



ANALYSING THE SYMBOLS, IMAGES AND MOTIFS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *GUN ISLAND* IN A TRANSHISTORICAL AND TRANSITIONAL PERSPECTIVE

¹Mrs. D.G. Kalaivani, ²Dr. P. Selvi,

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, ²Assistant Professor,

¹PG and Research Department of English,

¹Vellalar College for Women, Erode, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract: Amitav Ghosh is a distinguished Indian English writer best known for his historical fiction. His greatness lies in depicting all his first-hand experience in his novels rather than portraying the stories using the second-hand knowledge. He is a virtuoso in handling the themes like migration, history, culture and mysteries in all his novels. He has a great proficiency in expressing the historical events in a pragmatic way. Ghosh has gained mastery in manipulating various symbols and images with the themes. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, the name itself acts as a symbol as it depicts the city of Venice, The Land of Canals. This paper tries to explore the portrayal of symbols, images and motifs handled by the author in the novel *Gun Island* in a transhistorical perspective. In this novel, the author presents the story of both the opportunities and obstacles faced by the people while they are migrating from one country to other in an illegal way, the voyage experiences of the characters' in ships, the exploration of the world of animals and sea creatures, focuses on the environmental issues like climate change, the conflict between the profits and the world, Illegal migration and nostalgia.

Index Terms - Symbols, Images, Motifs, Transhistorical and Transitional perspective.

INTRODUCTION:

Amitav Ghosh is a prominent Indian English writer who is an adept in handling the universal themes like history, culture and journey in most of his novels with the quality of its own. He is a forte in his characterization in all his novels. Every significant character is limned realistically. In most of his novels, Ghosh handles time in a non-linear way as there will be a juxtaposing of past and present is further developed by the use of future in his novels. In order to relate past and present, he has effectively handled the theme of memory in most of his novels. The novels of Ghosh take us to different parts of the world as he attempts to portray the lives of his contemporaries from different countries like India, Bangladesh, Egypt, Malaysia, Burma, England, etc. As Ghosh is from Calcutta, he just pictures the streets of Calcutta and its landmarks in a magnificent way. He has unintentionally included so many symbols and images in his novels. Motifs and Metaphors are also exerted in plenty. In his novel *Gun Island*, he has used many of the symbols, images and motifs to represent various themes like history, culture and journey.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The core objective of this research study is to analyse the use of symbols in a transhistorical perspective, images and motifs in a transitional perspective.

Symbols

A symbol may be a character or an event or an object that the writer uses one thing to exhibit something that is abstract. A strong symbol is having a good connection with what it meant to symbolise in one way or the other.

Images

Images are the visual representation of a situation or an event or a person which create an impact on the five senses of the readers including internal emotions and feelings. It creates a picture in the minds of the reader through the words of the author that evokes the sensory experience of the readers. To appeal the reader's sensory experiences, the writers usually go with different figures of speech and effective descriptive language.

Motifs

A motif can be a sound, a symbol, an idea, a word or an action existing throughout the narrative. It emboldens a story by adjoining ideas and images to the theme that appears frequently.

Transhistorical Perspective

Transhistorical is the entity of the idea of transhistoricity which means the quality of having or holding something outside the bounds of history.

Transitional Phase

A transitional period is one in which things are changing from one state to another.

SYMBOLS IN A TRANSHISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**Dhaam**

A Dhaam is a Bengali word that represents Manasa Devi's shrine that is being hidden inside a tiger-infested mangrove forests in the Sundarbans. Shrines are built for the gods or saints of a cult or for the miraculous characters and are considered as a holy place. Amitav Ghosh defines the shrine through the words,

"Sometimes shrines are built to preserve their memory; and almost always their names are associated with a legend (Ghosh 5)."

The shrine and the hieroglyphic images and symbols present in the shrine resolve the mystery behind the name of the merchant Bundook Sadagar. The period at which the shrine was built acts as a mystery in the beginning and it is being disentangled from the Nilima's poem,

"Calcutta had neither people nor houses then
Bengal's great port was a city-of-the-world (Ghosh 16)."

The Merchant's shrine was built at a time when there was no Calcutta – that is to say, before the establishment of the city, in 1690.

"Could it be that *nagar-e-jahan* was a play on words, a cryptic reference to Dhaka in the seventeenth century?"

If this were the case, it would follow that the shrine had been built at some time between 1605, when the emperor Jahangir was enthroned, and 1690, when Calcutta was founded by the British (Ghosh 22)."

The architecture of the shrine is associated with the Bishnupur style of architecture that is the mixture of Islamic and Hindu elements to marvellous effect. The roof of the Bishnupur temples bears the structured outline of an upturned boat and Ghosh explains the Bishnupur architecture through the lines,

"Nor was that surprising, for everything about the structure – its burnt sienna colour, the shape of the roof, and the panels on its facade – spoke of Bengal's most celebrated style of architecture, which had originated in the kingdom of Bishnupur in the seventeenth century (Ghosh 68)."

