



The Synergy of History and Ecology in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract: Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) stages an urgent dialogue between historical displacement and ecological devastation, revealing the inseparability of human and nonhuman histories. This article articulates an original framework of planetary environmentalism to analyze Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019), moving beyond thematic summary to explore how the novel constructs a mythic–ecological narrative where human and nonhuman histories converge. Drawing on post anthropocentric theory (Samkaria 2022), planetary environmentalism (Khan 2024), and eco-spiritual myth criticism (Nitya 2025), this study illustrates how Ghosh endows nonhuman entities and myths with agency, thereby unsettling entrenched anthropocentric and colonial historical narratives. The paper advances current scholarly debates by arguing that *Gun Island* does not merely depict ecological crisis but performs an ethics of planetary storytelling, reimagining the Sundarbans and climate refugees as emblematic of interspecies and trans historical solidarity. This approach fills a critical gap in eco-critical discourse by demonstrating how Ghosh's fiction models a relational, multispecies narrative ethic for the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Planetary Environmentalism, Mythic Ecologies, Post anthropocentrism, Climate Justice, Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island*, Eco-Spiritual Narrative

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh has emerged as one of the most compelling voices in contemporary world literature, particularly for his sustained engagement with history, ecology, and the crises of human displacement. While earlier novels such as *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and the *Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2015) interrogated the intersections of empire, migration, and environmental change, *Gun Island* (2019) crystallizes these concerns into a planetary vision. Here, the narrative blurs the boundaries between past and present, human and nonhuman, myth and science, to reveal the entangled crises of historical violence and ecological collapse.

Existing scholarship on *Gun Island* has predominantly treated it as an instance of climate fiction or as a narrative extending Ghosh's concerns in *The Great Derangement* (2016). While such readings underscore the novel's urgency, they often stop short of elaborating how Ghosh integrates history and ecology into a single symbolic and narrative framework. This paper addresses that gap by arguing that *Gun Island* demonstrates a profound **synergy of history and ecology**, where colonialism, forced migration, and capitalist exploitation re-emerge in the guise of ecological devastation and climate displacement. By analyzing the novel's use of symbols, images, and myths, I demonstrate how Ghosh reconceptualizes history as ecological and ecology as historical, thereby challenging anthropocentric historiography and expanding the imaginative horizon of the Anthropocene.

The significance of this approach lies in its contribution to current debates on planetary environmentalism. Scholars such as Anwaruddin Khan (2024) and Abdul Mannan Hossain (2024) have emphasized the urgency of situating climate change in postcolonial and global South contexts, where ecological precarity cannot be disentangled from imperial legacies. Recent studies on ecospirituality (Nitya 2025) and border ecologies (Ahmed 2024; Samkaria 2022) further highlight the necessity of reading climate crisis through frameworks that cross disciplinary and species boundaries. In dialogue with this body of scholarship, this paper proposes that Ghosh's novel is not merely a narrative of environmental catastrophe but a planetary allegory that reconceives history, ecology, and myth as co-constitutive forces.

Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary critical framework combining **postcolonial ecocriticism, post anthropocentric theory, and myth criticism**. First, drawing on Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" and Ursula Heise's notion of "eco-cosmopolitanism," the analysis situates *Gun Island* within a tradition of environmental critique attentive to colonial histories and global inequities. Such an approach underscores how climate change disproportionately affects regions like the Sundarbans, where centuries of imperial extraction continue to shape ecological vulnerabilities.

Second, the paper adopts a **post anthropocentric perspective**, informed by scholars such as Samkaria (2022), Ahmed (2024), and Iftakhar (2024), who argue for the recognition of nonhuman agency and multispecies entanglements. This framework is particularly relevant to *Gun Island*, where animals, landscapes, and climatic forces emerge as historical actors with agency, memory, and symbolic power.

Third, the study employs **myth criticism** to interpret Ghosh's integration of folklore, particularly the myth of Manasa Devi, as an eco-spiritual counterpoint to Western rationalism. Following Northrop Frye's theory of archetypal symbolism and Nitya's (2025) recent work on eco-spiritual readings of South Asian myths, the analysis demonstrates how myth functions as both ecological ethics and historical memory.

