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Narrating Symbiosis: Material Agency and Ecological Relationality in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract:

Ecological crises and man-nature conflict is a major contemporary world issue recognized by WHO and UNO. Like many other disciplines of studies, literary texts both classical and modern have reflected the symbiosis-essential ecological concern through interdependence of man and nature, man-animal for existence, survival, respect for one another and sensitization with the tactics of narratology. Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island redraws a relationship between human history and the nature. Praxis of literary Anthropocene has blurred the traditional boundaries between human characters and nonhuman beings. By connecting contemporary climate- induced migration of human beings with the ancient Bengali folklore of the snake goddess Manasa Devi, the novel challenges human-centered storytelling. It argues that nature and animals are not mere backdrops for human drama, but are active participants that shape global events. This paper is an attempt to explore how ecological colonization and modern capitalism have simultaneously disrupted both the human communities and the ecosystem by comparing the forced journeys of human refugees with the irregular migrations of wild lives across the Sundarbans and the Mediterranean Sea. This study uses the lens of New Materialism and Ecological Relationality to analyze how the material world and non-human beings possess their own agency and voice by integrating local myths and non-Western worldviews.

Keywords: New Materialism, ecological rationality, colonial ecology, ecocriticism, symbiosis.

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INTRODUCTION:

The contemporary world has been facing major ecological crises owing to western world's anthropocentric attitude to nature. This is the major driving force for resources depletion and ecological challenges of planet earth. Ecological crises and man-nature conflict is a major contemporary world issue recognized by WHO and UNO (United Nations). Like many other disciplines of studies, literary texts both classical and modern have reflected the symbiosis-essential ecological concern through interdependence of man and nature, man-animal for existence, survival, respect for one another and sensitization with the tactics of narratology. This research explores the concept of symbiosis within Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island*, focusing on how material agency and ecological relationality are depicted.

The study examines the interconnectedness of human and non-human elements, analyzing how Ghosh uses narrative to illustrate the complex relationships and mutual dependencies within an ecosystem. It investigates the novel's contribution to understanding ecological consciousness through its portrayal of shared existence. *Gun Island* redraws a relationship between

human history and the natural world at the contemporary time of the climate crisis. In the Anthropocene, traditional literary boundaries between human characters and nonhuman beings have been blurred. By connecting contemporary climate induced migration of human beings with the ancient Bengali folklore of the snake goddess Manasa Devi, the novel challenges human-centered storytelling. It argues that nature and animals are not mere backdrops for human drama, but are active participants that shape global events. This shows a shifting in agency from anthropocentric attitude to symbiotic coexistence between both human and non-human beings.

This study is an attempt to explore how ecological colonization and modern capitalism have simultaneously disrupted both the human communities and the ecosystem by comparing the forced journeys of human refugees with the irregular migrations of wild lives across the Sundarbans and the Mediterranean Sea. The paper uses the lenses of New Materialism, a perspective that argues physical objects, weather, and animals are not passive things but have their own power and influence over human life; and Ecological Relationality, a

theoretical outlook to perceive the world as a vast network where everything depends on everything else. These theoretical frames analyze how the material world and non-human beings possess their own agency and voice by integrating local myths and non-Western worldviews. Through these ideas, the novel shows that nature has its own voice and agency. For example, as the protagonist Deen conversing with Nilima about cyclone of 1970, she realizes that the planet is actively reacting to human actions as she states that “The Islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they’re disappearing before our eyes” (Ghosh18). This claim portrays that human-nature conflict is a major contemporary issue for the change in the life of human and their surroundings, where cyclone itself is presented as decisive agent to determine the future of the world. It is given the voice to alter the situation of both human and non-human that recognizes the inherent values of all things, irrespective of their instrumental utility for human purposes. The novel makes a compelling case that nature and animals are not mere backdrops but active agents in the unfolding of world events, from cyclones that change migratory routes to dolphins that steer human travelers.

