IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Eco-Imperialism And Climate Migration In Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: A Literary Lens On Environmental Justice

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) presents a powerful literary engagement with climate-induced migration, situating the contemporary ecological crisis within historical and socio-economic contexts. By foregrounding the legacies of colonial exploitation, capitalist expansion, and systemic inequality, Ghosh demonstrates that climate migration is not solely a natural disaster but a human-made crisis. Using postcolonial ecocriticism and the framework of eco-imperialism, this study examines how the novel critiques global environmental inequities, amplifies marginalized voices, and exposes the structural roots of ecological degradation. The blending of myth, history, and contemporary reality underscores the ethical imperatives of planetary stewardship and climate justice. Ultimately, *Gun Island* exemplifies the capacity of literature to foster ecological consciousness, moral reflection, and collective responsibility, highlighting the urgent need for social and environmental justice in an era of escalating climate crises.

Keywords: Eco-imperialism, Climate migration, Postcolonial ecocriticism, environmental justice

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed an intensifying climate crisis that transcends borders, economies, and cultures, reshaping the very conditions of human survival. Rising sea levels, desertification, and erratic weather patterns have rendered once-habitable regions increasingly unlivable, displacing millions of people in what scholars now describe as the largest wave of migration since the industrial era. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by 2050 more than 200 million people may be forced to migrate because of environmental disruptions. Climate migration, therefore, is not merely an environmental or humanitarian concern; it exposes deeper intersections of inequality, power, and history. The Global South,

which has contributed least to climate change, disproportionately bears its consequences, a reality that links the environmental crisis to enduring structures of colonial exploitation and capitalist expansion.

In this global context, literature has emerged as a vital site for understanding the human dimensions of climate displacement. Amitav Ghosh, one of the most influential contemporary voices in postcolonial and ecological fiction, powerfully engages with this issue in his 2019 novel *Gun Island*. Set across India, the Sundarbans, Venice, and Los Angeles, the novel follows Deen Datta, a rare book dealer whose encounter with a mysterious legend of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, draws him into a web of myth, memory, and modern crisis. As Deen's journey unfolds, Ghosh merges ancient legend with contemporary ecological reality, transforming a mythic quest into a meditation on migration, environmental decay, and the collapse of modern certainties. Through intertwined narratives of myth and history, *Gun Island* reveals how environmental degradation and forced migration are shaped by global capitalism, industrial modernity, and the lingering legacies of colonial power. The novel's transnational movement between the Indian subcontinent and Europe mirrors the ecological and human flows that define the present moment of planetary crisis.

Ghosh's fusion of myth and environmental consciousness makes *Gun Island* more than a story of adventure or survival; it becomes a literary response to what he calls "the great derangement," humanity's collective failure to imagine and confront climate catastrophe. By connecting ancient cosmologies with modern realities, Ghosh challenges the anthropocentric narratives that separate nature from culture, suggesting instead that ecological imbalance is inseparable from histories of empire, trade, and exploitation. The myth of Manasa Devi, symbolizing both destruction and renewal, functions as a metaphor for the Earth's exploited yet resilient spirit, a theme that resonates deeply within the framework of postcolonial ecocriticism.

This paper, titled "Eco-Imperialism and Climate Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*," examines how Ghosh's novel exposes the continuities between colonial exploitation and contemporary environmental degradation. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of postcolonial ecocriticism and eco-imperialism, the study explores how *Gun Island* portrays climate-induced migration as a human-made crisis rooted in historical and economic inequities. It further analyzes how Ghosh's interweaving of myth, history, and realism not only represents the material effects of ecological collapse but also calls for an ethical and imaginative response to planetary suffering. By situating *Gun Island* within global discourses on environmental justice, this paper underscores literature's power to bridge social awareness and ecological consciousness. The climate exodus of our time, it argues, is as much a moral and cultural crisis as it is an environmental one.