By combining these frameworks, the methodology allows for a holistic reading of *Gun Island* that highlights its planetary imagination. The novel is interpreted not only as climate fiction but also as a work of symbolic historiography, ecological critique, and mythopoetic storytelling. This interdisciplinary approach ensures engagement with current scholarly debates while positioning the paper within the broader trajectory of postcolonial ecocriticism and Anthropocene studies.

Historicizing the Ecological Crisis

At the outset of *Gun Island*, Ghosh frames his narrative through a Bengali legend of the "Gun Merchant," which the protagonist Deen initially dismisses as folklore. As Deen journeys across the Sundarbans and beyond, however, the myth gradually reveals itself as an encoded history of colonial commerce, maritime conflict, and forced migration. The novel underscores how myth operates not as escapist fantasy but as a repository of historical memory. Recent critics have argued that such mythic structures encode ecological knowledge as well as social histories (Dhar 2023; Iovino 2024). Ghosh's reanimation of the Gun Merchant tale exemplifies this, for it links the violence of colonial expansion with the ecological transformations of the delta—deforestation, embankment construction, and human displacement.

By historicizing ecological crises, *Gun Island* demonstrates that contemporary environmental instability cannot be separated from imperial histories. The Sundarbans, a tidal mangrove landscape continually reshaped by cyclones and rising seas, also bears the scars of colonial land clearances and extractive economies. Scholars such as Chakrabarty (2021) and Baucom (2022) have emphasized that the Anthropocene must be understood not merely as a geological epoch but as a historical condition emerging from capitalist and colonial expansion. Ghosh dramatizes this insight by situating present-day climate crises within the *longue durée* of empire. The rising seas and displaced populations of the twenty-first century echo the forced migrations and environmental devastations of earlier centuries.

Thus, the myth of the Gun Merchant becomes a narrative device for mapping deep histories of ecological violence. Rather than treating myth and history as separate domains, Ghosh entwines them, showing how cultural memory carries ecological truths. In doing so, *Gun Island* extends postcolonial ecocriticism by revealing how colonial histories are inscribed not only in archives and diasporas but also in landscapes, waters, and mythic traditions. This narrative strategy allows Ghosh to bridge temporal divides, reimagining ecology as historical and history as ecological.

Climate Refugees and the Legacy of Empire

One of the central insights of *Gun Island* is that the phenomenon of climate migration cannot be disentangled from older patterns of imperial displacement. The novel's characters—particularly Tipu and Rafi—embody what might be termed *climate refugees of continuity*: their twenty-first century precarities resonate with the histories of indentured labor, exilic movement, and forced migration that shaped the colonial world. In charting their journeys across the Sundarbans, South Asia, and the Mediterranean, Ghosh refuses to portray climate migration as a wholly novel crisis. Instead, he situates it within a *longue durée* of mobility structured by empire, capital, and ecological disruption.

Recent scholarship has reinforced this view by situating climate displacement in a genealogical relationship with colonial histories. Farrier (2023) argues that "to narrate the Anthropocene without colonialism is to narrate an illusion," while Alam and Huq (2024) demonstrate how the South Asian climate crisis is deeply tied to colonial land-use practices and continuing extractivist economies. Within this framework, Ghosh's portrayal of Mediterranean refugees is not only a humanitarian narrative but also a historical echo of earlier diasporas, where exploitation, environmental degradation, and transoceanic violence coalesced. The "boat people" of today, in other words, are haunted by the shadow of indentured ships and slave vessels of the colonial past.

By embedding contemporary climate displacement in this wider historical cartography, *Gun Island* destabilizes the linear narratives that frame the climate crisis as a purely modern event. Nixon's notion of "slow violence" finds literary expression here, as the ecological devastations of empire accumulate into present-day crises that unfold across generations. This historicized approach also extends Robyn Eckersley's idea of *critical ecological citizenship*, whereby displaced populations embody the costs of ecological and historical injustice. In this sense, Tipu and Rafi are not merely characters within a fictional migration story but emblems of an ongoing continuum of displacement that stretches from the colonial era to the Anthropocene.

Thus, Ghosh articulates a new paradigm for understanding climate refugees—not as isolated victims of environmental collapse but as subjects embedded in historical continuities of exploitation. His narrative insists that ecological ethics must include historical accountability, for without reckoning with the colonial roots of displacement, any response to the climate refugee crisis remains incomplete. By staging these continuities, *Gun Island* demonstrates how literature can perform the critical work of mapping connections across time, geography, and ecology.

