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REIMAGINING HUMAN–NATURE RELATIONSHIPS: AN ECO-SPIRITUAL STUDY OF GUN ISLAND

[\1]G V Narmatha, [2]Dr. M. Praveena, [3]S. Sakkumma

[1]Assistant Professor, [2]Assistant Professor, [3]Assistant Professor

[1]Humanities & Sciences

[1]Annamacharya University, Rajampet, India

Abstract:

Using a Hindu eco-spiritual framework, this paper analyses Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island to investigate how traditional cosmological ideas shed light on current environmental issues. Ghosh describes the disruption of sacred human-nature ties in both colonial and postcolonial contexts, building on the legends of Bonduki Sadagar and Manasa Devi. This study examines how the novel depicts environmental deterioration, human moral failing, and ecological mutual dependence using a threefold conceptual lens of karma, dharma, and ecology derived from Hindu philosophy. Karma, the rule of cause and effect, is used to illustrate how human exploitation results in ecological collapse, climate migration, and natural calamities. Dharma is a concept that promotes responsibility for the environment and human-nonhuman cooperation. In order to speak out against the environmental degradation of capitalist modernity, this dissertation contends that Ghosh skillfully combines Hindu metaphysics with modern ecological science. The novel's portrayal of floods, Venice's collapse, and the worldwide refugee crisis dramatizes karmic repercussions, and its connection to the merging of myth and science presents a vision of holy interdependence. In the end, this essay comes to the conclusion that Gun Island offers an urgent eco-spiritual model for rethinking planetary ethics and reacting to the Anthropocene via spiritual duty, humility, and relationships.

Keywords: Gun Island, eco-spirituality, Amitav Ghosh, Hindu environmental ethics, myth.

1. Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most celebrated contemporary Indian English writers, known for blending history, culture, migration, and environmental concerns in his fiction. His novel Gun Island (2019) is a powerful work of climate fiction that combines mythology, migration, and environmental concerns. The story follows Deen Datta, a rare-book dealer, as he investigates the legend of the Gun Merchant in the Sundarbans and gradually uncovers connections between ancient folklore and contemporary ecological crises. The book tackles modern environmental issues such ecological imbalance, rising sea levels, animal migration, and climate change. Ghosh makes a connection between traditional beliefs and contemporary ecological realities through the story of Bonduki Sadagar, often known as the Gun Merchant. A helpful foundation for comprehending the novel's ecological perspective is provided by the ideas of Karma (activity and its repercussions) and Dharma (moral obligation and righteous conduct). According to the story, environmental catastrophes are the result of humanity's disrespect for nature, but ecological stewardship can bring people and the natural world back into balance. Through themes of climate change, human displacement, biodiversity, and ecological interconnectedness, *Gun Island* highlights the urgent need for environmental awareness and presents nature as an active force shaping human destiny.

2. Review of Literature

According to Harold Coward notes, "From the perspective of karma theory, I am totally responsible for both my impulses toward the environment and the way I choose to act or not act on those impulses. And the way I choose to act today creates the karmic impulses I will experience tomorrow and in future lives in my interaction with the environment" (Coward 1998, p. 45), Ghosh skillfully transforms this framework into a planetary record where pandemics, refugee crises, and environmental destruction are karmic repercussions of human excess. Building on this karmic structure, Coward stresses that Indian culture views human existence as intimately interconnected with nature, such that "to harm any aspect of nature—be it air, water, plants, or animals—is tantamount to harming oneself" (p. 39). In the meanwhile, the novel also draws on Hindu ideas of moral obligation to highlight ecological care and human-nonhuman relationships—a theme that is eventually expanded upon through the idea of dharma.

As Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim emphasize, many Indigenous and Asian traditions—including Hinduism—recognize the Earth as "a living cosmos" in which humans are integral participants in a dynamic interdependent community of life (Tucker and Grim 2001, p. 13). The ecosystem on *Gun Island* is a sacred web of interconnectedness that resonates with both modern ecological theory and Hindu philosophy, rather than just being a scientific fabrication

Chatterjee (2020) provides an engaging interpretation of Gun Island as a transreligious story that uses the Indic idea of dharma to bridge the gap between myth and environmental consciousness, according to recent research on the subject. She sees *swadharma*, or one's sacred duty, as the ethical core of the story by drawing on Vedantic ideas and the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, especially through the presence of *bhutas* (nonhuman entities), folk goddess worship, and holy geography.

Mahendru's (2025) reading effectively conveys both the novel's idea of ecological interconnectedness and Ghosh's critique of anthropocentrism. Although my study emphasizes interspecies responsibility, it does so from a distinct ontological perspective, one that is based on Indic cosmology rather than posthumanist materialism. I contend that Ghosh refers to dharma as a holy environment that unites nonhumans and humans in ethical duty and karmic reciprocity.

