

## Postcolonial Nonhuman Blurring (B)orders in Migrant Ecologies: A Postanthropocentric Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ecozona.2022.13.2.4671>



### Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019) explores the intersection of the nonhuman with 21<sup>st</sup> century issues pertaining to racial and ecological injustice, ethnic cleansing, environmental catastrophe and migrant ecologies by way of allegorising the myth of Manasa Devi (goddess of snakes and other venomous creatures). A postcolonial ecocritical lens helps analyse how the novelist presents nonhuman actors to contest Western anthropocentric conceptualisations of human subjectivity shaped by historical forces of modernity. By positing a postanthropocentric way of reading the world in order to shape new human subjectivities which do not efface human-nonhuman entanglements, my paper studies how Ghosh recognises agentic capacities and storied matter of the postcolonial nonhuman subject matter by identifying the novel's subversive negotiations through the tropes of language, embodiment, genre, and everyday environmentalism. I analyse how the contextualisation of the postcolonial nonhuman not only critiques human exceptionalism but destabilises the constructedness of borders in terms of an immaterial myth projecting an otherworldly possibility, trans-corporeality positing inescapable interconnectedness between humans and all living and non-living matter, and everyday environmentalism broadening the definition of environment to contest nature-culture dualism. I also argue that this ecofiction's allegorisation of Manasa Devi's myth through the unseen boundaries that she seeks to retain problematises a simplistic understanding of borders as limiting. My paper thus analyses how this reconceptualisation through the postcolonial nonhuman blurs borders and their ordering of the world and posits, instead, a relational living that dismantles constructedness of hierarchies while paying heed to (b)orders for ecological sustainable living.

**Keywords:** Trans-corporeality, myth, migrant ecologies, nonhuman agency, postanthropocentric.

### Resumen

La novela *Gun Island* (2019) de Amitav Ghosh explora la intersección de lo no humano con los problemas del siglo XXI relacionados con la injusticia racial y ecológica, la limpieza étnica, la catástrofe ambiental y las ecologías migratorias alegorizando el mito de Manasa Devi (diosa de las serpientes y otras criaturas venenosas). Una lente ecocrítica poscolonial ayuda a analizar cómo el novelista presenta actores no humanos para cuestionar las conceptualizaciones antropocéntricas occidentales de la subjetividad humana moldeadas por las fuerzas históricas de la modernidad. Al postular una forma posantropocéntrica de leer el mundo para dar forma a nuevas subjetividades humanas que no borran los enredos entre humanos y no humanos, mi artículo estudia cómo Ghosh reconoce las capacidades de los agentes y la materia histórica del tema poscolonial no humano al identificar las negociaciones subversivas de la novela a través de los tropos de lenguaje, encarnación, género y ecologismo cotidiano. Analizo cómo la contextualización de lo no humano poscolonial no solo critica el excepcionalismo humano sino que desestabiliza la construcción de las fronteras en términos de un mito inmaterial que proyecta una posibilidad de otro mundo. La transcorporeidad postula la interconexión ineludible entre los humanos y toda la materia viva y no viva, y el ecologismo cotidiano, ampliando así la definición de medio ambiente para cuestionar el dualismo naturaleza-cultura. También argumento que la alegorización de esta ecofiction del mito de Manasa Devi a través de los límites invisibles que ella busca retener problematiza una comprensión simplista de los bordes como limitantes. Por lo tanto, mi artículo analiza cómo esta reconceptualización a través de lo no humano poscolonial desdibuja las fronteras y su ordenamiento del mundo y postula, en

cambio, una vida relacional que desmantela la construcción de jerarquías mientras presta atención a órdenes/bordes para una vida ecológica sostenible.

*Palabras clave:* Transcorporeidad, mito, ecologías migratorias, agencia no humana, posantropocéntrico.

Amitav Ghosh in his novel *Gun Island* (2019) addresses our current ecological crisis in the age that we have come to know as the Anthropocene (the geological period wherein carbon-burning actions of humans are negatively impacting the planet's natural processes) and its consequential unfolding of an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Anthropogenic activities which are negatively altering the planet's ecology and geological processes at an exponential rate are turning habitable places into uninhabitable spaces resulting in global displacements and migrations of human and nonhuman lifeworlds. The primary focus of Ghosh's novel traces experiential journeys of migrants who, by virtue of their displacement, destabilise manmade nation-state borders that re-entrench systemic processes of othering and hyper-separation.

