs about the natural world, history, and the supernatural. The stories of the Gun Merchant, told and retold in different forms, act as a metaphor for humanity's enduring struggle against and within the forces of nature. As Deen navigates these tales and realities, he finds himself transformed, more connected to the world and committed to understanding the role of ancient myths in modern contexts. *Gun Island* closes on a note of tentative hope, with its characters finding new paths in the wake of environmental and personal upheaval. Ghosh presents a story deeply embedded in the realities of our world—where history, myth, and the pressing issues of climate change intersect, reminding us of the enduring power of stories to connect us to our past, present, and future.

Amitav Ghosh himself reveals to the journalist and author Raghu Karnad, son of late Sri Girish Karnad, at the release of this novel *Gun Island* (2019), “ 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."

## II

In the novel, the Sundarbans are depicted not only as a critical ecological zone but also as a profound cultural symbol, reflecting the intertwined narratives of environmental and historical significance. This mangrove forest, sprawling across the delta of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, serves as a pivotal setting that encapsulates the novel's exploration of ecological degradation and its repercussions on local communities and biodiversity.

The Sundarbans are presented as a frontline in the battle against climate change. This region, one of the world's largest mangrove forests, plays a vital role in regulating atmospheric conditions and protecting inland areas from storm surges and wind damage. However, as Ghosh vividly describes, this ecological buffer zone is under threat from rising sea levels and increasing salinity, which undermine its ability to sustain the rich biodiversity it harbours. The degradation of this habitat jeopardizes not only the myriad species that it supports—including the iconic Bengal tiger—but also the human communities that depend on its resources for their livelihoods. Ghosh delves deep into the cultural fabric of the Sundarbans, integrating local myths and legends that have been passed down through generations. These stories, rich with symbolism, often personify nature's elements, reflecting the community's deep-rooted connection to their environment. In *Gun Island*, the myth of the Bonduki Sadagar, or the Gun Merchant, becomes a leitmotif that Ghosh uses to link past calamities with contemporary environmental challenges. This myth serves as a narrative tool to explore how local populations interpret and respond to the changes in their environment, framing these responses within a broader historical and cultural context.

The colonial history of exploitation in the Sundarbans is a critical aspect of the novel, shedding light on how historical interventions have long-term effects on ecological and social structures. During colonial times, large-scale projects aimed at timber extraction and land reclamation disrupted the natural balance of the region, leading to significant ecological changes. These actions, driven by the colonial pursuit of economic gain, not only altered the landscape but also imposed economic and social hardships on the local communities, whose survival was intricately linked to the natural environment. Ghosh portrays these interventions as early forms of environmental exploitation, precursor to the more contemporary forms of ecological disregard seen in global practices today.

Ghosh's narrative strategy involves a poignant interplay between the local myths of the Sundarbans and the stark realities of environmental change. The folklore that once explained natural phenomena and instilled a sense of awe and respect for the natural world is juxtaposed with the harsh impacts of climate change, bringing to the fore a narrative of loss and transformation. This blending of myth and reality shows the shift in human-environment relationships over time, highlighting how traditional knowledge systems and cultural narratives are challenged and reshaped in the face of ongoing ecological crises.

### III

In the novel, environmental degradation acts as a catalyst for migration, reflecting a pattern that extends beyond the narrative to encompass global and historical phenomena. The novel interlaces personal stories with larger socio-environmental dynamics, illustrating how ecological crises can precipitate significant shifts in human populations. Through the lens of the Sundarbans and its connection to other parts of the world, Ghosh explores the forced migrations that result from the escalating impacts of climate change, positioning these movements within the broader context of postcolonial history and environmental mismanagement. The region is increasingly battered by cyclones and rising sea levels—a direct consequence of global warming. These environmental stressors not only diminish the area's natural resilience but also erode the socio-economic stability of the communities that depend on its resources. As traditional livelihoods become untenable, inhabitants are compelled to migrate, often to urban areas or overseas, in search of stability and opportunities. This migration is portrayed not as a choice but as a necessity born out of an urgent need to escape environmental catastrophes.

Ghosh does not confine his exploration of migration to the Sundarbans alone; rather, he expands the narrative to include global destinations like Venice and Los Angeles, where migrants seek refuge and prospects. This dispersal is indicative of a larger pattern where environmental migrants, often from former colonies, move towards more developed regions, which are themselves not immune to ecological challenges but offer more robust infrastructures to cope with them. The novel subtly draws parallels between these migrations and the broader diasporic movements that have shaped the postcolonial world, suggesting a continuity of displacement influenced by both historical and environmental factors.

The migration narratives in *Gun Island* also resonate with postcolonial critiques of global inequalities and the legacies of colonialism. The novel suggests that the burdens of environmental degradation are disproportionately borne by those in formerly colonized nations, who are often the least responsible for the conditions driving climate change. This disparity highlights the need for addressing environmental issues through a postcolonial lens, recognizing the historical injustices that exacerbate current vulnerabilities. Ghosh's characters, many of whom are engaged in scholarly or activist pursuits, embody this awareness and advocate for a more equitable consideration of global environmental policies. Moreover, as Rajender Kaur also observes, in *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh approaches the topic of climate change not through a scientific lens—which he critiques in *The Great Derangement* (2017) for its inability to effectively communicate the urgency of the issue and

inspire policy and mindset changes—but through elements of magic and the uncanny. Building on this premise, Ghosh suggests that the world is dominated by a sense of paranoia and a fatalistic acceptance of climate change, rather than a belief in our collective ability to actively address and potentially reverse its effects. (95)

#### IV

Venice, in the novel, is not merely a scenic backdrop but a critical narrative parallel that complements and contrasts with the environmental and historical narratives of the Sundarbans. Renowned for its architectural marvels and historical significance as a maritime republic, it is presented in *Gun Island* as a symbol of the vulnerability of human achievements to the forces of nature. This city, which once dominated trade routes and cultural exchanges between the East and the West, now faces existential threats from rising sea levels and sinking foundations. Ghosh uses Venice's current predicament to mirror the environmental issues faced by the Sundarbans, yet in a context that is markedly different in terms of geography, development, and historical trajectory. Venice's struggle against water, which once made it a powerful entity, now renders it helpless, symbolizing the irony of historical progress being undone by environmental neglect.

