

**AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PEREGRINATION FROM HERMENEUTIC TO
EPISTEMIC TRUTH : A PRAGMATIC STUDY**

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OF GUN ISLAND AS A CLI-FI PARADIGM

ABSTRACT

The climate crisis casts a much smaller shadow on literary fiction than it does on the world. We are living through a crisis of culture and of the imagination. Amitav Ghosh, whose book *Gun Island* is set in an ecologically unstable world. This paper intends to identify the development of truth from hermeneutic to epistemic heuristically, i.e. from interpretations to understanding. It also tries to explore the interdependent relationship between Science and Literature.

Keywords : Cli- Fi, Hermeneutics, Episteme, Post-truth, Global Warming, Interdisciplinary

Climate Fiction, or simply 'Cli-Fi', is a newly coined term for novels and films which focus on the consequences of global warming. New research from University of Copenhagen shows how these fictions serve as a mental laboratory that allows us to simulate the potential consequences of climate change and imagine other living conditions. Global warming is much more than scientific data on changes in the atmosphere; it is also a cultural phenomenon in which meaning is being shaped by the books we read and the films we see. And there are so many of them now that we can speak of a completely new genre, 'Cli-Fi', says Gregers Andersen who has just defended his thesis *Climate-Changed Existence and its Worlds; Global Warming in Fiction and Philosophy* at the University of Copenhagen. Anderson says, "We use these films and novels to imagine what life and society might be like in a future when global warming has dramatically changed our world because, as opposed to numbers and statistics, fiction can make us feel and understand the changes" (47).

If we do not take care of our environment, of our home, it will change, and it will feel and seem very different - "unhomely" if you will. This is exactly the feeling the fictions want to leave us with. And even

though UN's panel on climate change (IPCC) has previously issued a report stating that global warming may lead to abrupt and irreversible changes, most of these fictions do tend to exaggerate the consequences of global warming, and the climate changes often happen extremely quickly. (Anderson 61)

Gregers Andersen points out and continues :

They do this to depict characters who can remember how the world was before the climate changes set in – the characters are, in other words, able to spot that "our home" has changed. However, it is still a recognizable world the characters inhabit in these fictions. And it needs to be recognizable because we are supposed to feel uncomfortable with the fact that our home planet has become a strange and alien place. (62)

Sixty years ago, in his "Two Cultures" lecture, scientist-cum-novelist CP Snow sparked a literary controversy by denouncing authors for their scientific ignorance. Could the typical man of letters, he sniffed, describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics? Or understand what is meant by mass or acceleration? Had Snow lived long enough, he would have found in Amitav Ghosh a writer who didn't flunk the test. The plots of Ghosh's nine novels range from Pasteurian

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microbiology to tropical malaria research. Cyclones, described with meteorological precision recur, alongside dispatches from the deep time of geology; like Melville, he is absorbed by creatures of the sea.

Most recently, Ghosh has been lecturing on climate change, work that was collected in his last book, *The Great Derangement* (2016). In it, he issued a Snow-like condemnation of the failure of writers to tackle the scientific phenomena now upending civilization, not least in his native Bengal with its rising sea levels. His latest novel, *Gun Island*, meets his own challenge head-on with an entertaining fable about a world deranged by ecological depredation, environmental refugees, raging wildfires and ravaged wildlife.

A trained social scientist, Ghosh has been thinking about the limits of science since his bravura first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) satirised the skull-measuring pseudoscience of Phrenology. He venerates ancient, alternative forms of knowledge, as when Deen is entranced by a boatman navigating the Sundarbans sans GPS: “The forest teemed with signs that could be deciphered and read, like some antediluvian script” (Ghosh 141). Such intimacy with nature diverges from westerners' alienation from it. Even Piya, a scholar of nature, is embarrassed by her bond with a rare freshwater dolphin; science has proven that dolphins are sophisticated communicators, but interspecies friendship offends her scientific objectivity. In Hinduism, however, such friendship is natural, animal souls being indistinguishable from human souls.

These grand ideas make Ghosh catnip for academics. But his novel struggles to bear the load of so many ideas, so much knowledge, from the history of Venetian printing to the etymology of Arabic place-names. It is obvious that Ghosh spent the past few years lecturing. There is even a scene in a Los Angeles museum of a historian delivering a lecture about 17th-century global cooling. (The historian is unnamed; might Ghosh have recently given this lecture himself?)