The novel's overarching thematic ponders over the ideological and material construction of borders as fixed and totalitarian which, in the advent of (in)voluntary border-crossing and displacement are paradoxically rendered open and permeable. Ghosh in his latest nonfiction *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (2021) points out how the precariously positioned Sundarbans region (one of the primary sites in the novel as well), which has experienced many cyclones in the past, has been a site of constant upheaval in terms of massive exodus of climate refugees and jobless migrants in the advent of climate-related changes in the environment<sup>1</sup>. In his earlier influential work on climate crisis *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) Ghosh also observes that "[c]limate change has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those on the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us" (84). Contesting the notion that knowledge is produced by the centre, climate change has inverted the transmission of valuable and authentic knowledge as these "subjugated knowledges"<sup>2</sup> (Haraway) located on the periphery are voices of those who are not only experiencing climate change's spectacularly visible instant havoc but also its slow violence at an alarming rate that is wrecking their livelihoods.

To engage with *Gun Island's* focus on the material-discursive nature of borders, my paper analyses the novel's deployment of tropes such as folkloric myth, human-nonhuman intermeshing and cohabitation, and language's polyphony in the event of migrant ecologies from the unaddressed lens of the postcolonial nonhuman. My paper studies how the novel's nonhuman as pertinent characters critique human centrality and

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Sundarbans' precarity, see <https://www.yesmagazine.org/environment/2016/06/02/tired-of-running-from-the-river-adapting-to-climate-change-on-indias-disappearing-islands>.

<sup>2</sup> "'Subjugated' standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world" (Haraway 584). As a counter to the totalising and systematic narrowing to a unified vision, Haraway steers attention towards subjugated knowledges which are situated and embodied knowledges as a razor-sharp critique of the 'objectivity' that modern sciences have propelled.

the dualisms which divide the human and the natural world in a manner that “lead to a logic of domination and the othering of diverse peoples and species” (Flys-Junquera 23). Through a postanthropocentric reading, my paper’s intertwined concerns analyse how Ghosh’s literary representation of the postcolonial nonhuman offer counter-hegemonic strategies to re-situate humans and nonhumans in an interconnected manner. Firstly, I analyse how the postcolonial cultural trope of writing an ecological myth pertaining to the nonhuman into the novel’s realist form challenges the singularity of reality espoused by Western epistemologies and posits instead, an animistic agency of the nonhuman world. Secondly, I focus on the novel’s trans-corporeal negotiations iterating relational entanglements between human, nonhuman, and the more-than-human in order to ascribe an embodied dimension to apprehending poststructuralist constructedness of reality. Lastly, I point out how the novel’s non-anthropomorphised nonhuman voicing itself through different semiotic codes and expressing its narratorial and agentic capacity contests anthropocentric hyper-separation and human exceptionalism in terms of communication via language.

Deploying an ecocritical methodological lens helps read the social production of the natural and the physical world while being aware of the dark spots that render the rights and values associated with nonhuman creatures, oppressed humans, and processes pertaining to ecology as invisible. Offering a transversal critique, it cuts through, firstly, the destructive tendencies of Western discourse of enlightenment ideals that not only separate humans from the natural world by ‘conquering’ the latter but also renders the human as the exclusive subject of analysis. An ecocritical lens makes the nonhuman and more-than-human world relationally visible and audible, and it lends focus to an affective impression of nonhuman sentient beings and the ecological processes of human cognition. Secondly, it problematises the preponderance of reason over other consciousnesses and ways of knowing the world. A postcolonial ecocritical exploration which “preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world” (Huggan and Tiffin 14) thus attempts to redefine what it means to be human in our (re)conceptualisation of ourselves as in relation to nature and the nonhuman world.

### **Routing through Mythic Roots**

The myth that steers the narrative is based on a popular folk legend from the littoral zone of the Sundarban forest (between West Bengal in India and Bangladesh). It pertains to the wrath of Manasa Devi (goddess of snakes and other poisonous creatures) upon Bonduki Sadagar (Gun Merchant) who flees from one place to another in the hope and hubris of tricking the goddess, only to heuristically learn after practising evasiveness, of the power of the nonhuman world and the inconsequentiality of the human race in the face of environmental forces. The Gun Merchant’s deliverance is sought after he builds a dhaam (shrine) for Manasa Devi at the local site that is “teeming with snakes” (8) and hence ties his legend to hers at the site of the world’s largest mangrove forests, the

Sundarbans. Describing this site as “the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye” (8), the thematic becomes an allegorical interpretation of the politics of representation of matter and social constructivism that designs one as subservient to the other in the advent of geopolitical neoliberalism and unrestrained capitalism. The dhaam’s construction terminates the goddess’ wrath, thereby functioning as a metaphorical deterrent to anthropocentric thinking which espouses supremacist values and places humankind as/at the centre of the world.