The shrine's facade was decorated with good number of friezes and the panels bore the depictions of guns. Some of the tracings with crudely drawn hieroglyphs were found with various symbols and motifs represented infinite times in several combinations. Ghosh expresses those hieroglyphs as,

"The most prominent of these were a couple of turbaned figures, each paired with a distinctive symbol. One of these symbols was easy to decipher: it was an image of the palm of a hand, sheltered by a cobra's hood. Guessing that this sign stood for the goddess of snakes, Manasa Devi, I assumed that the figure with which it was paired represented the Gun Merchant. If this were correct, it would seem to follow that the second figure stood for the sailor, 'Captain Ilyas'. I was fairly sure that this was indeed the case, but I could make no sense of the symbol that was paired with the sailor (Ghosh 69)."

Dhaam, the Goddess Manasa Devi's shrine acts as a transhistorical symbol as it depicts and carries the symbols that are related to the myth of the Gun Merchant happened in the seventeenth century which was being connected with the life of Nilima during the year 1970 and also with the contemporary modern life of Deen. Even though the Dhaam is the shrine of the Hindu goddess Manasa Devi, it is being protected by the Muslim man.

The tale of the merchant

The first line of the novel *Gun Island* starts with the mystery behind the name 'Bonduki Sadagar' with the lines:

"The strangest thing about this strange journey was that it was launched by a word – and not an unusually resonant one either but a banal, commonplace coinage that is in wide circulation, from Cairo to Calcutta (Ghosh 3)."

The name of the merchant is 'Bonduki Sadagar' in Bengali could be translated as the Gun Merchant. The mystery behind the name Bonduki Sadagar makes Deen to embark an adventure on his own that makes him to travel from New York City in US, to the Sundarbans in India, to Venice in Italy, and into the Mediterranean, following the path of the fabulous merchant. Initially, Deen believes that the name Bonduki Sadagar means the Gun Merchant and lately he realises that it stands for the Arabic name of the city of Venice, Al-Bunduqevya. After doing further research about the mystery behind the name of the merchant, he found out that it means the merchant who went to Venice for trade.

The tale of the Merchant associated with the snakes is the transhistorical one as it is being carried away from generation to generation. While Kanai was speaking with Deen about the Bengali folklore, Deen listed out the characters that he used to hear from the stories uttered by his grandparents.

IMAGES IN A TRANSITIONAL PERSPECTIVE**Sundarbans**

Sundarbans is a place of lush mangrove forests located in the delta region between India and Bangladesh, where the Dhaam is located and it is being crafted carefully by Amitav Ghosh in his novels *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019). The muddy atmosphere and the perilous ambiance of Sundarbans are felt by the readers while reading these novels. The presence of serpents and the tigers in the mangrove forests of sundarbans and also the rapidly changing environment of sundarbans are portrayed realistically. Amitav Ghosh describes Sundarbans as "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). Ghosh in one of his interviews mentioned the sundarbans as:

"As you may know, I wrote an earlier book about the Sundarbans. It's called *The Hungry Tide*. The Sundarbans just worked its way into this story. I think that happens when you have a very powerful landscape—it tends to impose itself on you. I've been there a lot. It's very much part of my imaginative life. I guess it was inevitable that it would be part of this book as the Sundarbans are very, very badly affected by climate change and it's an ongoing disaster."

Venice

The beauty of the city of Venice is presented in a splendid way with the lines:

“Since Venice is itself an island – or rather an archipelago of islands – the old ghetto is an island within an island, as you can see (Ghosh 135).”

Ghosh compares the city of Venice, Italy with the city of Varanasi in India as Deen experiences living in both the cities and also the countries. Both the cities are related in portals of time and the visitors of the cities are aware of mortality.

“The kinship of the two cities is nowhere more apparent than in Venice’s getto: the walls that surround it, the narrow entrances that lead to it, and the slender, crooked houses – all of this reminded me of a part of Varanasi that I particularly love: the area around the Bindu Madhav temple, near Panchganga Ghat. There too you find seclusion and serenity in the midst of noisy multitudes; there too you have a sense of being amidst a community that follows age-old customs, unobserved by the world (Ghosh 151).”

Ghosh pictures the images in a pragmatic way that talks of the atmosphere of sundarbans, Dhaam, Venice, illegal migration of the Bangladeshis to Italy. Amitav Ghosh in his recent interview, “My intention was for word and image to have parity. So the book would have to be collaboration”.