Non-Human Histories: Ecology as Historical Actor

In *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh insists that the ecological world is not a passive backdrop to human action but an active historical agent. The novel's disorienting appearances of nonhuman actors—marine creatures in unfamiliar places, dolphins stranded in Venetian canals, migratory birds abandoning ancient routes—signal a reordering of history in which the natural world testifies to centuries of domination, extraction, and neglect. These ecological disruptions dramatize what Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann call "material ecocriticism," where matter itself narrates history through its agency and inscriptions of trauma (Iovino and Oppermann 2022).

By animating natural phenomena as historical participants, Ghosh unsettles anthropocentric historiography. Wildfires in California, for instance, are not depicted as isolated climate events but as planetary "backlashes"—historical consequences of human exploitation. In framing these disasters as acts of ecological memory, Ghosh aligns with Dipesh Chakrabarty's claim that the Anthropocene folds natural history into human history, producing a "conjoined crisis of species and system" (Chakrabarty 2021). Here, the earth itself becomes an archive of colonial and capitalist violence, recording human trespass in the language of storms, floods, and fires.

Contemporary ecocritical scholarship underscores this nonhuman historicity. van Dooren (2023) explores how species extinction must be understood as both a biological event and a cultural-historical wound, while Haraway (2023) calls for "sympoiesis," a recognition of co-creation across species that displaces human-centered narratives. *Gun Island* embodies these

insights by placing multispecies entanglements at the heart of its storytelling: dolphins, snakes, and migratory birds are not metaphors but interlocutors, bearers of ecological knowledge that humans must learn to heed.

This narrative repositioning of the nonhuman challenges dominant climate discourses that reduce ecological crisis to carbon metrics or technical fixes. Instead, Ghosh insists on a narrative ethics that recognizes the nonhuman as historical witness and co-actor. In doing so, he reframes literature as a space where ecological memory confronts human amnesia. By foregrounding the historical agency of the nonhuman, *Gun Island* performs an essential decolonial intervention: it dismantles the epistemic hierarchy that privileges human history over natural history and urges readers to recognize that the two have always been intertwined.

The Symbolic Ecology of the Sundarbans

The Sundarbans, both a literal mangrove delta and a symbolic ecology, stands at the center of Amitav Ghosh's environmental imagination. In *Gun Island*, this unstable tidal landscape becomes an ecological archive where the histories of empire, displacement, and resistance are inscribed in mud, water, and roots. Ghosh does not treat the Sundarbans as mere setting but as a narrative agent that embodies what Rob Nixon terms the "slow violence" of colonial and capitalist exploitation—deforestation, embankment projects, and displacement whose effects accumulate over centuries (Nixon 2011).

The mangrove itself emerges as a powerful motif. Resilient yet fragile, it thrives in saline and unstable terrain, symbolizing both rootedness and vulnerability. Ghosh's portrayal aligns with current ecocritical debates that highlight coastal ecologies as sites of both environmental precarity and cultural hybridity. Scholars such as H. Mahmud (2022) argue that the Sundarbans function as a "liminal ecology" where human and nonhuman entanglements defy fixed boundaries, while Chakrabarty (2021) emphasizes how deltas and estuaries condense planetary histories of climate, migration, and extraction. In *Gun Island*, the Sundarbans embodies these dynamics, acting as a palimpsest where histories of colonial land clearances and indigenous marginalization resurface alongside contemporary climate vulnerability.

The symbolic ecology of the Sundarbans also resists anthropocentric time. Its shifting tides and impermanent geography recall what Bruno Latour (2017) describes as "geostories"—narratives in which the earth itself participates in shaping political and historical trajectories. By dramatizing the delta as an ever-changing site of life and loss, Ghosh situates the region as both archive and prophecy: it holds memory of past violence while forewarning of future climate displacement.

Ultimately, the Sundarbans in *Gun Island* epitomize Ghosh's method of weaving history and ecology into a shared symbolic order. The tidal landscape is at once a material environment, a cultural metaphor, and a narrative voice that interrupts human-centered accounts of modernity. In elevating the Sundarbans as a site of ecological memory, Ghosh not only provincializes colonial historiography but also redefines literature as a medium for imagining multispecies futures.