The novel creates a palimpsest using Manasa Devi’s myth with the exploratory journey undertaken by the protagonist Deen (Americanised version of Dinanath Dutta), an antique book collector who ends up retracing the merchant’s journey by himself, travelling from one place to another. Both are migrants in different ways— the merchant as a slave who is bought and sold as he travels the globe with the colonial master and Deen who voluntarily moves between his homeland (West Bengal) and Los Angeles, which becomes home due to his professional life. The similarity of their migrant journeys is that both stories are enveloped within environmental and climatic changes. The Gun Merchant’s life is at risk due to the wrath of a goddess who alters the climate to wreak havoc upon him, and Deen constantly encounters occurrences (either experienced by him or as occurrences narrated to him by other characters) that are a result of/related to climate change. The close encounter with the king cobra at the dhaam unknowingly routes his voluntary travels that evince the reality of climate-induced migrations of the nonhuman. His encounters with the nonhuman world due to climate change seem improbable but are a reality with the nonhumans abandoning their habitats and seeking refuge by migrating to habitable atmospheres. Furthermore, through the myth, Ghosh deploys an etymological wordplay to reveal the gap between the idea that the word intends to hold and the materiality of it that takes shape. The word “bundook” (rifle in English), which entered the Bangla language through Arabic and Persian does not stand for a gun/rifle in the term ‘gun island/gun merchant’ but the place *al-Bunduqeyya*, Arabic name for Venice, the place where the merchant travelled to (as a slave) in order to escape the goddess’s wrath. If language as play is a leitmotif, it is perhaps noteworthy to ponder over the relationship established between language and myth in writing an ecologically-conscious novel.

Etymologically, the ancient Greek term *mythos* originally meant speech or word but it gradually separated from *logos* (Greek term for rationality) and adopted a more fantastical or fictional aspect. Laurence Coupe describes the literary theorist Kenneth Burke’s definition of myth as “a narrative that effects identification within the community that takes it seriously, endorsing shared interests and confirming the given notion of order, while at the same time gesturing toward a more comprehensive identification — that among humanity, the earth, and the universe” (6). Undercutting the linearity of progress espoused by the colonialist project of modernity, the performativity of the myth’s relevance to an ecofiction exploration rests in its ability to offer an otherworldly perspective which can provide an alternate way of dwelling in the world. By offering a different lens of viewing the world and its connectedness, myth brings together the material and immaterial, and posits a world that sutures the nonhuman and more-than-

human co-relationalities present in the local and immediate environment through the planet's empirical evidences. Such an epistemological shift posits mythic storytelling as a literary strategy to narrativise cultural and linguistic realities in a manner which refocalises land, water, air, and all its nonhuman sentient beings as "storied matter"<sup>3</sup> (Oppermann and Serenella 1). In the novel, the majhi (boatman), dhaam's caretaker who originally belonged to Bangladesh which is on the other side of the Raimangal River (which flows as a marker separating lands between India and Bangladesh), functions as a littoral voice dwelling on land *and* on sea. His poignant statement, "but some day, when the time is right, someone will understand it [Manasa Devi's legend] and who knows? For them it may open up a world that we cannot see" (Ghosh 17) holds within its contours the iterability of the myth (i.e., reproducible in different contexts) and its embeddedness in elusive meanings that cannot be contained within the tropes of realism and of a singular meaning. His words highlight the myth's contemporaneous potential as a conduit between this world and another imagined world as well as surface as another lens with which to read the (present) world. Dovetailing a premodern form of storytelling that animates the nonhuman and more-than-human relationships and knowledges with an ecocritical approach that reads as if the physical material world and background environment setting mattered heightens the proximity between the human and the nonhuman. It recognises the materiality of reality and highlights the problematic that inheres in the linguistically cultural embeddedness of forms.

In the novel, the protagonist Deen's insistence upon unearthing a reasonable meaning and plausible explanation behind the Manasa Devi myth which grips the community's collective consciousness renders it as an exercise in allegorising the myth. As a self-proclaimed pragmatist who celebrates Western rationality, Deen is dismissive of the epistemological and ontological aspect of myths and other inexplicable occurrences to provide a different way of engaging and being in the world. He strikingly asserts, "I pride myself on being a rational, secular, scientifically minded person... I don't believe in the supernatural" (35) and is of the opinion that "[i]t's one thing, after all, to tell a child a fairy tale at bedtime; it's quite another to tell the same story to an adult, in all seriousness" (37). Ghosh creates a juxtaposition between scientism embodied by Deen and the journey he undertakes to historically unearth the factual meaning of the relationship between the myth of the goddess of all things venomous and the Gun Merchant. Myths are different from allegories since the latter are "*interpreted* myth and therefore can be regarded not merely as fiction but as an example to follow, and the word derives from the Greek word *allos* meaning 'other'" (da Silva 105). Fictionalising this in a literary form that is representing climate crisis allegorises the Manasi Devi-Gun Merchant's myth as an example of an ecologically conscious warning to the current age of the Anthropocene. Deen ends up tracing how a legend that he regarded as "just a story" (127) could hold within its contours the possibility of functioning as a cautionary tale to apprehend the