In this paper, the researcher explores how ecological colonization and modern capitalism have disrupted both human communities and ecosystems. It does so by juxtaposing the forced journeys of human refugees with the irregular migrations of wild animals at two geographically and ecologically important sites: the Sundarbans mangrove forest in the Bay of Bengal, and the Mediterranean Sea. These spaces the areas of crisis in which the violence of colonial history and neoliberal capitalism meet on human and nonhuman bodies alike. Employing the frameworks of New Materialism and Ecological Relationality the study explores the agency and voice of the material world and nonhuman beings. Using Jane Bennett’s idea of vibrant matter and Donna J. Haraway’s concept to make kin instead of make seed, the paper contends that Ghosh’s combination of local myths and non-Western worldviews presents a decolonial alternative to anthropocentric environmentalism. Haraway argues that we live in a time of entangled human and nonhuman histories, in which survival requires becoming-with rather than domination. *Gun Island* is an example of this ethic. Snakes, mangroves, cyclones, and refugees are kin, not enemies. The novel doesn’t just tell a story of symbiosis, it enacts it, creating a literary space in which all

beings are co-authors of the story of a planet in crisis.

Methods and Procedures

This study uses qualitative research method to narrate symbiotic interdependency between human and nonhuman beings and text-based analysis drawing upon New Materialism and Ecological Relationality. The research proceeds through close reading and thematic coding of selected passages that address nonhuman actors, sequences of human and animal migration, and references to Manasa Devi folklore. A comparative analysis is conducted between the Mediterranean and the Sundarbans as twin zones of colonial-ecological crisis. Jane Bennett's theory of material agency and Donna Haraway's concept of making kin to explain how agency is ascribed to nonhuman entities in the novel form the conceptual basis of this paper. Secondary sources on Bengali folklore are used for contextual grounding.

In this section, the researcher formulates the theoretical background which allows the study of *Gun Island* in light of the interdependent frameworks of New Materialism and Ecological Relationality.

These theories provide an effective lens through which the researcher examines the novel's challenge to anthropocentrism and its promotion of the ethical relationship between humans and other species, especially in relation to climate-induced displacement and ecological crisis. Through the comparison of the current migration waves of humans to the age-old myth of Manasa Devi, the researcher aims to explore the impact of ecological colonization and capitalism on both human settlements and ecosystems. The parallel drawn by the researcher between the journeys of human migrants and the irregular migration of fauna across the Sundarbans and the Mediterranean Sea emphasizes the agency and voice of the material world and nonhuman creatures alike.

Results and Discussion

The close reading of *Gun Island* shows how Ghosh deliberately connects the displacement of human refugees with the irregular migration of wildlife, portraying both as simultaneous effects of colonial ecology and modern capitalism in the Anthropocene era. The Western world's anthropocentric, human-centered, attitude to nature is a major driving force for this environmental crisis in this contemporary world. At the onset of the novel, the

protagonist, Deen appears as a skeptic and a detached individual, an academic whose connection with the world is primarily mental and not physical. For example, the fact that he immediately dismisses the tale of Bonduki Sadagar as mere superstition highlights his lack of spiritual connection with the sacred aspect of nature. But as Deen moves to the Sunderbans, Venice, and finally Los Angeles, he experiences several instances that prove the presence of active agents of nonhuman life forms. The snakes that seem to have a certain effect on human destiny, dolphins that behave with mythical significance, and cities collapsing due to environmental concerns make Deen undergo a radical transformation. On his experience in the Sunderbans, for instance, Deen observes, “it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sunderbans” (Ghosh 107). By making this statement, Deen changes from being anthropocentrically dominant to environmentally humble. Deen’s transformation from one perspective to another is highlighted by the following statement made by Deen when in a state of introspection:

As this started to come back to me I had an uncanny feeling that I too had lost myself in this dream; it wasn’t so much that I was

dreaming, but that I was being dreamed by whose very existence was fantastical to me—spiders, cobras, sea snakes—and yet they and I had somehow become a part of each other’s dreams. (Ghosh 264)

In this statement, the divide between self and surroundings fades away since Deen ceases seeing nature as something alien and dead but begins to regard it as a dreaming reality that includes himself. His perception grows clearer when he is in Venice because he experiences the decay of nature in not just an abstract sense, but in a concrete sense too, through infrastructure destruction. In a dialogue with Cinta, Deen makes use of shipworms as symbols of nature’s decay not only in its physical, but also moral aspect because man becomes guilty of defacing nature by failing to comply with his planetary duties.