Understanding Eco-imperialism: From Colonial Extraction to Environmental Domination

Eco-imperialism refers to the continuation of colonial domination through ecological and environmental means. The concept draws from Alfred W. Crosby's idea of "ecological imperialism," first articulated in his 1986 study *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900*, which examines how European colonization advanced through the transfer, adaptation, and domination of biological species across continents (Crosby). It denotes a system in which the natural world, its resources, landscapes, and populations, is subjected to the same hierarchies of power and exploitation that structured classical imperialism. While traditional imperialism sought political control and economic extraction, eco-imperialism extends these practices into the realm of nature itself, embedding domination within environmental management, technological development, and global capitalism. The exploitation of ecosystems becomes a new form of conquest, one that sustains the inequalities of the postcolonial world under the guise of progress and sustainability. This framework allows scholars to interpret the climate crisis not merely as an environmental

disaster but as a political and historical process rooted in the unequal relations between the Global North and the Global South.

The historical roots of eco-imperialism can be traced back to European colonial expansion, where environmental exploitation accompanied territorial conquest. Colonization was not only the seizure of land but also the systematic transformation of ecological systems to serve imperial economies. Forests were cleared for plantations, rivers were redirected for irrigation, and indigenous modes of coexistence with nature were suppressed in favor of extractive monocultures. In India, for instance, the British restructured forest management through scientific forestry, converting biodiverse ecosystems into uniform, revenue-generating resources. The imperial reorganization of the environment thus reflected an ideology of control—an assumption that both land and people could be disciplined and commodified for profit. These early patterns of exploitation laid the groundwork for contemporary environmental inequalities, demonstrating that ecological degradation is inseparable from the history of empire.

The theoretical framework for understanding eco-imperialism draws on key contributions from postcolonial and environmental critics. Rob Nixon, in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), defines "slow violence" as gradual, often invisible harm to vulnerable communities, explaining that it "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). This highlights how environmental harm can be widespread even when not immediately visible. Similarly, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, in *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), argue that ecological exploitation and cultural domination are intertwined, showing that environmental degradation is always ideological. Together, these insights provide a theoretical lens for reading eco-imperialism as both a historical and contemporary phenomenon.

In the twenty-first century, eco-imperialism manifests through globalization and the rhetoric of sustainable development. Wealthier nations, while promoting green technologies and environmental regulations, frequently externalize ecological harm to poorer regions via trade policies, industrial outsourcing, and resource extraction. The language of "sustainability" often masks these inequities, allowing the Global North to maintain prosperity while the Global South bears disproportionate environmental costs. Activities such as mining rare earth minerals, expanding cash-crop agriculture, and displacing indigenous communities for development projects demonstrate that imperial logics continue to operate under modern capitalism. Climate policies that impose restrictions on developing nations, while permitting high-consumption lifestyles in wealthier countries, reproduce structural asymmetries reminiscent of colonial hierarchies. In this sense, environmental concern itself becomes a tool for sustaining global power imbalances.

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* provides a literary lens through which these dynamics are vividly illustrated. The novel situates readers in the ecologically fragile Sundarbans, a delta shaped by both natural forces and historical exploitation, where the legacies of colonial extraction intersect with contemporary environmental crises. The landscape, with deforested areas, eroded coastlines, and vulnerable communities, reflects centuries of ecological domination. Through the transnational journey of Deen Datta from India to Venice, Ghosh portrays contemporary migration as inseparable from historical patterns of economic and environmental subjugation. Migrants in the novel are not merely victims of natural disaster; they are caught in systems where ecological vulnerability mirrors social inequality. As Ghosh notes, "The Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that's exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought" (8). The narrative underscores how capitalist expansion continues to

commodify both humans and nature. The myth of Manasa Devi, goddess of snakes, becomes a symbolic figure of resilience amidst destruction, embodying the Earth's capacity for renewal despite persistent exploitation.

