



The Interface between local and the global in *The Gun Island*

Details of the Author:

Ms. Chaithanya Elsa Achankunju

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Mar Thoma College for Women

Perumbavoor, Ernakulam

Kerala, India

Earth is the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal... —Martin Hiedegger (Building Dwelling Thinking)

Bioregionalism developed at the wake of growing environmental consciousness in 1970 in North America. This movement, set in motion by thinkers such as Peter Barg, Gary Synder, Stephanie Mills and Raymond Dasmann, gave importance to reinforcing one's connectedness with the place where one lives. Kirkpatrick Sale in his book *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* contends that 'the most crucial and perhaps only and all-encompassing task is to understand *place*, the immediate specific place where we live in' (42). Bio regionalists veered away from the augmented gravity attached to political boundaries, instead, enhanced a perspective that focused on natural communities 'with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human consciousness'.(Thayer Jr.).

Amitav Ghosh , the famous transnational writer, born in Kolkata and a recipient of Padma Shri of Indian government and Jnanapith Award , in his latest fiction *The Gun Island*(2019) remarkably spells out the growing disquieting global concerns of ecological derangement and global migration. The life of Deen, a dealer in rare books and Asian antiquities, who lives and works at Brooklyn but born and raised at

Kolkata, gets entwined in the legend of Bodugi Sarkar, 'who is said to have fled overseas to escape the persecution of Manasa Devi, the goddess who rules over snakes and all other poisonous snakes' (Ghosh 5). His close alliance with Cinta, a famous historian who has also written a scholarly work on the Inquisition in Venice ushers in the mystery behind the legend that unravels the interconnectedness between the local and global thus reinforcing Deen's and also the reader's sense of oneness with the significance of the local space where one lives and how it is integrated with the entire world.

Achankunju 2

The action in the novel begins at Sunderbans, the famous mangrove area that stretches from certain places in India to Bangladesh and then proceeds to Brooklyn, Venice and other places across the world.

Bioregionalism contends that the identity of a human being can be developed by dwelling in close association with the natural beings at one's place of residence. It upholds a worldview that is not defined by political, ethnic or similar conventional boundaries. In *The Gun Island* the protagonist Dinanath Dutta visits his place Kolkata every year more for business purpose, but also certainly because his native place was a refuge for him not only from severe weather conditions during Brooklyn winter but also a break from the solitude that has been gnawing him during the mature years of his life. Deen who did not care much for the swamps and mangroves visits Sunderbans quite reluctantly following the promptings of his distant relative Aunt Nilima who was intrigued by the legend of Bodungi Sarkar and the presence of a shrine in the swampy Sunderbans.

The first part of the novel succeeds in creating a greater awareness about the islands of Sunderbans which 'are constantly being swallowed up by sea' (18). People dwelling at this place are at the mercy of rising tides and cyclones that frequent their region. The novel also shows how the political apathy of West Pakistan towards the casualties and suffering caused by Bhola cyclone that ripped apart the Bengal delta, forcing itself through West Bengal and the then East Pakistan led to the formation of Bangladesh. On the other hand though the casualty count could be reduced, with the aid of warning systems for storms, at the time of Cyclone Alia that hit the Sunderbans at 2009, it, nevertheless transformed large acres of fertile cultivable land into uncultivable state of swamps of salt water.

As a result of this natural specificity of Sunderbans it becomes the haven of traffickers. Since the land does not provide them avenues to build their lives, people, seeped

Achankunju 3

in poverty, turn to deplorable ways of life to find their livelihood. Several women moved to brothels while men to distant lands for work. The youth, on the other hand, pay agents money to find them work at other places. Some of them cross over to Bangladesh 'to join labour gangs headed for the Gulf. These experiences of the people at Sunderbans show how possibilities of social progress and security of one's life is often determined by the natural conditions of a bioregion. Those natural conditions can sometimes be detrimental to or supportive of the smooth survival of the natural beings including human beings whose lives are closely intertwined with those areas.