Through textual analysis, it becomes evident that Amitav Ghosh subverts the conventional role of human characters in his novel through an innovative approach to nonhuman characters that take on the leading roles in shaping events within the story. Matter plays no passive or static role as a setting but, rather, demonstrates thing-power, a concept coined by Jane Bennett and described as “the curious ability of inanimate things to

animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (6). The power of matter is especially noticeable when it comes to the biophysical disturbances that seem to haunt the protagonist Deen throughout his global journey. The *Acqua Alta*, high tide, in Venice represents one such instance of an active disturbance that disrupts the harmony of nature by forcefully intruding on the architectural achievements of humans. Deen bears witness to this material intrusion as well as the active behavior of the matter: “the water was rising so fast that it seemed to be leaping out of the ground” (Ghosh 141). The agency and voice given to the nonhumans creates the event that determine the future of both human and nonhuman things simultaneously.

Moreover, the beaching of Irrawaddy dolphins within the Sundarbans is a clear indication of how physical entities function as warnings. According to the marine biologist, Piya, the collective nature of the group indicates a knowledge of changes within the environment that totally eludes the monitoring capacity of humans (Ghosh 62). These findings are directly linked to the ideas expressed in Bruno Latour’s social constructivist theory, in which non-humans exist in a manner that makes them qualify as ‘actants’ (71). According to Latour, any

entity can be considered an actant if it is capable of modifying other entities during a process, “possess[ing] enough coherence to make a difference, produce effects, and alter the course of events” (Bennett 9). It portrays that human and nonhuman things construct the chain of web that affects the existence of one another promoting the conscience of interdependency.

In terms of its narrative structure, the novel *Gun Island* contradicts the notion of Cartesian dualism, which implies a sharp distinction between the culture of people and nature. By combining the myth of the Gun Merchant and the snake goddess Manasa Devi from the 17th-century Bengali folklore with facts about climate change in the current times, Ghosh manages to create a context for ecological relations. The analysis of the data presented proves that myth should be treated as a real materialistic document on the volatility of climate. In fact, the merchant escaping from the fury of Manasa Devi perfectly illustrates how climate change refugees escape the Sundarbans because of floods. Deen understands that the drawings found by him are evidence of the period when “the earth was acting up” (Ghosh 128). This correlation between the ancient myth of Manasa Devi and flood refugees reveals the power of the nature and its agential role to the

surrounding as an act of unavoidable relational coexistence.

Barad's notion of intra-action (132) can be used to exemplify the technique of relational interdependency. As she states in agential realism, "distinct agencies do not precede their interaction; rather, different agencies arise and co-constitute each other via their relationship" (134). Such a dynamic can be exemplified in the case of the wood-eating shipworms that threaten Venice. These animals do not exist in isolation from one another; rather, their reproduction process is sped up due to the increased temperature of the sea because of the industry of humans. Their destruction is then achieved through their feeding on the wooden piles that support the palazzos in Venice. Deen discovers that these small creatures are wreaking havoc all throughout Venice and proves that "the foundations of Venice are literally being eaten away" (Ghosh 214). Nature and culture are entangled in a vicious cycle here. The reader is forced to face the sad truth, and human history is inevitably tied to the history of matter.

In the similar vein, the notion of slow violence coined by Rob Nixon is used by Ghosh in the novel *Gun Island* in order to show that centuries-long colonization and

exploitation of natural resources led to today's climate change (184). Although the focus on spectacular violence is relatively small in comparison with ecological violence caused by salinization of the soil in the Sundarbans and destruction of the foundations of Venice by shipworms that are slow (14), Ghosh manages to make an important connection between two apparently distant places, which makes his book demonstrate ecological relationality and disprove the European dualism, as warm waters cause climate changes and refugees are created not only among humans but also animals (117). By referring to Gun Merchant legends, Ghosh meets the demands made by Rob Nixon as regards the environmental literary canon, and opines that nature should not play the background role but act as an independent entity with its own needs.

