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## Human Migration is widely Viewed as a Dramatic Consequence of Climate Change: A Case Study of Amitabh Ghosh's *Gun Island*

**Alia Rawshan Banu**

Sr. Lecturer, Dept. of English, University of Scholars, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Correspondence: [alia@ius.edu.bd](mailto:alia@ius.edu.bd)

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### ABSTRACT

*Migration is not a new phenomenon in human history. Human migration occurs through ages due to socio-economic and political issues. People travel or migrate from one country to another for a better life and livelihood. The immigrants have to undergo a myriad experiences and face manifold issues socially, politically and psychologically. Amitabh Ghosh's novel Gun Island deals with the contemporary environmental issues, border crossings, and human migration along with the story of investigation of folk myths of Bonduki Sadagar (Gun Merchant). Ghosh also focuses on large scale human migration in search of livelihood. This paper highlights the drawbacks or the negative impacts of wrong usage of technology through which people get enticed with the fascination of foreign countries in the contemporary world of globalisation. Amitabh Ghosh in his novel attempts to focus on the experience of immigrants and human values of migrants due to environmental and technological development.*

In *Gun Island*, Amitabh Ghosh deals with two contemporary global issues: climate change and human migration. This paper aims to explore the socio-political and climatological reasons for human migration and the consequences of it through textual analysis and close reading of the secondary sources. In this novel, environmental occurrences have been portrayed as increasingly common issues around the world. The recent environmental incidents like storms in the Sundarbans, wildfires in California, tornadoes and floods in Venice have occurred due to climate change which caused the internal and external migration of people.

Ghosh, in his book, attempts to link up the scenarios of the climate change to his *Gun Island* where he describes a middle aged Bangli merchant named Dinanath, a rare book dealer who travels between the Bay of Bengal and the Mediterranean Sea. He depicts the struggle of Dinanath to the struggles of contemporary migrants who are moving across the borders. Dinanath's journey is filled with cyclones and tornadoes and his pursuit of 'gun merchant' brings together a series of interesting stories of human migration which is fuelled by the desire for a new world in the era of cosmopolitanism.

Amitabh Ghosh portrays Dinanath as a successful migrant settled in New York, traveling across the world for his interest and purpose. He represents the class of 'Global Citizens' who enjoy the privileges bestowed upon them in this globalized society, yet he lives an unfulfilled life searching for love, purpose and interests. Another two Bengali teenagers, Tipu, a computer whiz, and Rafi a fisherman, both try to find a route to Europe aided by human smugglers. The stories of Tipu and Rafi were told in the perspective of Bengali refugees in Europe. *Gun Island* draws a direct parallel between the migrants leaving their homes in quest of better life and the

dolphins and other animals are forced to abandon their old and familiar habitats due to rising temperature and pollution revealing the entangled destinies of human and non-human beings on earth.

Ghosh's skillful use of the legend of Manasa devi along with Dinanath's quest for resolving the mystery of 'Gun Merchant' or 'Bondooki Sadagar' allows him to address issues as diverse as climate change, mythology, Venetian history and human migration. Since Appadurai describes the relationship among human movement, technological flow, and financial transfers as "deeply disjunctive" in that each "is subject to its own constraints and incentives". The global occurrence of human migration is undoubtedly one of the most complex areas of concern that international political decision-makers and theorists are currently investigating. Human migration is "a social process that involves the consensual demarcation of lines in space by a human community that is ratified, supervised, and enforced by civil authority" (Massey, 2010, p. 125). Migration in contemporary world is much more complex and it cannot be described an even process, nor it is predictable. Neither it is generalised to a single type (McAreevey 2017). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, immigration is not an event happening in one region but a process connecting to multiple people, their ideas and culture. Culture is constantly reproduced in different context. Nearly 100 years ago, Robert Park (1928) claimed that every advance in culture commences with a new period of migration and movement of populations.

The narrative of *Gun Island* depicts the relentless speed of environmental, technological, and socio-political changes that have occurred in recent decades. The novel makes direct references to many contemporary events including the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean Sea. While the mystery of the Gun

Merchant pulls the reader on at a swirling pace, the sheer density of references to contemporary phenomena juxtaposed alongside long excursions into the rich history of travel between early modern Europe and Asia. Amitav Ghosh, a master story teller, through his adventurous novel, *Gun Island* has effortlessly flaunted, the climate change; plight of the immigrants along with long heard legend of goddess Manasa Devi. He is a Calcutta based veteran writer who lives in New York. According to him, our ancestors have designed high order values to construct the society in which they allotted equal importance to every species. But, the modern world, with its urgency to accomplish its superiority, fails to keep up those values. “We’re living in a time of all sorts of strange intersections of behaviour among human beings, and animals. Climate change is causing extreme occurrences, and all kinds of phenomena that are not always explainable by the standards we once applied are revealing themselves.” (Burrows, 2019). Values are important aspect because it determines identity of people and they affect their attitudes and behaviors. Nowadays individuals cross national boundaries due to a short study period, to earn a certain amount of money, to flee due to war or persecution or natural disaster.