During this lecture about climatic disruption, wildfire rages outside the museum. Such neat ironies fill the novel. The plot later unfolds in Venice, an archipelago that mirrors the Sundarbans. Even the metaphors are

neatly tropical (eyes evoke the “darting movements of a hungry barracuda” [Ghosh 75]). The well-researched neatness is deadening. What's missing is a sense of entropy, of life's unpredictability and chaos. For example, although twists and turns abound in the plot, we are never surprised by any of Ghosh's characters. At one point Deen feels like a “character from a comic book” (Ghosh 85); well, Giacinta is one. She is Italian, so is obviously constantly squealing, “mamma mia!” (Ghosh 99) like the Super Mario Bros. Vitality is equally absent from the sentences that once leavened Ghosh's learning. In *The Hungry Tide*, he finely rendered the Sundarbans as “the trailing threads of India's fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari” (Ghosh 135). But since then, his style has evidently ebbed, dammed up by boulders of fact. Nevertheless, it's fitting that an author who avows the limits of knowledge should himself run up against the limits of his own knowledge-saturated style. Even the writer's failings demonstrate the very truth of what he is writing about. Can literature save the planet? Before we can attempt an answer to the question, we need to ask whether writers consciously engage with such a task. This question is difficult to ignore today, when the climate demon has unleashed its fury on humanity.

In *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh makes a spirited foray into the world of climate fiction, a category which has received scant attention from writers, especially in our part of the world – a region, which for economic and other reasons is vulnerable, and will be disproportionately affected by the unfolding climate disaster. Climate related environmental strife and disaster in the Sunderbans area is the spinning core of *Gun Island* from which characters like Tipu, Rafi or even the gun merchant in another time, are hurled outward, into other stories, by the violent centrifugal force of climate chaos and disaster.

Chased away from the punishing land they called home, these characters get drawn into other dreams, to other refuges, propelled by promises, towards other stories of life in the West, which constitute, so to speak, the surface narratives of this novel, where people like Deen, Piya, or the charismatic historian Cinta play important parts. However, and because climate change

knows no boundaries and can spring surprises and violent retribution at a place of its choosing, and also because stories connect with stories riding microscopic filaments of probability and chance, the characters of *Gun Island* find out how an angry planet stitches them together in the present, as it had in the past, when the gun merchant was running away from a wrathful goddess.

The trials and tribulations of Tipu and Rafi drive the plot at one level, as it travels from one continent to the next, just as the climate refugees, who are an important part of the story, taking great risks, cross land borders and oceans in search of a better life. Here in Deen, Tipu and Rafi's stories and their experiences we perceive climate change as a hyper object manifesting, in places far removed from one another, through poisonous sea snakes, raging wildfires, killer cyclones, freak weather, fist-size hailstones, shipworms eating up the foundations of a city and more, pervading the book with what Ghosh himself, following Heidegger and others, had characterised as the 'uncanny'.

How best can literature engage with this hydra-headed monster that is climate change? The author has himself dwelt on the challenges of representing its unpredictable and unthinkable aspects in his paradigm shifting work *The Great Derangement*. There, among other things, he pointed out the aversion in mainstream culture to engaging with nature, the problems of representing human aggregates and non-human actors, the poverty of language itself among several reasons. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh attempts this engagement, and despite some narrative slack, presents us with a busy and brilliant work which entertains and edifies while questioning the wayward ways of humanity. It is interesting to note how the ideas and analysis of *The Great Derangement* inform his writing of this novel. We find characters from the natural world, such as the dolphin Rani, a king cobra, colonies of shipworms, and spiders, among other creatures serving the plot, leveraging non-human agency into the storyline. That brand names of consumer goods are never mentioned in *Gun Island* whereas rideshare services which help reduce carbon dioxide emissions – like Uber and Ola are, connects to ideas about writing climate fiction discussed in his previous book.

Ghosh had earlier written how religious world views, because of their ideas of intergenerational responsibility, could be a better vehicle for mobilising large numbers people to counter climate change. The scene where Deen visits the Santa Maria Della Salute, the church of the Madonna of Good Health, who is said to have protected a tiny corner of Venice from the plague, seems to be an acknowledgement of this ameliorative and curative potential of religion that the author mentioned in his previous work. Yet the darkness that lurks a step away from the light is never forgotten: “She is the Black Madonna of La Salute” (Ghosh 95), said Cinta, and he continues, “The Panaghia Mesopanditissa. Madonna the Mediator: it is she who stands between us and the incarnate Earth, with all its blessings and furies” (Ghosh 96).