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<sup>3</sup> As Oppermann and Serenella affirm, "the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be "read" and interpreted as forming narratives, stories" (1). This material turn in the humanities problematises the nature-culture divide by arguing that the natural and physical world also has agentic capacities.



current climate crisis. Immersing himself in imagining the Gun Merchant's flight from Bengal to Venice due to his fear of the goddess induces in Deen an unexpected realisation of how he "wasn't looking at the Merchant's predicament from his [merchant's] own point of view [anymore] but rather from the perspective of his pursuer, the goddess [of snakes and other venomous creatures] herself" (152). The urgency of paying heed to the goddess' caution of curbing human greed functions as a caveat for Deen, compelling him to reassess his eurocentrism and skepticism of the nonhuman's acts of communication. This shift in perspective of reading the Gun Merchant's story through Manasi Devi's eyes emerges as an act of taking cognisance of the entanglement between the materiality of the nonhuman environmental lifeworld and cultural embeddedness of environmental storytelling.

In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh argues that in the historical moment of the modern, the novel form altered the way of reading the world through "the relocation of the unheard-of toward the background . . . while the everyday move[d] into the foreground" (23). Addressing the same by cutting through the realist tropes of the novel-form, Ghosh challenges the novel form's "banish[ment] of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday" (ibid.) by structuring Manasa Devi's myth as a force steering the novel's narrative. Preponderance of the myth in relation to human exceptionalism practiced by the Gun Merchant also extends the limits of the realist novel form to decentre human centrality and expand what it means to be a human, not as a self-enclosed entity but as a corporeal subjectivity that inevitably exists in tandem with its nonhuman environmental surroundings. Myth as a pertinent sight for an ecocritical enquiry, then, locates the world around the protagonist of a story (mythic or realist) as a living embodiment in itself where the nonhuman are given a voice and a glaringly obvious subjectivity and consciousness. Interestingly, the novel's thematic recognises a voice in the surrounding nonhuman and more-than-human elements not in terms of an anthropomorphic representation but in the nuances of the movements and expression of their characteristic traits that pertain to these living entities. Challenging modernist human exceptionalism, the novel's espousal of multivocality is an important trait of an ecocritical negotiation from a postmodern lens as it "fosters a cooperative learning process shifting attention from the position of authority to the idea of relationality" (Oppermann 116). It thereby posits an engagement between the human and the nonhuman in terms of a relation to one another as opposed to an anthropocentric supremacy over the nonhuman natural world.

The centrality of the logos is challenged as the myth is made apprehensible to the characters only through an embodied, visual, imagist, and oral form. The legend's specificity to a local place finds a physical manifestation of the reverence towards the goddess in the built-structure of the dhaam which acts as a archival storehouse. Engraved with pictorial hieroglyphic symbols (not alphabets) suggestive of the Gun Merchant's story, this act of archiving the folk legend characterises the dhaam as a storehouse which heightens the indispensable relevance of images, the pictorial as a form of writing, and the power of imagination in engaging with the world and reading its stories. The community experiences knowledge of the myth as a lived reality and it is this retelling from characters that attests to its ubiquitousness. Individuals living in the area

surrounding the dhaam acknowledged the myth's reality due to their belief that it is only because of Manasa Devi's blessings that their lives are spared during the cyclone. Established scholar of Venetian History, Professor Giacinta Schiavon (fondly called 'Cinta'), who is Deen's friend, recognises the effect upon the natives of Manasa Devi's myth within the coded language of jatra (local folk form of performance) which she attends during her trip to West Bengal. Her sharp observation that "for those people [locals attending the jatra performance based on Manasa Devi's story]... It is more real than real life" (34) attests to the power of the myth's performance. Moreover, Cinta corrects Deen by stating that concepts such as natural and supernatural work in tandem as "[n]either can exist without the other" (35), thereby acknowledging the plasticity of our rationally ordained world. The postcolonial novel's historicity is evinced by the inclusion of local myths, regional performing arts techniques such as jatra performances, and interspersions of the literary text with untranslated Bengali and Italian sentences (which too constitute a localism within Venice's spatiality and its relevance to the Bengali myth of Manasa Devi). Furthermore, the novel articulates a postcolonial historical situatedness via Cinta's deconstruction of the orientalist worldview that Deen prides himself in holding, by informing him of how densely populated Western discourse is with metaphysical tales that challenge European scientific rationality, particularly at the very site from which Renaissance rationalism originates: Italy.<sup>4</sup>

