

Decoding the posthuman perspectives in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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ABSTRACT

Climate fictions are extremely relevant in a world that is battling climate crisis, and this paper, "Decoding the Posthuman Perspectives in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*", explores the method of adopting a posthuman perspective in climate fictions. Literary fictions are powerful tools to address many socially relevant notions. The novel *Gun Island*, is like a methodological application of all the concerns and questions Ghosh has raised in his non-fiction work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and Unthinkable*. Intertwined around the aspects of climate change, migration, and refugee crisis, this paper's main objective is to re-read the novel, taking cues from contemporary posthuman theories. The methodology resorted is a deconstructive reading of the novel using the three strands of posthumanism by Braidotti in her work *The Posthuman* and Cary Wolfe's beyond anthropocentric concepts, dismantling of binary oppositions like human/animal, nature/culture and so on in his work *Animal Rites*. Spanning across the land of Sundarbans to Los Angeles and Venice, through the trope of magical realism, Ghosh voices the verge of climatic catastrophe world in attractive and metaphorical manner. Thus, this paper's main purpose is to prove that posthuman perspectives in climate fiction are the best ideological method to adopt to impart the right sense of ecological awareness in its whole essence. Breaking the stereotyped anthropocentric notions and repositioning the privileged status of humans within the web of life, is one the most required ideological shift the society needs. Thus, doing it through the power of fiction, more precisely climate fiction, makes it an immensely sensitive and relevant concern for addressing climate change. Further, it is an area of immense scope as climate fictions embedded with posthuman perspectives is quite like the need of the hour in this world of forest fires and wars.

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Introduction

The world is at the beginning of mass extinction, and the climate crisis is creating more refugees than war. Instead of focusing on weeding out illegal migrants, we should stress a much larger issue: the irreversible damage we are causing to our environment and the rise of climate refugees. Addressing climate change is the need of the hour because the world is on the brink of danger. Literature is a slice of life, and it offers us an insight into life and the reality around us in an artistic manner. In this context arises the million-dollar question of how the field of literary fiction has addressed the issue of the climate crisis. This paper aims to delve deep into Ghosh's posthuman approach to climatic fiction. The work intends to decode the posthuman perspectives and aspects in narrating a world on the platform of the climate threat. Posthumanism defamiliarizes traditional concepts of humanism and promotes a view that tends to understand the human subject concerning other elements. This approach in a fictional work that addresses climate crisis issues conveys the crux of the matter most effectively. One of the most effective ways to tackle the climate crisis is by promoting a view that thrusts importance not only on humans but also on all the other non-living and living elements of existence. Climate fiction is a branch of literature that deals with climate change and global warming. Environmental educators use a variety of means, such as newspapers, magazines, speaking engagements, etc., to improve climate change literacy. Many successful authors of literary fiction, such as Margaret Atwood, Paolo Bacigalupi, T. C. Boyle, Michael Crichton, Ian McEwan, Amitav Ghosh, Barbara Kingsolver, Ursula Le Guin, Lydia Millet, David Mitchell, Ruth Ozeki, Nathaniel Rich, Kim Stanley Robinson, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Marcel Theroux, have contributed to this new genre's efforts to imagine the causes, effects, and

feeling of various climate threats. Together, their work pulls the issue-oriented and didactic approach of activist fiction into contact with the intensive description and site specificity of Romantic nature writing. Cli-fi knits these tendencies into a narrative of the effects of a dramatic change in the Earth's climate on a particular location and a vision of the options available to a population seeking to adapt to or mitigate those effects. However, climate fictions are not just made up of disastrous stories set in the future but also includes the recent past and, most significantly, the present. Amitav Ghosh is one of the Indian writers precisely known for the environmental concerns in his work. Ghosh has been thinking about climate change for years.

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and Unthinkable*, Ghosh questions contemporary fiction's failure to address climate change and other environmental issues, realizing soon after that he had not done it in his novels spanning over a three-decade-long literary career. In his novel *Gun Island*, Ghosh attempts to tackle all the questions he raises. "It certainly is my attempt at an answer. When I finished writing 'The Great Derangement', I said to myself, 'What have I done?' Look at this book questioning how fiction approaches these subjects and now I have to think of an answer," said Ghosh while speaking at the launch of *Gun Island* at the India Habitat Centre while in conversation with journalist Raghu Karnad. With sweeping, exuberant style and extraordinary linguistic features, Ghosh addresses the issue of climate change and migration in *Gun Island*.