3. Discussion

3.1 Human-Nature Relations and Karmic Accountability

Amitav Ghosh's depiction of the environmental disaster at Gun Island powerfully illustrates the workings of karma. The situation of climate refugees, especially Tipu and Rafi, is a powerful example of karmic consequence. Ghosh spotlights that their migration is a part of a systemic karmic chain: "Hamlets obliterated by the storm surge,... corpses floating in the water, half eaten by animals; villages that had lost most of their inhabitants" (*Ghosh 2019, p. 21*). Here, the Sundarbans' submersion represents humanity's accumulated bad karma, which was created over centuries of industrial exploitation and ecological disregard.

In the same vein, natural catastrophes like the floods in the Bengal Delta and the sinking of Venice are portrayed as karmic retributions for past ecological neglect. Ghosh's catastrophic visualization— "it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans. When people tried to dig well, an arsenic laced brew gushed out of the soil" (Ghosh 2019, p. 66) shows collapse as a systemic reaction to persistent human sins rather than as individual incidents. Venice's decay boosts this motif: its foundations, once deemed indestructible, are now "riddled with holes" (p. 210). Cinta ominously declares, "I will show you a different kind of monster, much more dangerous" (p. 289), before introducing Deen to shipworms—wood-eating creatures thriving in the lagoon's warming waters. "They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities... They are literally eating the foundations of the city" (p. 290). An effective metaphor for ecological karma—damage that is internal, cumulative, and eventually unavoidable—is the picture of invisible rot eroding the city's very foundation.

This karmic reasoning is extended into the spiritual domain in the novel's concluding scenes. Neelofer Qadir interprets the last tableau of a migrant sailboat adrift in the Mediterranean as a moment of cosmic vengeance and compares it to the mythology of Manasa Devi- "Manasa Devi called upon the unnamed Ethiopian woman to rise up against the systems of violence—'inequality, climate change, capitalism, corruption, the arms trade, the oil industry'—responsible for rendering disposable once more the dispossessed of the world" (Qadir 2020, p. 9). Here, a framework of karmic accountability is highlighted

by the merging of political and ecological issues inside a mythic register. Ghosh's storytelling approach therefore closely resembles the Hindu philosophical idea of ecological karma, which holds that disruptive human acts have consequences that span time and space. Therefore, Tipu and Rafi's journey is a karmic manifestation of institutional violence rather than just a case of personal misfortune.

In his nonfiction book *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh explicitly articulates this karmic view of displacement by framing climatic migration as the unavoidable result of centuries of ecological violence and colonial exploitation. The paths taken by the refugees from Gun Island—Tipu, Rafi, and Bilal—reflect the true stories Ghosh records, especially the one of Khokon, a Bangladeshi refugee whose tale is similar to Bilal's.

"The conditions in the district are lethal now... Before it was just oppression; now on top of the oppression there's disaster after disaster" (Ghosh 2021, p. 156). Khokon's evidence, demonstrates how neoliberal extractivism and colonial histories exacerbate ecological collapse, speaks to Tipu's sorrow.

The sentence that follows, might be used as a thesis for both writings, is the pinnacle of Ghosh's criticism of structural injustice-

On the other hand, migrants like Khokon are aware that every facet of their predicament stems from persistent, unsolvable, and deeply ingrained forms of racial and social injustice. They are aware that they wouldn't have to risk their lives on shaky boats if they were wealthy or white. They are aware that the mechanisms that have uprooted them are a part of long-standing, deeply ingrained power dynamics in both national and international society. According to the perspective, national and international institutions of governance exist specifically to safeguard the systemic inequities and historical injustices that lead to refugee displacement rather than to advance justice or welfare. (p 158)

This critique of institutional violence is consistent with Gun Island's depiction of Tipu and Rafi's treacherous voyage to Venice, a city that is collapsing due to ecological karma. Ghosh's argument that migrants are climate migrants whether they realize it or not is reflected in Bilal's destiny on Gun Island, just as Khokon's displacement is linked to protracted dry spells, powerful hailstorms, and unseasonal downpours in Bangladesh. The quote's focus on "protection" of inequality highlights how karmic retribution is ingrained in the very systems that sustain global injustice, transforming governance into a tool for moral and ecological accountability.

According to *Gun Island*, environmental catastrophes and climate refugees are karmic echoes, or expressions of humanity's collective moral obligations. Ghosh challenges secular narratives that view disasters as neutral by reiterating the spiritual causal logic of karma. He offers an integrated view in which environmental collapse becomes the inevitable result of human ethical failure, criticizing the Enlightenment distinction between human and natural histories.

3.2 Dharma as a Framework for Environmental Care

Gun Island presents dharma as an ethical remedy, suggesting a revitalized feeling of duty toward the non-human world, while diagnosing ecological catastrophe as a karmic result of human conceit. According to Hinduism, dharma, or the concept of moral behavior, encompasses human obligations to the environment as well as interpersonal ethics, upholding the sacred order of life. Deen is presented at the start of the book as a skeptical and detached man, an academic whose interactions with the outside world are mostly disembodied and cerebral. His early rejection of the Bonduki Sadagar legend as superstition is a prime example of his estrangement from nature's sacred aspects. But as Deen travels through the Sundarbans, Venice, and Los Angeles, he comes across more striking examples of nonhuman agency, such as dolphins whose actions have mythological significance, snakes that appear to direct human destinies, and collapsing cities that bear witness to environmental suffering.