Myth, Memory, and Environmental Ethics

In *Gun Island*, myth is not a relic of superstition but a vital narrative mode through which ecological and historical memory survives. The recurring story of Manasa Devi—the goddess of snakes—functions as a counter-discourse to the rationalist paradigms of modernity. Where Western science often seeks to compartmentalize nature as resource, the myth encodes an ecological ethic of balance, reciprocity, and respect for nonhuman life. As Akeel Bilgrami (2022) notes, myths in South Asian traditions frequently resist the disenchantment of nature by embedding cosmological meaning into ecological practice. Ghosh revitalizes this mythic mode, positioning it as a narrative technology capable of addressing the Anthropocene.

Myth, in this context, is a form of ecological memory. It preserves knowledge of past catastrophes, migrations, and multispecies entanglements in symbolic form. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021) suggests that climate narratives must move beyond archives of human history to recognize planetary deep time. Ghosh's novel performs this move by allowing myth to bridge the temporalities of history and ecology: the serpent of Manasa Devi is at once a symbol of vengeance, a reminder of ecological retribution, and a herald of interdependence.

This re-enchantment of myth challenges Enlightenment binaries of reason and superstition. As Donna Haraway (2023) argues, storytelling in the Anthropocene requires "staying with the trouble," learning to weave myth, science, and situated knowledge into multispecies ethics. Ghosh exemplifies this by interlacing Bengali folklore with contemporary crises, showing that myths are not archaic but adaptive cultural forms. They enable what Achille Mbembe (2021) terms "planetary entanglement"—a recognition that human survival is bound to the survival of other species and ecosystems.

By incorporating myth into his ecological narrative, Ghosh not only provincializes dominant Western epistemologies but also foregrounds alternative ecological ethics. The myth of Manasa Devi is not a distraction from material crisis but an interpretive lens through which the violence of extraction, displacement, and ecological collapse can be understood as interconnected. Myth thus becomes a mode of resistance against the "epistemic violence" of colonial modernity and a guide toward reimagining an ethics of care, kinship, and planetary survival.

The Role of the Storyteller and the Postmodern Sage

The protagonist Deen embodies the transformation from a skeptical Eurocentric scholar into a figure resembling what might be called a "postmodern sage"—a narrator who learns to reconcile myth, history, and ecology. At the outset, Deen represents the disenfranchised intellectual, skeptical of myth and invested in the authority of textual archives. Yet, as his journey unfolds across the Sundarbans, Venice, and Los Angeles, he acquires an expanded vision in which myth and science are not mutually exclusive but co-constitutive modes of knowing. In this sense, Deen's trajectory mirrors Ghosh's own literary project: a recovery of storytelling as both cultural memory and ecological pedagogy.

This role situates Deen within broader debates about world literature and planetary ethics. Franco Moretti (2013) has argued that world literature is often understood through systems of circulation and form; however, Ghosh's novel resists such market-driven frameworks, foregrounding instead what Wai Chee Dimock (2020) describes as "deep time cosmopolitanism." Deen's storytelling crosses temporal, geographical, and disciplinary boundaries, producing what might be called a planetary narrative form that resists linearity and embraces cyclical, tidal rhythms akin to the ecological landscape of the Sundarbans.

As Amitav Ghosh emphasizes in *The Great Derangement* (2016), storytelling must confront the imaginative failure of modernity in representing the climate crisis. In *Gun Island*, Deen becomes the medium through which this crisis is narrated—not as an isolated environmental issue but as a continuum of colonial exploitation, forced migrations, and ecological devastation. His shift from skeptical academic to myth-bearer dramatizes what Amitav Ghosh elsewhere calls the reclamation of narrative imagination as a necessary tool for survival in the Anthropocene.

Deen's arc also resonates with recent theoretical interventions in narrative ethics. Martha Nussbaum (2019) argues that literature expands ethical horizons by cultivating empathy across differences. Ghosh extends this by presenting storytelling not only as an ethical practice among humans but also as a medium of multispecies solidarity. Through Deen, the novel exemplifies what Ursula Heise (2021) terms "multispecies world literature"—narratives that engage with planetary entanglements across species lines.

Thus, Deen is not simply a character but a narrative device that models the transformation of epistemology itself. He embodies the possibility of reconciling fragmented disciplines—myth, history, ecology—into a synthetic mode of planetary storytelling. As such, he becomes Ghosh's postmodern sage, a figure who instructs readers in the art of reimagining human existence as part of a wider, interdependent ecological and historical continuum.