Dinanath’s visit to the shrine of Manasa Devi before its extinction due to rising sea level and before the legendary story is lost forever since “temperatures are rising around the world because of global warming” (Ghosh 2019, p 214). The Sundarbans is described by Kanai Dutta, a relative of the narrator, Dinanath, as “the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye” (Ghosh 2019, p 8). Due to environmental change, in contemporary world, human displacement from the Sundarbans resembles that of the ‘Gun Merchant’ in the ancient legend who fled his homeland to save his life. Cinta, a veteran Italian historian, interprets the ancient legendary story of ‘Gun

Merchant’ and she elucidates that the Merchant’s “homeland, in eastern India, is struck by drought and floods brought on by the climactic disturbances of the Little Ice Age; he loses everything including his family and decides to go overseas to recoup his future” (Ghosh, 2019. p. 141). The novel *Gun Island* highlights the impact of climatological change and ecological damage on the natural resources of the Sundarbans affecting the lives of the inhabitants and leading to mass migration.

Ghosh portrays Tipu and Rafi as having had access to technology since their boyhood and they are good at using digital devices like smartphones, computers. Through internet browsing, they come to know about the safe and secured life in foreign country and have been fascinated by those allurements. Tipu thinks that “the internet is the migrants’ magic carpet; it’s their conveyor belt” (Ghosh 2019, p. 61). This novel reveals the drawbacks and destructive impacts of wrong usage of technology. In an interview, Amitabh Ghosh remarks,

A lot of this is happening because the systems exist, and these systems are not trivial systems. The human trafficking business is the biggest clandestine industry in the world, even bigger than the drug trade. It reaches very deep into society, especially poor societies. On top of that,

you have the information system. If you are a poor kid say in Bangladesh or Pakistan—both of these countries have higher rates of internet penetration rates than the U.S.—you see these pictures on your cheap smartphone. You have social media and you are connected to people who can help you move. These technologies are absolutely at the heart of the movement (Ramakrishnan, 2019, para. 19)

From internet, Tipu collects information regarding irregular routes to cross national boundaries but people need to have permission from the government in order to cross the borders which have

been constrained by the authority of the respective countries. However in ancient times, such restrictions had not been so strict when people migrated from one country to another.

*Gun Island*, Amitabh Ghosh subtly shows the similarity between Venice and Sundarbans. As an effect of climate change, both of these places will, one day, go under water due to global warming, rising sea level. Through this parallel, the author draws the readers' attention to the fact that climate crisis is not just confined to one Inregion, state or country, it is prevalent all over the world. According to Clark,

Amid the freak cyclones and oxygen-starved waters comes the story – or stories – of migration across the ages; tales of escapology, of deprivation and persecution, of impossible yearnings for a new world that bring us, inexorably, to the terrified refugees on the Mediterranean. Which is, perhaps, Ghosh's essential point... (Clark, 2019, para. 7)

Another important issue Ghosh wants to clarify the readers that the systems of the past differ from those of the present as the migrants from India to Venice like Rafi, Tipu and similar expatriates cannot be termed as slaves and they willingly plan to migrate. Here, the author inform us that “the world had changed too much, too fast; the systems that were in control now did not obey any human master; they followed their own imperatives, inscrutable as demons” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 280). Cinta remarks that 21<sup>st</sup> century Italians are dependent on the labour of the immigrants who have left their birth place deliberately and cross international boundaries to reach economically affluent countries for a secured and improved life.

In *Gun Island*, Amitabh Ghosh blends ancient myths and legends with the tales of adventurous migrants from various developing countries to explore

the endless saga of human migration which is ensued by global climate crisis. This paper deals with human migration from diverse developing countries and border-crossing which is occurred willingly yet socio-politically and environmentally enforced to leave their home land for better future or career. Moreover, this border-crossing of the people of Sundarbans indicates that “environmental migration is widely viewed as one of the most dramatic consequences of climate change (Gemenne, 2012, p. 238).

However, it can be said that future research work can be conducted on super diverse migration, rural cosmopolitanism, global trends and influences, fair treatment for all migrants.

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