Deen's significant metamorphosis is sparked by these interactions. Thinking back on his trip to the Sundarbans, he reflects, "it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sunderbans" (Ghosh 2019, p. 107). By acknowledging the agency and life of the natural environment, Deen transitions from anthropocentric mastery to ecological humility. Deen's admission of the following at a period of introspection highlights this metamorphosis even more:

As this started to come back to me, I had an uncanny feeling that I too had lost myself in this dream; it wasn't so much that I was dreaming, but that I was being dreamed by whose very existence was fantastical

to me-spiders, cobras, sea snakes-and yet they and I had somehow become a part of each other's dreams. (Ghosh 2019, p. 264)

Deen no longer perceives nature as exterior or inanimate, but rather as an intimate, dreaming presence that encompasses him inside its range of consciousness. This is when the distinction between self and environment vanishes.
Deen's awareness is further heightened while he is in Venice, where he sees infrastructural breakdown as well as environmental deterioration in mythical or allegorical terms. The shipworms that endanger Venice become a metaphor for a more profound ecological disintegration during a discussion with Cinta. Deen's inner realization that environmental degradation is both literal and moral, a condemnation of a humanity out of step with its global obligations, is reflected in this imagery of invisible natural forces undermining the very foundations of society. Ghosh dramatizes this change, arguing that the ecological catastrophe necessitates a deep reorientation of human consciousness toward humility, moderation, and reverence rather than just legislative changes.

According to *Gun Island*, dharma is not just a religious duty but also a global ethic that is desperately needed to mend the strained bonds between people and the natural environment. Ghosh provides a visionary alternative to the exploitative, alienated mindsets that have caused environmental catastrophe by bringing back ancient Hindu teachings about ecological connection and moral obligation.

3.3 The Sacred Interconnectedness of Nature

Amitav Ghosh sees the Earth in Gun Island as a dynamic, sentient network where human and nonhuman destinies are intricately intertwined rather than as a passive arena for human action. This idea is based on both Hindu cosmology, which sees the world as an expression of Prakriti (nature) and Brahman (universal spirit), and contemporary ecological science, which stresses systemic interconnectedness. Barry Commoner's First Law of Ecology, which states that "everything is connected to everything else," encapsulates the growing recognition in scientific ecology of the Earth as a web of complex interdependencies (Commoner 1971, p. 29).

When Cinta tells Deen about the appearance of spiders, worms, and other harmful critters, Ghosh echoes this scientific realization. She remarks, "So, you can say that this spider's presence is natural or scientific. It is here because of our history; because of things human beings have done. It is linked to you already-you have a prior connection with that spider, whether you like it or not". (Ghosh 2019, p. 271)

This demonstrates that the disintegration of environmental systems is the disintegration of a cohesive fabric that supports life across species and regions rather than a sequence of discrete incidents. According to Ghosh's story, these entanglements are moral and spiritual in addition to biological or material. The spider, a messenger of ecological imbalance, turns into a symbol of karmic consequence; its existence in Deen's life is the outcome of deeds committed over time and space, linking even the furthest onlookers to the harm done to the planet. According to this theory, there is no "outside" that one may escape, no unspoiled wilderness, and no distinct area of innocence; human responsibility is unavoidable.

Ghosh blurs the lines between spiritual responsibility and empirical causality by basing this vision on both Hindu metaphysics and scientific interdependence. According to Hindu cosmology, *Brahman* is the immanent principle that unites all creation, and *Prakriti* is a generative, conscious force rather than inanimate matter. Therefore, ecological degradation is a violation of dharma and a break in the sacred order rather than just the collapse of ecosystems.
The resurgence of mythological and nonhuman characters like Manasa Devi, dolphins, and even shipworms implies that nature is now a subject with the ability to react, exact revenge, and even communicate rather than a passive object of human activity. Instead of opposing science in *Gun Island*, myth enhances it by providing moral and emotional frameworks for human reorientation. Ghosh's eco-spiritual vision depicts the Earth as a dynamic, sentient fabric in dire need of regard, preservation, and rejuvenation by fusing scientific ecology with traditional Hindu mythology.

4. Conclusion

By fusing Hindu eco-spiritual frameworks with international environmental concerns, Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island is a powerful literary contribution into the discourses of environmental crises. Ghosh brings old Hindu cosmologies back to life in the context of climatic collapse by reviving the tripartite ideas of karma, dharma, and ecosystemic interdependence. He suggests that ecological degradation is a serious

ethical and spiritual dilemma rather than just a technological error. In the end, Gun Island serves as a reminder that survival in the Anthropocene will not be ensured by dominating nature, but rather by relearning how to live within it—with reverence, humility, and reciprocity, as dharma dictates.

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