Los Angeles Wildfires

Ghosh weaves the myth of the Gun Merchant into contemporary weather-related realities such as the Los Angeles wildfires, the unusual travels of dolphins and spiders, and the sinking buildings of Venice, to create a pacy, absurdist, and ultimately hopeful tale of our times. The landscape of Los Angeles after the wildfires is presented as “a charred, smouldering stretch of forested hillside that had already been laid waste by the fires (Ghosh 116)”. The situation after the wildfires shows the destruction of the forests and the wildlife in it is presented through the lines:

“I would learn later that the remains of a wildfire are by no means a wasteland. For certain species of birds – hawks, eagles and other raptors – they present rare opportunities for hunting: the loss of tree cover makes it easy to spot those rodents and reptiles that have survived the fire by burrowing underground. For birds of prey the conditions are so favourable that some species of raptor have even been known to actually start, or spread, wildfires by carrying burning twigs afield in their beaks (Ghosh 117).”

Tornadoes

The readers can visualize the image of tornado in their eyes through the sensible description of words used by Amitav Ghosh in his novel *Gun Island*. It is being presented in the below lines:

“Glancing up I caught sight of a patch of dark cloud, heaving and shuddering, almost as though it were trying to give birth. Then all at once it split apart, like a bursting eggshell, and a thin, grey extrusion emerged from it and began to descend towards the earth, twisting like a whiplash as it grew (Ghosh 250).”

MOTIF IN A TRANSITIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Journey

Ghosh employs the motif of journey in the lives of most of the major characters of the novel. Each and every character will make a journey to explore something in their life: the protagonist Deen travels from Brooklyn to India and to Venice, another character Piya is being constructed as a vagabond who travels frequently between India and the U.S. to pursue her research on the life of marine mammals, Tipu and Rafi make extreme journeys across borders without passports, Cinta moves around the world freely as an educationalist to attend conferences.

One of the major characters, Deen travels to Venice to explore and collect more information about the life of Gun Merchant. During his stay in Venice, he stumbles upon the fact that many Bangladeshis are working in the streets of Venice as an illegal migrant labour. Those migrants have made a perilous journey through Middle East and Africa. The second part of the novel titled Venice, talks of the hostile nature of the Italian armed forces against those illegal migrants who enters into Italy through the waters. Besides that, Ghosh adds the thriving journey of the Gun Merchant in the past. During his first travel to sundarbans, Deen explored the Dhaam, a temple built for the snake Goddess Manasa Devi, located on the uninhabited island of Sundarbans where he has collected the symbols that gives him the clue to know more about the Gun Merchant. During his second journey to US, he meets Cinta who gives him the unseen truth hidden behind the name of the Gun Merchant, Bonduki Sadagar. He made his next journey to Venice, where he finds out that the people working in Venice is actually Bangladeshis and not Italian as they are speaking the Madaripur dialect of Bangla, which is the native town of Deen. Piya makes her travel to India to pursue her research on the Irrawaddy dolphin, known to science as *Orcaella brevirostris*. Professoressa Giacinta Schiavon called Cinta who is presented by Ghosh as a good friend of Deen in the novel is making her journey to find out some mysteries about the Venetian Spice trade. In her life, journey is portrayed pessimistically as it acts as a reason for the loss of her loved ones. And in the life of Rafi and Tipu, the journey that they have made is in an illegal way, because of that they have undergone many troubles and disruptions in their life.

CONCLUSION

Amitav Ghosh constructed his novel *Gun Island* in a splendid way that he handily gyrates time and space. The irresistible changes and intensified displacement of the world makes the story of the novel an engrossing one. It also tells the story of a man who finds hope and faith in the world through two phenomenal women. Ghosh has fabricated a story that complements the reminiscence of a bygone era with the coeval of the modern times. He also depicts the story with a wide range of manifold characters from different countries and supplicates history and myth. The realistic symbols Dhaam and the fact that lies behind the tale of the merchant is transhistorical as it is being there throughout history. The images portrayed by Amitav Ghosh such as the sundarbans, the city of Venice, Los Angeles Wildfires and tornadoes acts as a transitional phase in the lives of the characters. Journey acts a motif as it is being repeated throughout the novel and is being made by most of the characters to explore something in their life. The denouement of the novel reveals the belief of Deen and Cinta who realised that the mystery behind the Gun Merchant is not just a myth but a significant and pivotal piece of information that is pertinent today.

REFERENCES

Books

[1] Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. Penguin Random House, 2019.

Web References

- [1] <https://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/symbolism>
- [2] <https://literarydevices.net/imagery/>.
- [3] <https://literaryterms.net/motif/>.
- [4] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transhistoricity#:~:text=Transhistoricity%20is%20the%20quality%20of,is%20said%20to%20be%20transhistorical.>
- [5] <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/transitional-phase.>
- [6] https://www.bookbrowse.com/bb_briefs/detail/index.cfm/ezine_preview_number/14447/gun-island.
- [7] <https://storiesforearth.com/2021/04/15/gun-island-the-great-derangement-amitav-ghosh/>.
- [8] <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2019/autumn/gun-island-amitav-ghosh.>
- [9] <https://electricliterature.com/gun-island-is-a-magical-realism-novel-about-climate-change-and-migration/>.
- [10] <https://kenyonreview.org/reviews/gun-island-by-amitav-ghosh-738439/>.

