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## Climate Catastrophes in the Age of the Anthropocene: A Critical Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

Chithra Mary Philip

Tom Thomas

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7672-9858>

First Author: Chithra Mary Philip, Research Scholar in English, St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Kerala, Assistant Professor in English, Baselius College, Kottayam (Autonomous), Kerala, [chithramaryphilip@gmail.com](mailto:chithramaryphilip@gmail.com)

**Corresponding Author:** Tom Thomas, Professor and Research Supervisor, Postgraduate and Research Department of English, St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Kerala, [tom.zemeckis@gmail.com](mailto:tom.zemeckis@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

**Aims:** *This paper analyses anthropogenic climate crises depicted by Amitav Ghosh in his novel Gun Island (2019).*

**Methodology and Approaches:** *This study analyses Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island (2019) using the concept of the Anthropocene. Using the theoretical paradigms of eminent theorists such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Timothy Morton, Adam Trexler and Timothy Clark, the paper tries to analyse the gravity of the anthropogenic climate crisis.*

**Outcome:** *This article records the climate changes in the Sundarbans. Ghosh portrays the Bhola cyclone affected Sundarbans and the resultant influx of climate refugees. The vulnerability of coastal regions that results in devastating shifts in the marine world are highlighted in the study. Human interventions in the ocean result in the formation of "oceanic dead zones" with a very low oxygen content. Human use of fertilisers can be deciphered as a hyperobject and it results in massive fish kills.*

**Conclusion and Suggestions:** *Ghosh's Gun Island anticipates the climate crisis in the Anthropocene. By placing humans as mere members of the planet, Ghosh considers all elements of nature in equal terms. This study highlights humans' role in mitigating the climate crisis through characters such as Piya Roy, Lisa and Giacinta Schiavon.*

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The age of the Anthropocene signals the geological epoch that moulds humans as geological agents or planet shapers. Dipesh Chakrabarty in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021) postulates that “The term Anthropocene helped focus public attention on the possibility that human beings now so dominated the planet that their collective impact was comparable to those of very large-scale planetary forces” (157). Earl C. Ellis in *A Very Short Introduction to Anthropocene* (2018) records the observations of the atmospheric scientist Paul J. Crutzen that “[w]e are in the Anthropocene!” (1). Timothy Clark delineates adoption of the term “Anthropocene” to the field humanities as a “loose and short hand term . . . [for a wide range of] environmental issues that are planetary in scale, notably climate change, ocean acidification, effects of over population, deforestation, soil-erosion, overfishing and the general and accelerating degradation of ecosystems” (2).

The Anthropocene era denotes the current period in Earth’s history. Coiners of the term Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, attribute the origin of the geological epoch with the industrial revolution to the present and is recognised for the global climate crisis. Adam Trexler in his seminal book *Anthropocene Fictions* (2015) claims that

Global climate change is likely to be our time’s lasting legacy on Earth. . . . Yet barring tremendous, immediate, and global interventions in emissions, global temperatures are likely to rise between 3 and 5 degrees centigrade by 2100, leading to a number of predictable geophysical, biological, social, and economic outcomes. Droughts, tropical cyclones, heat waves, crop failures, forest diebacks and fires, floods, and erosion will become more extreme. (1-2)

Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* (2019) records climate catastrophes such as floods, cyclones, global warming, wildfires, massive fish kills and sea level rises. Recurrence of these climatic conditions eventually lead to climate migration. The first part of the novel is set in the Sundarbans which is visited by the Gun Merchant. Ghosh narrates that “[T]he Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that’s exactly where the war between profit and nature is fought” (8). By a blend of myth and reality,

the narrator Dinanath Datta records a series of natural calamities that occurred. At the opening of the novel, Nilima Bose, an activist of Badabon Trust, a charitable organisation provides her account of the Bhola Cyclone of 1970, that hit the Bengal delta and affected the lives thousands of people of the Indian Province of West Bengal and East Pakistan which later become Bangladesh. The cyclone is described as “the greatest natural disaster of twentieth century” (13) in terms of casualties.