The problem of the representation of matter identified by the poststructuralists as an inevitable outcome of the constructedness of "realities" using language and of language's inherent instability and ambiguity also exposes the limits of rational discourse that uses language to apparently capture the internal logic of things. Interestingly, it is this inherent instability of language and its meaning that mythmaking deploys to iterate a connection between idea and matter. German philosopher Ernst Cassirer elucidates the methodological underpinnings of myth by mentioning that for the German philologist Max Müller, myth is "the product of a basic shortcoming, an inherent weakness of language. All linguistic denotation is essentially ambiguous—and in this ambiguity, this "paronymia" of words lies the source of all myths" (4). The question, then, is what knowledge does the ambiguity laden in the structural form of the myth of Bonduki Sadagar's encounter with the goddess of venomous nonhuman creatures present? What alternate world does the novelist imagine? It is through the constant act of incidental and deliberate storytelling, unexpected travel plans, uncanny weather occurrences due to climate crisis, and encounters with the power of the nonhuman and more-than-human to inflict misery upon the human's frail body that lead the protagonist to embark upon an exploratory journey which transforms his way of seeing and recognising the indivisibility of the human from one's environment. What needs further analysis is how a novel premised upon a myth

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<sup>4</sup> Ghosh destabilises European rationality by echoing Ernesto de Martino (Italian folklorist and ethnographer) whose seminal work on Tarantism (inspired by a *Tarantola*, venomous spider found in southern Italy) espoused the view that there exist "many well-documented instances of things that cannot be explained by so-called "natural" causes" (37) His work focused on how tarantism was a thriving practice in some parts of Italy wherein "... people believe that spirits can enter you through the bite of a tarantula [and to heal, these]... victims have to be exorcized by music, and especially dance – that is where the *tarantella* [folk dance form] comes from" (Ghosh 36).

enfolded around the nonhuman world negotiates the permeability of transcorporeality and language for shaping border negotiations concerning both, the human and the nonhuman.

### Agentic “Storied Matter”: Blurring (B)orders through Trans-corporeality

The novel's emphasis upon and engagement with the nonhuman actively contests humanism's ontological hierarchy which declares agential capacity as the sole faculty of humans (Western, white, male). Ghosh points out in *The Great Derangement* that climate change has the power to make “apparently inanimate things com[e] suddenly alive” (85). He further states that “this renewed awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and even perhaps the planet itself” is “one of the uncanniest effects of climate change” (85). Ecocritic Stacy Alaimo's development of trans-corporeality puts forth an ecologically fruitful approach and also re-defines our engagement with the environment per se. In her influential work *Bodily Natures* she argues that “imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (2). By way of transforming the human corporeal body as a site that is perpetually in motion, a state of becoming, and affected by the environment in which it finds itself, the material environment comes to play a pivotal role in human cognitive processes. Moreover, the interlinkages between the human body, material environment, and context of circulation of cultural labour output become relevant for further analysis.

The relationship between cultural forms of human labour and environment has been explored by the postcolonial ecocritic Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee through the Italian Marxist and literary critic Timpanaro's reflections on it: “concept of superstructure, *even understood non-mechanically*, cannot include the totality of cultural activities... Philosophy, science and art do not draw stimulus and nourishment solely from the ‘artificial terrain’ of society, but also from the ‘natural terrain’” (qtd. in Mukherjee 62–63; emphasis in original).<sup>5</sup> Trans-corporeality which “denies the human subject the sovereign, central position” (Alaimo 16) is an important tool that problematises borders by stressing porosity as an inevitable movement interlinking human, nonhuman, and more-than-human actors that constitute the world. Opening up the human body as *one* of the corporeal entities in ecological processes that maintain the planet as a site for collective existence and proliferation of living matter thus challenges the “anthropocentric model of disenchantment that has led to rampant instrumentalisation of nature” (Rangarajan 128). By emphasising movement, Alaimo opines that trans-corporeality “opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors” (2). Hence, porosity by virtue of its movement facilitates a

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<sup>5</sup> Mukherjee's engagement through basic materialist philosophical positions underscores conceptual frameworks of an aesthetics that he calls ‘eco-materialism’. For more, see his work *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.



disruption of manmade borders which conceptually seek to compartmentalise and retain dualisms between one and the other.