Reimagining the Anthropocene

In *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh stages the Anthropocene not as a purely geological epoch but as a historical and epistemological crisis. By blurring the boundaries between myth and science, the novel contests the dominant Western framing of the Anthropocene as a universal human condition. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021) reminds us that climate change cannot be addressed outside of the histories of empire, capitalism, and globalization; similarly, Ghosh situates ecological crises within the longue durée of colonial exploitation and forced migration. The rising seas, wildfires, and storms in the novel are not only climate events but also historical reverberations, echoing centuries of extractive violence and displacement.

Ghosh thereby aligns with Bruno Latour's (2018) call to rethink modernity as a failed project that divorced humans from their ecological embeddedness. In the novel, floods in the Sundarbans, the migration of marine creatures, and wildfires in California demonstrate that the nonhuman world is no longer a passive backdrop but an active participant in history. The Anthropocene, as Ghosh narrates it, becomes a space where human and nonhuman agencies entangle, destabilizing the binaries of nature and culture, past and present.

This narrative approach also connects to postcolonial ecocriticism, which critiques the universalizing discourse of the Anthropocene for erasing asymmetries of power. As Nixon (2011) argues in *Slow Violence*, environmental degradation disproportionately affects the poor and marginalized, a truth reflected in the precarious journeys of characters such as Tipu and Rafi. Their struggles as climate refugees recall earlier patterns of forced migration under empire, demonstrating how colonial histories shape contemporary ecological precarity. By linking the Mediterranean refugee crisis to historical diasporas, Ghosh resists the depoliticized narrative of "humanity as geological force," emphasizing instead that the Anthropocene is stratified by race, class, and geography.

The novel also contributes to ongoing debates about narrative form in the climate crisis. Ghosh's cyclical, tidal storytelling resists the linear temporality of modern historiography and instead embraces what Timothy Clark (2020) describes as the "scalar challenges of the Anthropocene," where individual stories must be read against planetary timelines. By weaving myth with ecological science, Ghosh develops what might be termed a "mythic realism," a form that allows readers to perceive deep time, multispecies entanglements, and planetary interdependence.

Ultimately, *Gun Island* reimagines the Anthropocene not as a deterministic fate but as a contested narrative terrain. Through its synthesis of history, ecology, and myth, the novel offers an alternative to the technocratic discourses that dominate climate debates. It calls instead for a re-enchanted imagination, one capable of recognizing the sacred interdependence of humans, nonhumans, and the planet itself. In doing so, Ghosh reframes the Anthropocene as a site of ethical responsibility and narrative possibility—a space where storytelling becomes a mode of survival.

Conclusion — History, Ecology, and Narrative Ethics

By weaving history, ecology, and myth into a single narrative fabric, *Gun Island* demonstrates how the Anthropocene is not only an environmental epoch but also a historical and cultural condition. Ghosh refuses to treat ecological crises as isolated, recent phenomena; instead, he positions them as extensions of colonial extraction, capitalist expansion, and migratory displacements. This postcolonial reframing ensures that the Anthropocene is understood not as a universal category but as a stratified reality, disproportionately borne by marginalized peoples and ecologies.

The novel's emphasis on climate refugees, multispecies entanglements, and the symbolic ecology of the Sundarbans reveals how storytelling can function as a form of ecological ethics. In Ghosh's "mythic realism," myth is neither an archaic remnant nor a simple metaphor; it encodes ecological wisdom, historical memory, and moral accountability. This literary strategy aligns with contemporary calls, from Chakrabarty's planetary history to Clark's Anthropocene narratology, to rethink the very scales of narrative in an age of climate crisis.

At the same time, *Gun Island* participates in what scholars like Nixon describe as the politics of "slow violence," foregrounding the unseen, gradual, and historically layered forms of ecological devastation. By linking Mediterranean refugee crossings with colonial displacements, or Californian wildfires with the long histories of capitalist overreach, the novel highlights continuities that dominant climate discourses often obscure.

Ultimately, *Gun Island* does more than recount history or depict ecological catastrophe—it reimagines both domains as deeply interwoven, inseparable, and ethically demanding. By calling readers to recognize the agency of nonhuman life, the cyclical nature of time, and the sacredness of interdependence, Ghosh's work challenges the epistemic arrogance of modernity. It insists that to survive the Anthropocene, we must not only reduce carbon emissions but also cultivate historical accountability, narrative imagination, and multispecies solidarity.

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