The ramifications of the cyclone were countless. The disaster-stricken Sundarbans is depicted through the narrations of Nilima and Horen Naskar. Nilima introduces Horen, a young fisherman who “had witnessed the devastation with his own eyes” (Ghosh 13). Nilima gathers volunteers and Horen guides them to the island. On their way, they witness “horrific sights of hamlets obliterated by the storm surge; islands where every tree had been stripped of its leaves; corpses floating in the water, half eaten by animals; villages that had lost most of their inhabitants” (Ghosh 14). The calamity was intensified by the flood of refugees from East Pakistan that resulted in acute starvation. Nilima also provided the story of the miraculous escape of the deep dwellers of Gun Island who live in a part of Sundarbans. The villagers managed to keep their belongings and stocks of food to Manasa Devi’s shrine.

Horen’s chronicle of the cyclone is more vivid than that of Nilima as he is the primary witness. “He had been out at sea . . . Their boat was swept ashore, but on the wrong side of the border. The boat had not survived the landing but they managed to climb on to a tree” (Ghosh 55). After two days they were rescued by some other fishermen of their village. On the way they witnessed inconceivable sights, “they had to fight off stranded mobs; they have been forced to evade thieves and river bandits, who had descended like vultures, to take advantage of the chaos” (Ghosh 55).

Horen narrates severe aftermaths of the cyclone. Gun Island underwent “a drought so terrible that the streams, rivers and ponds had dried up and the stench of rotting fish and dead livestock had hung heavy in the air. Half of the people had died of starvation; parents had sold their children and people had been reduced to eating carcasses and cadavers” (Ghosh 55). The coastal regions were

looted of its fish wealth that ensued in poverty and joblessness in fishermen community.

The calamities that occurred in the Sundarbans recurred during the Cyclone Alia in 2009. Millions of people in India and Bangladesh were moved to safety camps as per weather forecast. The long-term consequences of Alia included the following, “Hundreds of miles of embankment had been swept away and the sea had invaded places where it had never entered before; vast trace of one’s fertile land had been swamped by salt water, rendering them uncultivable for a generation, if not forever” (Ghosh 48). The land becomes uninhabitable. Moyana, a dweller of Gun Island and a helper of Nilima, narrated the change in land and water. Underground water resources were swamped with arsenic; embankments were demolished by high tides. Fishermen were deprived of fish, “where once their boats would come back loaded with catch, now they counted themselves lucky if they netted a handful of fry” (Ghosh 49). The river was converted to half water, half land. The nearby parts of the river beside the shrine were filled with mud. Tipu, son of Moyana narrates how the illiterate village youth use internet via mobile phone with the aid of voice assistance. They drop out of education, addicted to the internet, attracted to easy money and never return to their traditional jobs. This embarks another aftermath of climate change that make people leave their traditional jobs like fishing or farming.

Ghosh uses mythology as a remedying force to subdue the planetary climate crisis. The myth of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snake manifests the prominence of natural forces over humans. The dwellers of Gun Island believe that Manasa Devi protected them from the cyclone as they took refuge in her shrine. Manasa Devi’s shrine was guarded by a middle-aged Muslim man. Villagers irrespective of their religion revered this shrine. Manasa Devi was known as the goddess of snakes (14). According to Hindu tradition the shrine was guarded by Manasa Devi and according to Muslim tradition, it was a place of jinns. The shrine symbolises Nature itself, it gives shelter to its worshippers and punishes the sceptics, who are not ready to trust.

The Gun Merchant becomes a symbol of a powerful *Anthropos* in the Anthropocene. Ghosh internalises climate change and the related planetary crises

through the Gun Merchant. He is omnipresent; whether it is the cyclone struck East or the flood affected West. Manasa Devi is a representation of ancient religions that protect nature by evoking fear. Datta narrates how the Gun Merchant angered Manasa Devi by disagreeing to become her devotee. “Plagued by snakes and pursued by droughts, famines, storms and other calamities he had fled overseas to escape the goddess’s wrath, finally taking refuge in a land where there were no serpents, a place called ‘Gun Island’ – Bonduk -dwip” (Ghosh 16). On his way he is captured and looted by pirates, Manasa Devi appears and frees him as he promises to build a shrine in Bengal. The ship is visited by all kinds of creatures and the pirates fight with them, the captives take over their ship and riches. Thus, the Merchant is rewarded in abundance.

