

## Book Review Article

### Climate Change and Migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*.

GUN ISLAND BY AMITAV GHOSH (GURGAON, PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE, 2019)

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The title often determines the quality of readers it would attract, and as such environmentalists and the fiction lovers all over the world cannot overlook the two books authored by Amitav Ghosh, whose works - *The Great Derangement* and *Gun Island*- appeal to both these set of readers. Ghosh's 2016 book "The Great Derangement", a non-fiction, is a take on the environment crisis the present day world has ushered into due to anthropogenic activities, and the failure of the creative writers to address that explicitly. Therefore, *The Great Derangement* becomes a perfect prelude to what was to come next, the fiction *Gun Island*. Both the texts complement each other and are essential readings if one is to decipher two things: The magnanimity of the crisis that we are exposed to, and the responsibility of a novelist to present that proportionately through his or her work of art. Ghosh has indeed been successful in both the tasks.

*Gun Island* is like a maze which needs to be deciphered by linking several apparently interspersed events to get a complete perception of the multidimensional effects of climate change. The novel opens with an exploration of the mystical shrine of "Gun Merchant" dedicated to the serpent goddess "Manasa Devi" in the the Sundarbans region. The initiation of the protagonist Dinanath Datta into this journey and his inducement to explore the area by one marine biologist Piyali Roy unfurls the intricate relation between anthropogenic activities and the marine world. The beaching of whales in the Sundarbans, the appearance of venomous sea-snakes in Southern California and poisonous spiders in Venice in search of new habitats are all scientifically explored through

fictional episodes. The change in the climatic conditions all over the world, the change in animal and marine habitats, and the natural calamities, which appeared unintelligible, are all finally linked to an indefinite “past beyond memory”, with the realisation that deliverance lies in that past. To simplify, the journey of Dinanath Datta into the past through the surviving artifacts invokes the moment in history that has changed the entire equation between man and nature: the colonising enterprise of the European nations in the 17th century and its corollaries like migration and rise of industrialisation that have caused the present day crisis. The explication also helps one to understanding the situation that is responsible for the vast number of illegal as well as legal migrations happening all over the world, especially from Asian nations to Europe and the USA. Whereas the focus is on the climate change and its effect on the world at large, the novel at the same time also provides sufficient scope to discover the genesis of the problem. The title of the novel is a little evasive and also interesting because the search for the story behind “Gun Island” which starts in Sundarbans takes the narrator and also the reader through a meandering route of the narrative space and location only to discover that the Gun Island is “Venice”. This is also suggestive of the locus of the problem related to the climate change. This linkage takes us through the varied human activities since the beginning of the seventeenth century and connects every episode to the central issue of global warming.

Ghosh’s sustained narrative and engaging expression arrests the attention of the readers and transports them into the uncanny world created within the novel. The readers are at once at the periphery and also within the narrative because the readers can objectively see and relate the real world with the fictional world created in the novel and at the same time empathise with the narrator about what is actually taking place in the fictional world.

The novel will have different appeal to different readers depending on the ideological moorings and geographical of the reader. For European readers, the novel opens up possibilities to be apologetic

leading to salvation, and for environmentalists it is surely a step forward to fight the climate change. For someone residing in Northeast India, the novel shall help to relate to the issues pertaining to migration, the protests against the construction of Lower Subansiri hydroelectric Project, Brahmaputra dredging and may be the plight of the Chakmas who have been dislocated from the Chittagong hill tracts. A simultaneous reading of Sonjoy Hazarika's *Rites of Passage* will further elicit the kind of problems that the northeast India is facing, which can actually be seen as a microcosm of the larger problem: the migration from neighbouring nation. However unlike Hazarika, Ghosh overlooks the issue of population growth and does not address the issue at all. It would be too naive to ignore the ramifications of over populating the world now. Nevertheless, other issues like natural disasters (Flood and Cyclone), illegal immigration, and the syndicate that supports this kind of human trafficking have been exposed by both the writers. What has been addressed is only the tip of the iceberg, and a journalistic approach can unearth much more hidden links and agenda.

The novel has a universal appeal and is a must read if one wants to understand the socio-political reality of the world.

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