

A Planet in Crisis: Environmental Justice in Amitav Ghosh's

Gun Island

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Abstract

This paper examines how Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* functions as a literary intervention in contemporary debates on environmental justice. Ghosh portrays climate change not just as an environmental issue but as a deeply connected justice crisis. It is rooted in colonial histories and capitalist systems. Through a transnational narrative that combines myth, history, and ecological realities, the novel challenges readers to reconsider the interconnectedness of environmental and social crises. The novel focuses on vulnerable populations in the Global South, particularly climate refugees, whose lives are shaped by ecological devastation and forced migration. By depicting human and non-human elements as entangled in a shared fate, *Gun Island* calls for a redefinition of environmental justice, one that is inclusive and grounded in both historical responsibility and multispecies ethics.

Keywords: Environmental Justice, Ecocriticism, Amitav Gun Island

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) emerges at a time when global concern about climate change has reached a critical level, demanding immediate attention and action. Public conservation often remains disconnected from the lived experiences of those most affected. Amitav Ghosh is a prominent writer in postcolonial and ecological literature. He uses this novel to examine how the climate crisis intersects with histories of colonisation, displacement, and global capitalism. (Ghosh, *The Gun Island*). In *Gun Island*, environmental degradation is not a background event; it is the force that drives the plot, uproots communities, and reveals the inequities embedded in global systems.

As Ghosh contends in *The Great Derangement*, literature has long ignored the political and existential urgency of climate change, a failure he describes as a "crisis of imagination" (Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*). *Gun Island* can be seen as his fictional response to that critique.

Environmental Justice

Environmental Justice emerged from grassroots movements in the United States during the 1980s, focusing on how communities of colour and people experiencing poverty were disproportionately affected by environmental hazards (Bullard). Over time, the concept has expanded to address global inequalities in ecological damage and access to resources. It is particularly relevant as climate change alters patterns of displacement and disaster.

Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" is particularly relevant in framing *Gun Island*, as the novel illustrates how environmental destruction unfolds not in spectacular events but through gradual, cumulative damage. (Nixon). The Sundarbans, for example, face ecological decay that is both slow and devastating, with rising salinity and erosion threatening livelihoods over generations. (Ghosh, *The Gun Island*).

In literary studies, scholars such as Nixon and Chakrabarty emphasise the importance of planetary-scale thinking that links ecological collapse with histories of empire (Chakrabarty). This global approach is essential for understanding and tackling the root causes of environmental injustice. Amitav Ghosh's work aligns with this framework, using fiction as a means to visualise the often-invisible effects of environmental injustice.

The Human Face of Environmental Injustice

One of the novel's most striking portrayals of environmental injustice is its focus on climate-induced migration. The story is set in the Sundarbans, a fragile delta region in India and Bangladesh. It presents a community under constant threat from rising seas, cyclones, and salinisation (*The Gun Island*).

Tipu, a young boy from the Sundarbans, represents a new class of migrants who are displaced not by war or politics, but by climate (Ghosh, *The Gun Island*). His journey from the Sundarbans and ultimately to a refugee camp in Italy, reveals the new geography of environmental injustice. Those individuals who bear the least responsibility for causing climate change are often the first to experience its adverse impacts (Nixon). Additionally, when they attempt to seek safety and refuge from the environmental crises, they are frequently criminalised (Bullard).

Tipu's statement, "It is not about jobs, it is about survival" (*The Gun Island* 157), captures the existential urgency behind climate migration. Amitav Ghosh utilises Tipu's arc to critique the hypocrisy of Western nations, which contribute the most to global carbon emissions, yet militarise their borders against the displaced (*The Great Derangement*).

Colonialism and Capitalism

At the heart of *Gun Island* is a sheltered narrative that ties the present climate crisis to historical systems of exploitation. The legend of the *Gun Merchant*, an allegorical tale within the novel. It symbolises colonial trade routes, extractive capitalism, and the commodification of nature and people.

Ghosh draws a direct line from colonial extractivism to the present climate catastrophe, echoing his arguments in *The Great Derangement*, where he critiques the Enlightenment legacy that separated humans from nature and positioned it as a resource to be dominated. As Chakrabarty argues, this systemic worldview made ecological destruction inevitable within imperial capitalism.

As the novel references the East India Company and global shipping networks, Ghosh reminds us that today's fossil-fuel-dependent global economy is rooted in a history of exploitation. That continues to determine whose lands are sacrificed and whose lives are expendable.

Ecological Interconnectedness

One of Ghosh's most innovative contributions to environmental literature is his insistence on non-human agency. In *Gun Island*, animals behave in strange, unexplainable ways. Dolphins appear far from their natural habitats, bees swarm unexpectedly, and snakes emerge in places. These disturbances are not presented as anomalies but as signs of nature asserting itself, responding to human-induced imbalances. Ghosh thus echoes concepts from deep ecology and posthumanist thought, challenging the anthropocentric worldview. This creates a more compelling discussion of the argument.

As Rob Nixon notes, environmental justice must be “attentive not only to human suffering but to multispecies entanglements” (Nixon). Amitav Ghosh enacts this attentiveness by inviting readers to see non-human life not as mere background scenery or a matter of planetary fate.

Myth, Storytelling, and Resistance

The Novel *Gun Island* is not a traditional climate novel filled with scientific exposition or policy debate. Instead, Ghosh employs what he calls 'the narrative imagination' to restore storytelling as a vital ecological issue. Demonstrating its power to help us grasp the scale and stakes of climate collapse. He blends folklore, history, and magical realism to disrupt the rationalist paradigms that have failed to grasp the urgency of the climate crisis.

The invocation of Manasa Devi, the snake goddess, reconnects readers to Indigenous and local epistemologies that treat nature as animate and sacred(*The Gun Island*). Myth in *Gun Island* becomes a form of counter-modern resistance. It offers frameworks that acknowledge non-human agency and ancestral wisdom.

In contrast to dominant climate narratives centred in the Global North, Ghosh's storytelling centres the voices and cosmologies of those most vulnerable to environmental change. This is itself an act of justice, an effort to "decolonise the Anthropocene".

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* challenges us to rethink environmental justice as more than a matter of emissions or conservation. It is fundamentally a question of who bears the burden of ecological collapse and who is allowed to survive it.

By centring the experiences of climate migrants, exposing the colonial roots of environmental harm, and foregrounding non-human agency, Ghosh redefines justice in planetary terms. In the book "The Climate of History in a Planetary Age," Chakrabarty asks readers to consider both the deep histories and the wide-ranging entanglements that comprise our ecological moment. As Ghosh warned in *The Great Derangement*, failing to imagine these connections is itself a form of complicity. *Gun Island* offers not just a warning, but an invitation to reimagine justice in an age of planetary crisis.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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