This connects Ghosh's portrayal of multispecies migration which is its representation of an ethic of survival in the Anthropocene. The fact that human migrants such as Tipu and Rafi move from South to Europe should not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. It also involves the migration of other creatures, including birds, fish, and insects. In turn, there is a literary confirmation of the idea of "sympoiesis" by Donna Haraway, who describes this term as

“collective generation of systems... that do not have self-defined boundaries” (58). This statement supports the concept of interdependent interaction emphasizing how plants, animals, microbes, and humans co-create sustainable life together rejecting any system or organism that exist in isolation. Ghosh innovates his narrative strategy in *Gun Island* in that he uses the Manasa Devi mythological folklore as a material entity instead of just a symbol in order to counter the Western rationalist approach of dividing the supernatural from the natural (McDaniel 67). In such a narrative ecosystem, the snakes function not as symbols but as agents whose actions arise out of their biological nature and divine touch.

Through the climax scene of the novel in the Mediterranean Sea where there is a refugee ship stuck in the sea surrounded by abnormal flocks of birds and sea life, the distinction between political crises of the humans and ecological catastrophes is debunked. Through the climax scene, the characters realize that it was the animals as well as the humans who had gathered together in a situation where they were all in trouble in such a way that “everything was connected to everything else” (Ghosh 287). Through making such connections, the novel *Gun Island* refutes human exceptionalism. The

narrative is no longer centered on the conventional environmental story of humans coming in as saviors of the helpless planet. Rather, the discussion indicates that we must recognize our fragility for survival.

This development is consistent with the claim of Vasudha Narayanan that Hindu environmental ethics compels humanity to regard nature with reverence and awe. The reverence that Deen cultivates finds expression in his interactions with snakes and dolphins, creatures that have been worshiped in Hinduism. Manasa Devi, the serpent deity, symbolizes not only punishment from God for ecological transgressions but also the potential for peace in case humans perform their ecological action. During an encounter with a snake, Deen comes to realize that, “the snake wasn’t just watching me; it was waiting, telling me something that couldn’t be communicated in words” (Ghosh 159). This statement reveals the agency that has shifted to nonhuman blurring the boundary between human and nonhuman things.

As a result of his visit to the shrine in the Sundarbans, Deen’s uncanny experience related to his encounter with the king cobra, which is part of the legend, helps him enter an entirely different world of mystery and

add certain supernatural components to the plot of the novel. What seems to be something supernatural from the viewpoint of ordinary humans is nothing else but nature's demonstration of its agency. To begin with, there was a serious problem with which Deen needed to cope when he started realizing his uncanny experiences and understanding the connection between the human and the nonhuman worlds. As Kuhelika Ghosh argues in her analysis of the concept of nonhuman agency based on Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, "unlike human subjects, the nonhuman subject cannot speak in the linguistic sense; however, as multispecies scholarship shows, the nonhuman environment responds to environmental stimuli in agential ways in order to survive" (10). Likewise, there are numerous cases of nonhuman agency in *Gun Island*, with the incident with the king cobra biting Tipu leading to mystical visions serving as a good example. However, whereas Deen thinks that nonhuman agency is supernatural, slowly and steadily he starts reacting emotionally and rationally to the interwoven nature of humans and nonhumans. As he observes:

I had an uncanny sense of losing my own identity in that dream; it was not really that I had fallen into a trance, but that I was

becoming an integral part of the dream of creatures whose very existence was fantastic – spiders, cobras, sea snakes – creatures which I now knew were a part of my own world. (Ghosh 227)

This remark portrays Deen's journey towards realizing the entangled nature of human and nonhuman life, which Ghosh believes as co-creation of hybrid identity appealing to multispecies coexistence, considering the need for symbiosis in an age of climate chaos.

In this regard, I argue that through his myth about Manasa, Ghosh emphasizes the theme of multispecies justice, pointing out how the hubris of humans and their superiority over nonhumans along with their inability to communicate effectively with other species has caused the current climate change. As Deen recognizes later on, "the Manasa Devi was in effect a negotiator, a translator . . . between two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her mediation there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression" (Ghosh 167). As a result, in order to serve as the goddess of snakes or the goddess of the animal kingdom, Manasa Devi needs to teach humans the lesson that their actions will

affect nonhumans. Humans' unquenchable greed for natural resources has affected the environment to such an extent that the latter has begun to fight back for its very survival. Gilson asserts that "Ghosh's L.A. is metaphorically represented by the merchant of the parable, and the raging wildfires are signs of nature biting back: the retaliation of the Manasa Devi" (272), due to humans not being devout to her anymore because of their hubris and material affinity. Likewise, Lava Asaad states that "the legend embodies the greed of humans who place great value on the profit to be made even at a high price" (6). Although Asaad makes sense, he might be generalizing the myth into an embodiment of what humans do, when the truth is that humans are not entirely to blame for the climate crisis. Thus, whereas Ghosh's approach towards the climate crisis as depicted through the mythic undertones in the novel underscores the importance of respecting nature by humans, the emphasis on the problem of multispecies justice calls for ecological interdependency.