The narrator, Dutta assimilates himself with the Merchant as he is also a sceptic who doubts the power of Manasa Devi. Dutta represents a modern man who doubts the traditional beliefs. He is assisted by Tipu, who stands as an icon of youth in Sundarbans. Life become miserable for the people in Sundarbans, which was struck by cyclones and sea level rise which forced people to leave their homelands. The illiterate youth were addicted to internet and made easy money by illegal crossing of the border and drug trafficking. Piya Roy, a researcher in Marine Biology becomes the spokesperson of Anthropogenic climate change in marine ecosystem in the Sundarbans. She introduces the term “oceanic dead zones”:

they’re these vast stretches of water that have a very low oxygen content- too low for fish to survive. Those zones have been growing at a phenomenal pace, mostly because of residues from chemical fertilizers. Only a few highly specialized organisms can survive in those conditions- everything else dies, which is why those patches of water are known as ‘dead zones.’ (Ghosh 95)

The lack of oxygen in water threatens the marine life. The spread of dead zones become a problem of profound gravity as some of them are as large as middle sized countries. Piya notices the presence of dead zones in rivers too, especially in estuaries where the river meets the sea. The fertilizers reach the sea through the river (Ghosh 95). A refinery nearby the Sundarbans also causes trouble as they

dump industrial waste into the river that ensues in massive fish kills. Environmentalists noticed that these fish kills evolved into a global phenomenon. Thousands of dead fishes floating on the surface of water indicates the extinction of fishes, and it leads to surging unemployment among the fishermen community. The human use of fertilizers can be deciphered as a hyperobject that results in massive fish kills. Hyperobject is a concept put forth by Timothy Morton, which “refer(s) to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans . . . . A hyperobject could be the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism” (1). The putrid smell of rot fishes and wafting of gases are harmful for the people living in the coastal areas.

Beaching of whales become a worldwide phenomenon due to climatic discrepancy. “Why do Whales Beach themselves?” an article in *The Deep Dive Blog* states, “Bad weather, old age, navigation errors, and hunting too close to shore also contribute to beachings.” Ghosh points out how the anthropogenic sounds clash with the navigation of whales, “man-made sound from submarines and sonar equipment . . . could be behind the beaching . . . marine mammals use eco location to navigate so if something messed with that, they could become disoriented and run themselves aground” (99).

Emission of greenhouse gases effect in global warming which results in “more deadly heat waves, stronger floods and droughts, and notable impacts on sensitive species” (Trexler 3). Ghosh’s *Gun Island* offers a cosmopolitan picture of the world affected by climate calamities. On the way to Los Angeles to meet Giacinta Schiavon, Dutta’s friend, he overhears on the aeroplane that the place is undergoing a wild fire. Schiavon who was fondly called as Cinta, is an academician from Venice. The calamity caused the burning of thousands of acres of land and thousands were moved to rescue camps. The land, after wildfires, was reduced to a waste land. Certain birds of prey like hawks, eagles and other raptors discover it as a rare opportunity for hunting and intensified the calamity by carrying twigs in their beaks and spreading fires. Wildfires caused appearance of venomous snakes out of the forest. Cinta has undergone so much personal losses due to death her daughter Lucia and dog due to snake bite.

On reaching Los Angeles, Dutta attends a conference, where Dutta's friend Cinta is a delegate. In one of the sessions, the narrator listens to a lecture on the topic, "Climate and Apocalypse in the Seventeenth Century." The seventeenth century was an age of climatic disruptions, and is known as Little Ice Age. The century witnessed a drop in temperatures across the world. The cause was attributed to fluctuations in solar activity, or a series of volcanic eruptions or due to the reforestation of vast area of land following the mass genocide of Amerindian peoples during European invasion of Americas. The world was struck by famines, droughts and epidemics and millions of people died that resulted in the diminishing of population "in some parts of the world the population had declined by a third" (Ghosh 122). Different dynasties across the world went through droughts, wildfires, famine political turmoil, rebellion and suicides. The paradoxical fact of the era is that, it was the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment and of noteworthy philosophers like Hobbes, Newton, Spinoza and Descartes. The world had been enriched by many masterpieces of literature, art and architecture. In this century the Londoners began to use coal on a large scale for heating and dependence of fossil fuel started. The age was "a pale foreshadowing of what the future holds" (Ghosh 122).