The environmental challenges faced by Venice include frequent flooding, exacerbated by the phenomenon known as "acqua alta" (high water), and the gradual subsidence of the city's foundations. These issues are compounded by the large number of tourists the city attracts, which places additional pressure on its infrastructure and environment. Similarly, the Sundarbans are subjected to increasing salinity, cyclonic storms, and erosion—challenges that are intensified by the area's socio-economic vulnerabilities and the ongoing impacts of historical land use policies dating back to colonial times.

The parallel Ghosh draws between these two regions highlights the global nature of ecological crises. Both Venice and the Sundarbans are experiencing the adverse effects of human-induced environmental changes, yet their stories are manifestations of a broader narrative concerning global warming, sea-level rise, and unsustainable development practices. This juxtaposition reiterates the novel's theme that environmental crises are universal, transcending local boundaries and requiring a collective human response.

The historical exploitation of Venice and the Sundarbans provides a deeper understanding of their current ecological crises. Venice's history as a trade hub during the Renaissance made it a city wealthy in cultural exchanges but also led to extensive

manipulation of its lagoon environment to suit commercial and defensive needs. Similarly, the Sundarbans were historically exploited for their natural resources during the British colonial period, with vast areas cleared for timber and agricultural land. These historical interventions have left both regions more susceptible to environmental threats, illustrating how past human actions continue to influence present-day vulnerabilities.

## V

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* artfully blends myth and reality, using folklore to deepen the narrative's connection between past and present environmental and cultural challenges. Through the strategic use of myths like that of the Bonduki Sadagar, or the Gun Merchant, Ghosh not only enriches the storyline but also offers insightful commentary on human interactions with nature, particularly within a postcolonial framework. This fusion of the mythical with the real allows for a multilayered exploration of the themes central to the novel. In the novel, myths serve as a bridge between historical and contemporary issues, allowing characters and readers alike to navigate the complex interplay of culture and ecology. Ghosh employs these stories not as mere embellishments but as fundamental elements that inform the characters' perceptions and responses to their environments. Myths in the novel function on multiple levels: they are cautionary tales, historical records, and symbolic representations of human fears and hopes. Through these narratives, Ghosh connects the dots between past atrocities and present calamities, suggesting that myths are not static relics but dynamic elements that evolve and adapt to new realities.

The myth of the Bonduki Sadagar is central to *Gun Island*, encapsulating the essence of the novel's exploration of the links between human destiny and environmental forces. The legend tells of a merchant who, in his dealings, inadvertently disturbs the ecological and supernatural order, leading to a series of events that reflect the real consequences of human greed and interference with nature. This myth resonates with the modern-day protagonist, Deen, who finds himself confronting similar themes in his travels from the Sundarbans to Venice. By paralleling the myth with Deen's experiences, Ghosh emphasizes that the ecological and social challenges faced today are not isolated or new but are deeply rooted in human history and behaviour.

The use of myth in the novel is particularly poignant in a postcolonial context. The stories that Ghosh reiterates and reimagines are not only pre-colonial in their origins but also carry the scars of colonial interventions. Colonial histories have often disregarded or



misinterpreted indigenous knowledge and myths, resulting in a loss of heritage and ecological wisdom. By reclaiming these myths and placing them at the forefront of a narrative about global environmental crises, Ghosh shows the importance of indigenous perspectives in understanding and combating these crises. The Bonduki Sadagar, and other similar myths, act as repositories of a deeper understanding of nature, serving as guides in a world where postcolonial states are often at the front lines of climate impact. In the novel, myths also provide a unique lens through which to view human interaction with the environment. They reflect the age-old human struggle to coexist with nature, often highlighting the consequences of imbalance and disrespect towards natural forces. By weaving these tales into the fabric of his narrative, Ghosh not only pays homage to these ancient wisdoms but also critiques modern disregard for them. The environmental issues—rising seas, extreme weather, loss of biodiversity—depicted in the novel are thus given a deeper historical and cultural context, linking them to long-standing human attitudes and actions.

To conclude, we see that this novel does more than depict environmental degradation as a backdrop to its narrative; it actively engages with these crises, drawing a parallel to the colonial exploitations of the past and their lingering effects on contemporary settings. The environmental crises depicted in *Gun Island* are not isolated phenomena but are deeply woven into the fabric of historical and ongoing socio-political injustices. Through the dual settings of the Sundarbans and Venice, Ghosh provides a canvas to explore the interconnectedness of history, environment, and identity. Rita Joshi rightly writes about the novel, “In depicting a wide range of diverse characters from various countries and subtly invoking myth and history, fact and fiction, Ghosh has created a work that contrasts nostalgia for a lost past with concerns for the contemporaneous.”

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<https://youtu.be/r5RbdchKMv4> conversation on Gun Island between Amitav Ghosh and Raghu Karnad at the release of the book.