Dovetailing interconnectedness between human and nonhuman in terms of an invisible but scientifically and biologically identifiable reality (trans-corporeality) and as an invisible but inexplicably embodied experience (trans/altered consciousness) illustrates decolonial models of engagement that counter imperialist, neocolonial, and unjust practices of environmentalism. Numerous instances in the novel yoke together human, nonhuman, and more-than-human at a physical, material, and embodied level. Significantly, the most relevant entanglement is between Tipu, Deen, Rafi and the serpent that peacefully resides in the Gun Merchant's dhaam. King cobra's attack on Tipu feverishly consumes his body and releases into him a tiny amount of venomous "something" (79) that takes hold of him and burns him from within. While it unleashes physical un-ease in Tipu followed by visions that come true at later stages in the novel, the serpent also uses his fangs to bite into Deen's mindscape. The tumultuous episode of the snake bite renders Deen, a professional, educated individual, and a Bengali himself, as an outsider, inept at either providing solace or imparting knowledge. He observes a burgeoning animality grow in the interaction between injured Tipu and caretaker Rafi. "All at once his [Tipu's] body began to twitch and shake... like those of a dreaming animal" and "Rafi was like a wild creature... an odd bond seemed to have arisen between them; it was as if the venom that had passed from Tipu's body into Rafi's mouth had created an almost carnal connection" (80, 81). Deen's unhelpful responses highlight his inability to apprehend the knowledge system that governs the lives of people living in the Sundarbans. *Gun Island's* constant interface between the human and the nonhuman body collapses the differentiated body and mind into a conjoined bodymind and contests the notion of "body and its passions as potential obstacles to knowledge" (Wegenstein 24 qtd. in Mitchell and Hansen). In presenting the body's corporeality as an episteme, Ghosh counters the imperialist Cartesian duality which propagates conceptual knowing over physical and embodied knowing. Writing on the materiality of nonhuman bodies not as objects but as subjects unto themselves, Ghosh also presents how anthropogenically induced climate change and ecological events impact the nonhuman. I cite the cetologist Piya's insightful critique of the chemicalisation of water-bodies in detail to stress upon the strain experienced by the nonhuman in the face of forceful displacement, akin to that of a displaced migrant. She informs Deen that,

it's [chemicals flowing in the river] been a huge source of stress for them... to abandon all the places that you know and were forced to start all over again... There she [Rani, the matriarch of the dolphin pod] is, perfectly adapted to her environment, perfectly at home in it – and then things begin to change, so that all those years of learning become useless, the places you know best can't sustain you any more and you've got to find new hunting grounds. Rani must have felt that everything she knew, everything she was familiar with – the water, the currents, the earth itself – was rising up against her... No one knows where they belong any more, neither humans nor animals. (96-97)

In taking cognisance of nonhuman perspectives, Ghosh critiques anthropocentrism by inverting the gaze such that it is the nonhuman that is unleashed upon the human. Though wildfires wreak havoc for the larger ecological balance of the planet, Ghosh writes in the

novel how some birds of prey are known to start wildfires by carrying burning twigs in their beaks to forests since burning forests create favourable conditions for some species of raptor to prey on rodents and reptiles (117). Though the novel is interspersed with information regarding the destructiveness of wildfires for humans and nonhumans, inclusion of the activities of birds of prey provides another point of view that takes into consideration the agency of the birds of prey who act *for* themselves. Rani (the matriarch dolphin christened by Rafi), after being rescued by Piya establishes eye-contact with her, as if communicating an expression of gratitude for saving her life. Piya, a scientist by profession is reluctant to accept the blurring of species boundaries and is cautious to not anthropomorphise Rani and impose human sense-perceptions on cognitive faculties of the nonhuman creature. Cinta voices Alaimo's assertion that the environment needs to be re-defined using a different set of cognitive tools when she thanks Deen for having "brought the Gun Merchant into my life as well. I think that imposes an obligation on us... [t]o retrace his footsteps; to try to see Venice as it was when he was here" (217). In a bid to revisit the Venice of yore, its present spatiality confounds Deen when he and Cinta have an encounter with shipworms: "More and more of these are invading Venice, with the warming of the lagoon's water. They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities. It has become a big problem because Venice is built on wooden pilings. They are literally eating the foundations of the city" (230).

Furthermore, the story of Lubna (Bangladeshi woman overseeing the legal rights of migrants in Venice) is a testimony to humanity's precariousness, vulnerability, and inconsequentiality while encountering the nonhuman and more-than-human. Her story from the global south's neglected region captures the extreme vulnerability of existence that millions living on the fringes experience as a lived reality. A deadly cyclone that hit Bangladesh, taking away her family's possessions and driving her family members to seek shelter in the tree, pushes them further to the edge of precarity: "being in that tree, with the wind howling and the flood raging below, not knowing whether you would be killed by the storm or a snake" (160). Tathagata Som in his essay "The Place of the Planet: Climate Change and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*" makes a pertinent observation that the "juxtaposition of a premodern myth with ongoing anthropogenic climate change reframes contemporary discourses of climate change migration by pointing out that our shared species history is marked by both human and non-human migrations". Thus, Ghosh's attempt to suffuse the novel's primary narrative with multiple devastating environmental stories heightens the reality of how ecological fragility in the global south affects not only waterscapes and landscapes but lifeworlds of humans and nonhumans alike. Additionally, the novel not only registers climate catastrophe in the global south (here, the Sundarbans and Bangladesh) but also mentions Californian wildfires and the rising-sea level that is drowning Italy.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Today, Venice stands at the brink of being placed on UNESCO's list of "World Heritage Sites in Danger". In 2019, it was flooded due to torrential downpour because of climate change <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-504013088>. Increased tourism activities have severely threatened its ecology resulting in UNESCO reviewing Venice's status ( <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lifestyle/travel/venice-avoids-unesco-world-heritage-site-in-danger-list-after-ban-on-large-ships-101627004966405.html> ). As of now, it has not been put on the list.