Climate migration is a critical issue discussed in *Gun Island*. This phenomenon is resultant of climate disasters such as floods, hurricanes, wildfires and global warming. It is catalysed by displacement of people internally within a country or to other countries due to climatic disasters. The International Organization for Migration defines environmental migrants as "persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad" (Ghosh 6).

Cyclones in the Sundarbans led to massive climate migration. The youth were not able to survive in the Sundarbans and got involved in drug trafficking and illegal boundary violations. Ghosh depicts climate crisis as an equalising force that demolishes the concept of human-made boundary or territory. The flood of climate refugees from Bangladesh intensified the severity of the calamity.

Tipu, Bilal and Rafi represent the Indian youth who were affected by climate disasters. They long to move to foreign countries for a better lifestyle with the internet, smartphones and computers. They started illegal migration from Bangladesh and carried 250 dollars with them. They were guided by a group that was notorious agents for illegal boundary crossings. They were brought through different borders and were looted of their money. As they reached the Turkish border, Tipu had a dream and went to Egypt to meet an Ethiopian woman, who was compared to a *forishta* or an angel (Ghosh 241).

Extreme climate conditions lead to climate migration of insects and marine mammals. Dutta documents the migration of black beetles caused by warming of mountains. These beetles invaded the forest near the Brooklyn town. They are notorious for they eat up trees from the inside and the dead wood is prone to wildfires. Lisa, a visionary entomologist warns the officials about the aftermaths of the migration of black beetles but no one pays attention. Global warming results in intense drought and wild fires. “The state had to declare an emergency and send in helicopters and stuff. Two people died and dozens of houses were burned down” (Ghosh 109).

Piya, a researcher in Marine Biology analysed changes in the composition of waters of the Sundarbans and consequent climate migration of dolphins. Sea level rises result in the intrusion of salt water into fresh water upstream that threatens the habitat of dolphins. “They have started to avoid some of the waterways they had frequented before; they had also, slowly, begun to venture further and further upriver, into populated, heavily fished areas” (Ghosh 92). This results in the threat of extinction of dolphins due to causalities such as being trapped by fishermen’s nets and hit by motor boats and steamers. Ghosh also records the migration of poisonous yellow snakes into northwards caused by wildfires in Los Angeles threatening the lives of many.

The second part of *Gun Island*, focuses on the Italian city of Venice torn by extreme weather conditions such as global warming, floods, storms and sea level rise. Floods arise as a global phenomenon, whether it is Sundarbans or Venice. People of the Sundarbans know how to sustain in floods as they are used to it, but it becomes unacclimated for Venetians. Global warming causes warming

of water bodies. In 2019, Naomi Klein warned: “Oceans are warming 40 percent faster than the United Nations predicted just five years ago” (7). The warming of the lagoon’s water causes the intrusion of ship worms in Venice. These worms eat wood from inside and become a severe threat to Venice, as it is built on wooden pilings. They invade the city after the floods. Cinta and Dutta skirmish with ship worms, they fall down and worms crawl all over their body and they feel that the earth itself is touching them with tentacles. They are hospitalised and later reunited with Rafi. People wear gum boot to overcome the crisis. The narrator notices some Bengalis selling boots, galoshes and plastic shoe protectors (Ghosh 234).

In order to escape from the storm that followed the flood Dutta and his friends boarded a cruise ship named the *Lucania*, which is German made ship used to rescue refugees. On their journey to northwards, they pass places like the Island of Sans Clement which was visited by the Gun Merchant, who is a forerunner of the inhabitants of the Earth, as they may turn to climate migrants at any time due to unpredictable weather conditions. Rafi and Piya long to meet Tipu. Gisa, daughter of Cinta’s cousin informs them about the Blue Boat, which started its journey from El- Arish, in Sinai. The place was notorious for trafficking where a connection house got devastated due to storms. In this ignominious connection house, refugees were kept as captives by traffickers. The place was infamous as the hub of trade in human organs. The Blue Boat accommodates the refugees escaped from the connection house, but the Government was not ready to accept them. Rafi anticipates the presence of Tipu in the Blue Boat.