The colonial cartography and the capitalist logistics system are illustrated as a continuum in that the transportation system used for global commodities also enables human trafficking, and oil tankers and cargo ships not only threaten the lives of whales

and cause pollution in the oceans but also endanger the lives of refugees. According to the New Materialist approach, the above observations suggest that the ecosystem and human communities do not suffer separately from exploitation but share the effects of the same type of extractive practices. The Sundarbans region, which is marked by British colonial water management, is still affected by the effects of that management – erosion, salinity infiltration, and increased cyclone activities. In the novel, Ghosh does not consider the environment and refugees separately as two crises; rather, they are two symptoms of one problem. It is a direct challenge to anthropocentric narratives which frame climate migration as solely a human tragedy, obscuring the simultaneous displacement of nonhuman species. As Bennett argues, "matter is not a passive substratum but an active participant in the world's becoming" (viii). Both human and nonhuman are tied to the same tragedy, therefore, reciprocal reverence can only sustain the existence, and maintain the balance in the environment for co-existence. *Gun Island* materializes this claim narratively by refusing to separate human suffering from ecological collapse (Ghosh 45). The anthropocentric attitude is a major problem for creating this ecological chaos, thereby, respect for all can balance the planet

earth since the suffering is equal to all. Ghosh presents nature and animals as active and sentient beings, departing from the Western literary convention of presenting nature as an inactive background. It is through this technique that form takes on the function of matching the form of nature in its truest form as humans are part of a living universe, thus adopting the biocentric view in literature (Bhattacharya 112). It is important to re-examine the creation of a dichotomy between human and nonhuman beings established by the West through anthropocentrism. Ghosh through his novel, *Gun Island*, attempts to revitalize the conscience of reverence equally for all to promote environmental balance for coexistence.

Conclusion

Employing a new materialist perspective to turn anthropocentric assumptions to reverential attitude to nature to promote a dynamic interplay of material agency and ecologically relational thinking, Ghosh's novel, *Gun Island* can be analyzed through multiple dimensions. In this context, the novel portrays the relationship between colonial ecologies and global capitalism as mutually constitutive forces of destruction by tying together the forced movement of human climatic refugees with the

unpredictable migration of other life forms from the Sundarbans and across the Mediterranean Sea to create precarity as a multispecies reality. By using non-anthropocentric storytelling techniques such as agentic verbs, focal displacements, plot devices beyond humanity, and even literalizing the mythology of the Manasa Devi myth into a tangible physical entity rather than an abstract figure, Ghosh effectively removes human consciousness from the center of narrative agency to pass it along to the natural world. In this way, nature and animals become living entities involved in the shaping of history, thus decolonizing western realist conventions and placing indigenous folklore as a mode of storytelling that compels an ethically symbiotic perspective on the part of the reader.

Theoretically speaking, the application of a new materialist approach to South Asian writing, *Gun Island*, opens up new perspectives within the discipline, as this concept demonstrates that material agency is quite relevant not only to the West but also to Bengali folklore and to other non-Western epistemologies. Pedagogically, the use of *Gun Island* in the classroom provides teachers with another important tool of instruction in regard to climate justice and postcolonial ecologies. This text allows

instructors to show students how nonhuman entities can be regarded as historical agents by following certain methodological guidelines for overcoming the anthropocentric paradigm. Practically speaking, the narrative perspective of this work shows the necessity of the role of ecological storytelling in real life because by narrating about symbiosis, Ghosh creates a certain ethical perspective in which the problem of environmental degradation should be solved by the international community taking into account not only the socio-political problem of refugees but also the issue of saving endangered species.

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