## Negotiating Borders

Historically speaking, colonialism's expansionist and land-grabbing tendencies constructed nonhuman nature as an object meant for possession and dispossessed natives who laboured upon it for self-sustenance. Usurping natives' resources and extracting labour out of them to enrich their own accumulated wealth, colonialist tendencies constructed a relationship with nature in terms of dichotomies, hierarchies, and exploitation. Enfolded within negotiations regarding nature-culture dualism is another facet of othering: the issue of migration and displacement due to climate crisis and its resulting mass exodus. Socio-cultural practices of racial discrimination exacerbated in the advent of climate migration has classified displaced people as 'climate refugees'. Lester R. Brown explains that, "[o]ne of the defining characteristics of our time is the swelling flow of environmental refugees: people displaced by rising seas, more-destructive storms, expanding deserts, water shortages, and dangerously high levels of toxic pollutants in the local environment" (108). Inequalities in global social structures that retain global politics of exclusion trickle down to the immediate and personal social relations. The novel highlights how climate crisis severely exacerbates social injustices that greatly affect lives of people living on the margins (particularly in the global south). While the Gun Merchant travelled through international borders as a bonded slave subservient to "the greatest and most cruel experiment in planetary remaking... in the service of commerce" (279), climate migrants like Tipu and Rafi practice self-determination and assert their choice in the given circumstances of wanting a better life by moving beyond their homes that are constantly being eaten up by the sea. Migrant crisis that has at its root the problematic notion of 'identity' that shapes socio-political and economic aspect of migration is routed through the space of the internet. Though the internet saturates them with images of alluring life beyond home shores, the absence of the reality of racial and ethnic oppression is experienced by them only when they embark upon the journey. *Gun Island* explores the intersection of race, ethnicity, and environment by delineating a narrative that focuses on the lifeworld of displaced Dalits from the Sundarbans<sup>7</sup> as they chart their journey through "dalals" (connecting men) in the hope of living a better life by crossing international borders. Voluntary displacement experienced by Tipu in response to the adverse effects of climate change on his family's livelihood is also exacerbated by social ostracisation for having been born into the Dalit community which faces systemic caste-based oppression within homeland borders and beyond as well.<sup>8</sup>

The Sundarbans' textured materiality with its muddy waters and shifting terrains destabilises borders that conceptually work to maintain dichotomies between collective

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<sup>7</sup> Social groups living in the Sundarbans primarily belong to four *jatis* (caste system for classifying people into hierarchies exercising different power equations): Midnapuris, East Bengalis, Muslims, and Adivasis. For more, see <http://uddin.digital.conncoll.edu/sundarbans/local/garjontola-satjelia-india/jatis/>

<sup>8</sup> Ghosh has also engaged with displacement in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) where he chronicles the Morichjhanpi massacre (1978-79) that resulted in the displacement of Bengali Hindu Dalit refugees who had settled in Morichjhanpi (northernmost island of the Sundarbans).

categories like “us” and “them” and singular subjectivities like “I” and “you”. Located in the marshy area of the Sunderbans with its characteristic “shifting mudflats of the Bengal delta” (5), Nilima Bose, a longtime resident who also runs the charitable organisation ‘Badabon Trust’ observes how “[t]he islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they’re disappearing before our eyes” (18). A marginalised character like Moyna (Tipu’s mother who illegally helps people to cross borders and the widow of the poor fisherman Fokir who died saving the Indian-American cetologist Piya during a storm that hit the Sundarbans<sup>9</sup>) voices the wrath of the Sundarbans when she poignantly says that sometimes “it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sunderbans” (47). Moreover, the social and ethnic demographic of Sundarbans comprising marginalised communities and adivasis (tribals living in forests) bear the brunt of vulnerabilities of different degrees—climatic, economic, social, and cultural. If the Sundarbans’ local spatiality blurs boundaries between land and water, stable and unstable, in itself it is constantly being usurped by a larger force of nature: the sea. Environmental detritus accumulated due to human activities is swallowing livable lands, disrupting the lives of humans and nonhuman species as well. Thus, the border discloses an important dimension of migrant ecologies: “the porous exchange of inside and outside” (Iovino 21). The pertinent question that arises is—what does the environmental refugees’ action that pierces through the perviousness of borders do to ideological and material constructions of nation-state boundaries?