Ghosh, however, steers clear of the dystopian trope of disaster fiction, instead creating a world, not different from our own, animated by climate strife, affected by displacement and the accumulated symptoms of everything humans have inflicted on the planet. Thus we have dolphins beaching in Sunderbans, hungry birds of prey setting forests alight and poisonous snakes and spiders appearing far from their habitats, displaced by climate strife. The snake reference recurs in the book, tied as it is to the story of Manasa the goddess, but the scenes involving displaced creatures brings to mind another memorable work of climate fiction, Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*. Similarly, a delirious Tipu or the historian Cinta, who seem to have a connection with invisible worlds, could remind us of Bethany Krall, the psychotic teenage character in Liz Jensen's cli-fi masterpiece, *The Rapture*. There are other books like Frank Schatzing's eco-thriller *The Swarm*, which one might recollect while reading certain scenes in *Gun Island*. It is indeed exciting to note that these novels about ecological breakdown and climate change seem to be in conversation with one another, indicating common ground about the shape of the beast in the creative community while also pointing to the growing robustness of this branch of literature.

Still, Ghosh charts a different course as he engages climate despair in his fiction. Here we find a coming

together of his abiding themes of displacement and dislocation alongside climate strife as he creates polyphony of events and voices, from the past and the present, affected by the dark and unthinkable powers of climate change and the unknown. Nilima, Rafi and later on a helmsman, Horen Naskar, give Deen some vague clues to the gun merchant's lost story. These, alongside the symbols painted on the shrine, ultimately bring him to Venice where the last nail-biting scenes of the book are played out. The slowly sinking city of Venice, which, like the Sunderbans, is another symbolic reminder of the rising sea levels associated with climate change, is poignantly evoked by Ghosh as he compares it, like Geoff Dyer and others had done, to Varanasi:

That there is a strange kinship between Venice and Varanasi has often been noted: both cities are like portals in time; they seem to draw you into lost ways of life. And in both cities, as nowhere else in the world, you become aware of mortality. Everywhere you look there is evidence of the enchantment of decay, of a kind of beauty that can only be revealed by long, slow fading. (69)

The novel explores many of Ghosh's other recurring motifs: Irrawaddy dolphins; the Sunderbans; and climate change. But if there is one theme that takes up residence at the heart of the novel, that becomes its propulsive engine, it is the theme of refugees and illegal migration, of displacement and renewal. It is one of the most urgent and fraught themes of our times. A new kind of politics is taking over the world, leaving most of those who thought they understood the business quite baffled. Very few were able to predict the movement across the world that led to the rise of what is now described, inevitably, a posteriori, as right wing populism.

This, perhaps, is the backdrop against which Amitav Ghosh's latest novel, *Gun Island*, can be read. On the face of it, this work offers a continuity of many of Ghosh's concerns in his fiction, among them memory (*The Shadow Lines*), history (*The Ibis Trilogy*, *The Glass Palace*), ecology (*The Hungry Tide*), and the inexplicable (*The Calcutta Chromosome*). It would not be wrong to say that all these elements make *Gun Island* what it is, the intersection of individual trajectories with larger forces affecting the world. And yet, this is not a novel that can be

appreciated for its delineation of character or breathtaking plot or an engrossingly rich experience that you emerge from only when it's all over. No, it is a work that you must take a break from frequently to think about unfamiliar things, process new ideas, challenge your own understanding of life.

For those looking for deep insights into the minds, compulsions and contradictions of the three main players – Dinanath Dutta aka Deen, the rare book dealer, Cinta, the Venetian woman who is an authority on the history of her beloved city, Piya, the marine biologist who works in the Sunderbans (and has a backstory that Ghosh wrote in *The Hungry Tide*), this novel is the wrong station to get off at. It is less interested in the complexities of individuals than it is in telling a larger story that affects all of us.

But it is through his uncertainties and discoveries that the arc of discovery in this novel is played out. There is certainly a Deen in all of us, going with the relentless globalised flow of capitalist forces, enchanted by technology and its manifestation in the form of convenient gadgets, and yet uneasily aware that the planet is hurtling to its doom. Something must be done, but it is not the Deens of the world who do it. The world that Deen reveals for us is an unsettling layering of extreme events over everyday mundanities. Animals of all kinds, in particular, make disturbing and terrifying appearances, and nature itself is a determined force of upheaval that makes it impossible to use it as a literary device. It is the protagonist of *Gun Island*, and it has turned mysterious and violent, defying attempts to explain it through western forms of reason and logic alone.

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