Ghosh's depiction of environmental crisis resonates with Nixon's theory of slow violence: harm is gradual, dispersed across time and space, and often invisible to those not directly affected. In *Gun Island*, climate change, industrialization, and displacement illustrate how environmental degradation is historically and socially embedded. By intertwining myth, history, and ecological awareness, Ghosh transforms the narrative of climate migration into a moral and political inquiry, compelling readers to recognize the uneven responsibilities of a globalized world. The novel thus exemplifies eco-imperialism in action, showing the entanglement of progress and destruction, control and survival, and power and vulnerability.

Postcolonial Ecocriticism as a Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial ecocriticism is a critical literary framework that examines the interconnected relationship between colonial history, environmental degradation, and cultural narratives. It exposes how colonialism and its enduring legacies have shaped environmental perceptions and practices, particularly in formerly colonized regions, and critiques dominant Western centric environmental discourses. By foregrounding the voices of historically marginalized communities, especially indigenous peoples, postcolonial ecocriticism challenges the exclusion of diverse ecological knowledge systems from mainstream environmental thought. Ecocriticism, the interdisciplinary study of literature and ecology, analyzes how texts address environmental issues and nature. The concept originated with Joseph Meeker's 1972 idea of "literary ecology" (*The Comedy of Survival*), and the term was coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.* Over time, the field expanded to address pressing environmental issues, including pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. Postcolonial ecocriticism builds on these foundations by emphasizing that environmental problems are not purely ecological or economic, but deeply political and historical, shaped by colonial systems of extraction and domination.

A key tenet of postcolonial ecocriticism is its challenge to colonial and contemporary environmental perspectives that treat nature solely as a resource for exploitation. It emphasizes recognizing nature's intrinsic value and its interconnectedness with culture and community well-being, privileging diverse knowledge systems, such as traditional ecological knowledge maintained by indigenous communities, which were often dismissed under colonial rule. For example, colonial forest management in India replaced local ecological expertise with scientific forestry serving imperial economic interests. Postcolonial ecocriticism also critiques "green colonialism," a concept in environmental justice discourse describing conservation and development initiatives driven by Western agendas that marginalize local communities and impose external models of resource governance (*What Is Green Colonialism*). The framework examines who benefits from such interventions and who bears their ecological and social costs, advocating for environmental justice and equitable distribution of ecological burdens in postcolonial contexts.

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* can be read as a postcolonial ecocritical text that examines how climate change is inseparable from histories of colonialism, capitalism, and global inequality. Through the novel, Ghosh critiques the lingering effects of European Enlightenment thought, which separated humans from the environment and justified colonial exploitation of both people and land. The Sundarbans, depicted as a fragile and dynamic landscape, becomes a site where ecological precarity and social vulnerability intersect, highlighting how marginalized communities, particularly in the Global South, disproportionately bear the consequences of environmental degradation. Characters such as Rafi, Tipu, and Deen navigate these disrupted environments, revealing the resilience and agency of subaltern actors in the face of displacement, economic

marginalization, and climate-induced precarity. The destruction of local spaces, such as the shrine of Mansa Devi, underscores how environmental catastrophe erodes cultural memory and territorial rootedness, challenging Western ecocritical frameworks that often assume stable, place-based environmental engagement. Ghosh emphasizes that ecological crises are socially and historically produced rather than purely "natural" phenomena, and migration emerges both as a consequence of ecological imbalance and a continuation of systemic injustices rooted in colonial and capitalist histories.

From a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, *Gun Island* highlights the unequal power dynamics inherent in global environmental discourse, where Northern-centric policies and narratives often marginalize the voices and experiences of the Global South, reproducing historical patterns of exploitation. Ghosh interrogates the tension between local knowledge, myth, and global ecological systems, presenting a "post-local" world in which mobility and adaptability are essential for survival. The novel also foregrounds socio-political barriers; national borders, xenophobia, and economic inequities, that hinder the enactment of planetary ecological ethics. By integrating magical realism, folklore, and historical memory, Ghosh demonstrates that ecological crises cannot be disentangled from colonial legacies and contemporary global inequalities. In doing so, he asserts that the environmental struggles of subaltern communities are both a product of, and resistance to, the intertwined forces of history, politics, and nature, offering a critical intervention in postcolonial ecocritical discourse.