The Gun Island presents details about the water and fauna of the place through the character Piya, who is already present in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, who comes to Sunderbans as part of her research in marine biology. The bioregion is thus studied in detail and various phenomena associated with nature are enumerated enlightening any ordinary reader on the secrets of nature. For Deen also his bioregion gets thus familiar. Robert J. Thayer Jr. says, " If you want somebody to understand where they are from, you've got to take them to it.' Through Piya and her research Ghosh, who, himself an anthropologist, presents the intricacies associated with the place. The water around the island Garjontola has varied shades of hues. "Each of these rivers, said Piya, is like a moving forest, populated by an incredible variety of life forms." (Ghosh 95). Also, the occurrence of massive fish kill where thousands of dead fish float on the surface or washed ashore show the increasing presence of oceanic dead zones and also the consequence of pushing poisonous effluents from refineries into water bodies thereby disturbing the ecosystem.

The first part of the novel also shows how Deen becomes more conscious of the living beings around him after the strange encounter with a snake at the shrine in Sunderbans where

a king cobra strikes Tipu, Moyna's son. When Deen stands dazed and perplexed not knowing what to do, Rafi, the local who was with them knew exactly what to do.

'Then, clamping his lips around the spot where the snake's fangs had punctured the skin, he began to suck on the wound, with an intensity of an effort that deepened the colour of the face.'(77-78)

Tipu is taken to the hospital and rescued. But deterred by the lack of prospects of a better life and tormented by hardships Tipu and Rafi try to stealthily move to other countries with the hope of bright future. Ghosh narrates the natural predicament that forces them to do so. At Sunderbans,

'.. there's a whole bunch of dirt-poor, illiterate people scratching out a living by fishing or farming or going into the jungle to collect bamboo and honey.... But now the fish catch is down, the land's turning salty, and you can't go into the jungle without bribing the forest guards. On top of that every year you get hit by a storm that blows everything to pieces.' (60-61).

After getting back to Brooklyn Deen travels to Venice and is astounded to find Rafi working in a construction firm. Rafi narrates the strenuous expedition undertaken by Rafi and Tipu to escape from Sunderbans which also led to their separation almost while reaching their destination. Mitchell Thomashow in "Towards a Cosmopolitan Bioregionalism" proposes that

'when habitats are transformed by commercial, industrial and agricultural developments, natural resource extraction, tourism and war, a chain of ecological and cultural disruptions is initiated. Indigenous societies must either adapt to the changing circumstances, migrate to a new habitat, or face extinction.'

Hence it is important for the global community to cater to the needs of the migrating sections of society. The attempt of a group of people in the ship *Lucania* to disembark at Venice receive varied responses from the government and other groups. While Deen, Piya, Rafi and others travel in a migrant rescue boat to Luania they encounter a fleet of cetaceans including long-finned pilot whales, fin whales, etc.. traveling to Sicily. As Deen and others sail towards the refugee boat they find several vessels ahead of them hired by activist groups with various opinions towards migration. The expedition undertaken by the

refugees were both supported and detested by various groups. The bold intervention of Admiral Sandro di Vigoovo refugees were safely transplanted from the vessel to the land of Venice.

The background of all the actions that take place in the novel are ecological concerns and descriptions. It thus defamiliarizes all that what is thought to have been known by the readers thus enlightens us on the nuances of our life that has to imperatively stay connected with nature.

Getting rehabinited in one's own bioregion is essential to lead a life integrated with the ecosystem of the place which enables an understanding of the physical terrain and the living beings that dwell in that place. Though bioregionalism propagates the proposition of moulding and transforming one's live based on the bioregion *The Gun Island* shows how the challenges raised by the unmanageable circumstances at the region can be detrimental for the survival of the living beings in that place. The sense of political and national boundaries then supercede the psyche of the general community when the suffering lot turn refugees and try to migrate to other places. An interface with the local and global is then essential; a spirit of camaraderie and all-inclusiveness, because earth cannot be solely possessed by anyone. Earth and all that earth has is a given and the freely given cannot be owned without a spirit of kindness and egalitarianism.

Works Referred

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Lynch, Tom, Cheryll Glotfelty, Karla Armbuster(Ed.). *The Bioregional Imagination*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012. Print.