The ship the *Lucania* was surrounded by migrant haters who were shouting anti- migrant slogans on one side and migrant lovers on the other. Their flags stated varied slogans like “No room here; go home... No human is illegal... climate migration = invasion.... Send them back with birth control” (Ghosh 272). When the Boat reaches near the *Lucania*, everyone becomes happy except the migrant haters. They claim that Europe belongs to Europeans and that the refugees must return to their native lands. Rafi spotted Tipu in the Blue Boat. The inmates of the ship were happy to hear the announcement from a helicopter that

they would be rescued by the naval officials. Ashwarya Samkaria observes that, “The movement of the climate refugees becomes a symbolic reminder that the disastrous effects of climate crisis and the increasing threat to the planet becoming uninhabitable is not reserved either for solely human members of the global south or for nonhuman creatures of the global north” (38).

The mythical story of the Gun Merchant acts as a moralising force throughout the novel. The human race is likened to the merchant, when they turn away from nature, it warns them with natural calamities. Datta is a replica of the Gun Merchant who invites the fury of the goddess Manasa Devi by disbelief. Both of them internalise the cause of climate crisis that is caused by human greed. In order to reach Manasa Devi’s shrine, the narrator had to walk through the mud in the river. He considers it as primeval mud. As advised by Horen and Tipu he strips of his dress and walks like a primeval man, this journey can be read as modern man’s return to nature. Datta was frightened by a cobra for being sceptic about the mightiness of Manasa Devi. Tipu saves him by trapping the snake using fishing net but gets bitten by it and is hospitalised for several months. Even after his return from Sundarbans to Brooklyn the narrator suffers from heart-burn, as diagnosed by the doctor. He believes that something has entered into his body on his visit to the shrine. The internet is presented as boon as well as curse in the Anthropocene. It becomes a boon when it connects people of diverse geographical areas. Tipu uses the internet to evoke the superstitious fears of the narrator.

Ghosh’s *Gun Island* serves as a warning signal to the readers about the apocalyptic years that await the planet Earth. By accepting subject position as planetary creatures, humans can participate active role in mitigating climate change. The novel exemplifies activists such as Cinta, Piya and Lisa who try to create awareness among people about the changing climatic conditions. In the Anthropocene, climate migrants struggle for existence. Ramifications of anthropogenic climate change such as floods, cyclones, global warming, sea level rise and wildfires cautions humans about the future calamities.

The novel cautions humans about the planetary climate crisis. Ghosh portrays the climate crisis of the South Asian continent through the depiction of the Sundarbans, a site prone to cyclones and floods. Cyclones and floods often

make the land uninhabitable. Marine degradation is evident through the depiction of oceanic dead zones, which challenges ocean life and is looted of its fish wealth. The climate crisis in Europe is manifested through the portrayal of the Italian city, Venice. Venice becomes a cite of global warming, floods, storms and sea level rise. Ghosh chronicles wildfires in America, which lead to massive destruction of flora and fauna. Depiction of planetary climate crises in *Gun Island* envisages readers to regain climate stability through climate action. Climate theorists advocate that “Earth [is] for all” (Dixson- Declève et al.), which decenters centrality of humans and necessitates humans to lead a planet centred life.

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**Chithra Mary Philip** is an Assistant Professor of English at Baselius College, Kottayam (Autonomous), Kerala. She is a research scholar in English at St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Kerala. Her areas of interest include Ecocriticism, Anthropocene, Climate Fiction and Gender Studies.

**Philip, C. Mary, T. Thomas**

[www.literaryherm.org](http://www.literaryherm.org)

**Prof. Tom Thomas** is Professor and Research Guide at the Department of English, St Thomas College, Kozhencherry. His areas of interest are Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism and Posthumanism.