Climate Migration and Global Capitalism

Climate migration and global capitalism are deeply interconnected phenomena. Climate change, driven largely by capitalist economies, particularly in the Global North, disproportionately affects poorer countries, causing environmental disasters such as floods, droughts, and storms that force millions to migrate. These migrants often end up in precarious labor conditions within global capitalist systems, exploited as a "disposable climate labor army" and subjected to xenophobia, insecurity, and social marginalization. The global capitalist system both contributes to climate change and profits from its consequences. Environmental destruction opens new lands and resources for extraction, fueling economic growth at the expense of displaced populations. This dynamic reflects a continuation of colonial legacies, where the wealthiest nations produce the causes of climate migration while the poorest suffer most and provide the labor that sustains capitalist economies. In India, climate migration is already a pressing reality. Droughts in Bundelkhand, riverbank erosion along the Brahmaputra in Assam, and flooding in Odisha's coastal Sundarbans have displaced thousands, with projections estimating forty-five million climate migrants by 2050. These displaced populations face limited governmental support, fragile livelihoods, and structural inequalities intensified by global capitalist practices.

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh extends the critique of global capitalism by highlighting the entanglement of human and nonhuman migrations. The novel traces a transnational journey: from the Sundarbans to Brooklyn, Brooklyn to Los Angeles, Los Angeles back to Brooklyn, then to Venice, and finally to the Mediterranean near Sicily, illustrating how climate change displaces both people and ecosystems across continents. Migrants cross borders, challenge imposed orders, and confront social, political, and economic constraints, showing that environmental crises disrupt social and ecological systems simultaneously. By weaving in the myth of Manasa Devi, Ghosh connects historical colonial exploitation with contemporary environmental devastation, suggesting that ecological ethics must consider interspecies responsibility and the legacies of imperialism. The narrative critiques human-centered frameworks and argues for a planetary environmentalism that recognizes the interconnectedness of cultures, species, and landscapes. Through these layered representations, Ghosh exposes systemic failures in addressing climate crises and illustrates how capitalism continues to exploit vulnerable communities while exacerbating ecological and social precarity, reinforcing the unequal global distribution of climate burdens.

The novel also emphasizes the profound challenges faced by nonhuman species as they navigate disrupted habitats. Piya, a researcher tracking the Irrawaddy dolphins of the Sundarbans, observes that the dolphins are forced to venture further upriver to avoid increasing salinity, entering populated and heavily fished areas where they risk entanglement in nets or collisions with boats.

> "Over time, these hazards drastically reduce their numbers, leaving only a few survivors, such as Rani and her two companions" (Ghosh 103).

The process of "cetacean stranding" or "beaching" illustrates the lethal consequences of environmental change, with Piya noting that man-made sounds from submarines and industrial equipment can disorient marine mammals, causing them to run aground (Ghosh 82). These examples highlight that migration is not only physically taxing but also psychologically stressful for animals, underscoring the broader ecological costs of climate change driven by human activity. By portraying the intertwined fates of humans and nonhumans, Ghosh reinforces the need for an inclusive, planetary approach to environmental ethics that recognizes the shared vulnerability of all species.

Human–Nature Relationship: Shared Vulnerability and Ecological Loss

Human and nature are increasingly vulnerable due to the accelerating impacts of environmental degradation. Industrial expansion, deforestation, overfishing, pollution, ozone depletion, changes in humidity, unexpected floods, droughts, and global warming have disrupted ecosystems worldwide, forcing both humans and wildlife to adapt to rapidly changing habitats. Rising sea levels, erratic weather patterns, and loss of biodiversity have created ecological stress that disproportionately affects marginalized communities while threatening countless species. For example, coral bleaching in the Great Barrier Reef, migration of polar bears in the Arctic, and the decline of freshwater fish populations in South Asia illustrate the global scale of ecological precarity. These challenges reveal the interconnectedness of life on Earth, showing that human survival and well-being are inseparable from the health of ecosystems. As Rachel Carson warned, "In nature nothing exists alone" (51), reminding us that every disruption reverberates across species and ecosystems.