The novel highlights the fact that the majority of the workers living in Venice are Bangladeshi migrants. On the one hand, for individuals with stable social and economic identities (Deen, Piya, Cinta, Lisa), transnational movement is carried out effectively through official fiefdom which generates and reaffirms state-sanctioned conceptual reality of borders as legitimate. On the other hand, marginalised people with less or no social mobility are constantly negotiating with borders, visiblising the constructedness of borders and their own precarious destinies. Transforming international spaces into a common point of gathering, characters that meet in the Sundarbans at the start of the novel (Deen, Tipu, Rafi, and Piya) end up finding each other in Venice due to unforeseeable climate events, uncanny coincidences, and social mobility (legally and illegally). Their different socio-economic positions point to the interface between legally sanctioned macro-level movements that adhere to borders and localised illegal individual self-determination that takes place to transcend borders that continually practice racial segregations. With a myth that sutures transnational locations through the Bonduki Sadagar’s story with attributes of environmental catastrophes spread across continents, the leitmotif of climate displacement is evinced when Deen observes from his aeroplane window of how “[f]rom that height it was possible to mistake the Venetian lagoon for the Sundarbans” (147). As planetarity brings the local and the global into dialogue, *Gun Island* “builds towards a translocal ecology that can accommodate a wider range of mobile

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<sup>9</sup> Fokir’s death occurs in Ghosh’s earlier novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004) in the chapter titled ‘The Wave’. He turns himself into a human shield to protect Piya from the tidal wave, ultimately leading to his demise.

populations, including climate migrants" (Newns 13). Heightening narratives of climate displacement surface as being instrumental in narrating an environmental tale that displaces the mainstream "dominant narrative of reason... [which has been resulting in] global economic regimes that threaten the biosphere" (Plumwood 5-6) and posits instead, a discursive-materialist way of experiencing the world.

The novel's climactic moment is the interface between overpowering forces of the nation-state and the natural world's climatic changes. On the one hand are manmade nation-state borders flanked by fascist right-wing forces and left-liberals seeking to engage (as per their politics) with the incoming Blue Boat carrying climate and economic refugees seeking asylum in Italy. On the other hand is the force of nature which at this opportune moment drastically changes the atmosphere. A severe change in the weather conditions results in the swirling of the waters and the sky and this natural disaster (storm) looms over *all* social actors. All passport-holding citizens on land and fleeing refugees on water become helpless, rendering the place-ness of the Italian border as an abstract space, vulnerable to environmental fury. Moreover, the nonhuman too, ends up defying manmade borders. The narrator observes how birds "must be migrating northwards- they're going to pass right over us" (281) and how "dolphins and whales that were undulating through the water" (282) were free to migrate from their domestic Venetian habitats to "international" habitats. If territorialisation locks land, the nonhuman and the more-than-human world deterritorialises atmosphere, landscape, and waterscape. 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. Thus, the act of crossing borders due to climate emergency is tantamount to the fact that climate change does not discriminate between geographical borders, nation-states, and living beings.

### Manasa Devi as an Interpreter Re-presenting the (B)orders

The chasm between nature and culture becomes the novel's focal point of engagement and is explored through the interface between the planet's physical materiality and its presentation through the challenging task of using the representational tool *logos* to signify the physical world which is "out there". The disenchantment of nature as "the denial to nature of all subjectivity, all experience, all feeling [that renders] nature as disqualified" (Griffin 2) is effectively challenged by illustrating agentic capacities of the nonhuman and more-than-human world. Exploring the interrelatedness between language and the physical world through the postcolonial nonhuman, the novel highlights the presence of an intermeshed network of human, nonhuman, and more-than-human worlds, and thus dismantles the predominance of a homogenised world that positions the self-sufficiency of the human at its centre. It upturns the normative direction of communication from the human to the inanimate world and contests the notion that action is "always" acted/inscribed by the human *upon* the nonhuman.



Nonetheless, while *Gun Island* seeks to destabilise borders, it is pertinent to note that the unseen boundaries that the goddess Manasa Devi seeks to retain problematise a simplistic understanding of borders as limiting. The novel situates Manasa Devi as an intermediary between humans and nonhumans who do not speak each other's languages so as to retain borders that are needed between earth's generative capacity to give and humankind's exploitative capacity to take. By way of a postanthropocentric reading, the underlying impetus of my paper is that there are borders that *need* to be adhered to in order to contain human practices of capitalist exploitation which instrumentalise nature. As opposed to borders that have an exploitative xenophobic logic at their centre to racially segregate and possess people, reading borders defined by the figure of the mythic goddess of nonhuman creatures through an ecocritical prism refracts the ecological consciousness prevalent in pre-modern texts that recognise the inter-relationality between humans, nonhumans, earth, and the universe. My paper has thus shown how Ghosh's reconceptualisation through the postcolonial nonhuman blurs borders and posits instead, a relational way of living that dismantles the constructedness of hierarchies while paying heed to (b)orders for ecological sustainable living.

Submission received 24 March 2022

Revised version accepted 7 September 2022

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