In *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh vividly portrays the interconnectedness of humans and nonhuman species, emphasizing the shared vulnerability brought about by environmental degradation. Piya, an Indian-American researcher of Bengali descent, exemplifies this relationship through her work with the Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sundarbans. Her bond with Rani, a dolphin, reflects a deep ecological awareness and mutual recognition, highlighting human–nonhuman interdependence. As sea levels rise and freshwater inflows decrease, saltwater intrusion forces dolphins to migrate upstream, exposing them to entanglement in fishing nets, collisions with boats, and stranding deaths. Piya observes these movements using GPS tracking, noting how climate change and industrial pollution create "oceanic dead zones" that drastically reduce oxygen levels, rendering vast stretches of water inhospitable to marine life (Ghosh 80).

The novel also extends this depiction of ecological precarity to human communities. Rising tides, cyclones, and wildfires in the Sundarbans, Venice, and Los Angeles reveal how environmental disasters disproportionately affect marginalized populations, reflecting a shared vulnerability across species and geographies. Crop failures, contaminated water, and forest destruction threaten both livelihoods and survival, as seen in Moyna's concern that "both land and water is going against the people of Sundarbans" (Ghosh, 90). The migration of marine and terrestrial species, such as dolphins and snakes, underscores the broader ecological consequences of climate change, showing that human and nonhuman lives are interwoven in planetary systems of risk and resilience. By foregrounding these interactions, Ghosh illustrates how ecological loss is both a

material and ethical crisis, calling for a rethinking of human responsibility toward the environment and the species with which we share the planet.

Myth, History, and Folktales in *Gun Island*

Amitav Ghosh's novels are characterised by colonial history, folklore, and mythology, and *Gun Island* exemplifies this blending of narrative strands to illuminate contemporary environmental crises. Central to the story is Deen Datta, a rare book dealer whose encounter with the legend of the Gun Merchant—derived from the medieval Bengali folktale of Chand Sadagar and the snake goddess Manasa Devi—propels him into a journey that bridges myth, history, and present-day ecological realities. The Gun Merchant's voyages from the Sundarbans to Venice serve as a historical and symbolic backdrop, reflecting the struggles of communities facing floods, cyclones, and rising sea levels in the modern era. Through Deen's investigation, Ghosh reinterprets these folktales as living narratives, showing how myths can convey ethical and environmental lessons across time. The novel emphasizes human responsibility toward nature, portraying climate change not merely as a scientific or economic phenomenon but as an extension of historical patterns of exploitation and imperialism. In doing so, Ghosh draws attention to the deep interconnectedness between human and non-human life, illustrating that ecological imbalance affects all beings. By interweaving myth, history, and contemporary climate consciousness, *Gun Island* transforms traditional folklore into a critical lens for understanding migration, environmental vulnerability, and the ethical imperatives of coexisting with the natural world.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* illuminates the human and ecological consequences of climate-induced migration, showing that these crises are deeply rooted in systemic inequalities, historical exploitation, and the legacies of colonialism. By intertwining myth, history, and contemporary realities, the novel highlights the shared vulnerability of humans and nonhumans, emphasizing that environmental degradation affects all forms of life. Through the experiences of displaced communities and the interweaving of ecological and social narratives, Ghosh urges readers to recognize their collective responsibility toward the planet. His literary approach fosters empathy, amplifies marginalized voices, and underscores the ethical imperatives of planetary stewardship and climate justice. Ultimately, *Gun Island* demonstrates that literature can do more than tell stories, it can raise awareness, provoke moral reflection, and inspire action. The novel points toward a future where cultural, ethical, and environmental consciousness converge, reminding us that addressing climate crises requires not only scientific and policy solutions but also a commitment to social equity and shared global responsibility. It is a call to rethink our relationship with nature, humanity, and the planet, emphasizing that sustainable and just futures depend on collective awareness and action.

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