Posthumanism is an emerging field that dismantles the deeply ingrained view that humans are the crown of all creations. The concept of humanism has been vastly altered under the influence of contemporary scientific advancements, global concerns, and revolutionary philosophical thoughts

that depart from old notions regarding humankind. In the current scenario, the concept of posthumanism is discussed in contexts of anxiety about the excess of technological intervention and also the threat of climate change, which is an issue of serious concern in the current world when all parts of the world are being affected by the havoc of climate crisis. Also, it is discussed to highlight the potential for human enhancement.

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* as a climate fiction

The myth of the Gun Merchant, a fictional myth that Ghosh has formulated concerning ancient Bengali folktales, is the basic premise on which the whole novel is constructed. The whole plot of the novel is like a reincarnation of this myth. Thereby, the truth is that Ghosh has used this myth as a metaphor to indicate its relevance in the current world. Firstly, he is trying to express that climate change is not a new fashionable trend but something that has existed for a long time. Travelling from the marshy flood-prone Sundarbans on the south-eastern fringe of West Bengal to the city of Venice in Italy, known to be sinking slowly, the novel sheds light on all the climate adversaries that are still striking us. While tracing this vast geographical trajectory, the plot also describes an ambitious arc of time, connecting our present-day ferments caused by climate change with those that unfolded many years ago, during a phase of global cooling described as the Little Ice Age by scientists. Yet, despite these leaps of time and place, the story that Ghosh tells remains alive and prescient, featuring ecological crises such as the "dead zone" in oceans where large stretches of marine life cannot survive due to pollutants from factories and refineries, then mass beaching of whales and dolphins, the devastating wildfires, floods and so on.

In fact, the book arouses a sense of urgency and is very much about the world we live in now by giving a cumulative picture of the impact of the climate crisis on the world as a whole, including all living organisms. In his interview with *The Hindu* on *Gun Island*, Ghosh says,

We are living in a time of all sorts of strange intersections of behaviour among human beings, and among 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 (Ghosh).

Scholars like Rosi Braidotti, Ursula Heise and Stacy Alaimo have argued that environmental issues must be considered when discussing posthuman issues, and vice versa. If we live in a posthuman world, this is not just because of advancements in science and technology, but also because climate change and related phenomena have made us more aware that human existence is largely determined by non-human forces that humans cannot fully control. In an era of turbulent planetary change and environmental crisis, taking a posthuman approach to the concept of the environment is extremely important as it plays an important role in imagining the dynamic relations between humans, non-human species, and the environment. The human species are undergoing a massive transformation in response to these changing environmental conditions. Climate change, pollution, overpopulation, and other similar phenomena

trigger these transformations or prompt humans to migrate or change their living conditions to adapt to these situations as their only option is nature on the account of which they survive. While taking a posthuman approach to environmental aspects in a literary novel, a romantic notion of the environment as a benign force is dismantled, instead flagging the complexity and risks involved in the changing relations between humans and their environment. This fascinating turn towards focus on non-human aspects is effectuated by explicitly dealing with an environmentally mediated, dramatic, phased event that enlists human and non-human characters or figures. Rather than offering a strictly hierarchically ordering in which human protagonists are situated in a story that occurs in a fictional world, these novels narrate an emergent, constructive interaction between characters, events, and environments. It replaces anthropocentric dichotomies of subject and object, nature and culture, human and non-human. This is exactly what Amitav Ghosh has done in his novel *Gun Island*.

The novel can be seen as a paean to the lessons of history and myth, a rallying cry against the climate crisis and climate change-induced plight of refugees. Ghosh raises urgent questions about what migration and movement mean, and what closed borders and xenophobia are doing to the people devastated by climate change's wrath. Interestingly, Ghosh comments on climate change's devastating environmental and human impact and its consequences not from a biased anthropocentric perspective, but rather from a more revised post-anthropocentric or rather more precisely, from a posthuman perspective. Ghosh strengthens this perspective through repeated encounters with the natural world, which is given the same agency as humans. Crossing past several binaries, he takes a swift turn away from the ideals of anthropocentrism and this is the most attractive aspect of this apocalyptic yet hopeful climatic fiction.

An analysis of the traces of Rosi Braidotti's notion of posthumanism within *Gun Island*

Rosi Braidotti in her concepts of posthumanism, thrusts importance on *zoe* or the generic animating life force, which is not a property of an individual or a specific species but rather of the whole universe which includes all the organic and inorganic organisms. *Zoe* is a "dynamic, self-organising structure of life itself" (Braidotti 160); in this, the *anthropos* is a very minute segment. Braidotti puts forth a *zoe*-centric form of ideology and she does this by highlighting a three-phase process, which she labels as "becoming-animal", "becoming-earth" and "becoming-machine". These three-phase process can be explicitly analysed in *Gun Island*. By shifting the focus from an anthropocentric perspective on the causes and impacts of climate change, Ghosh promotes a *zoe*-centric view. This view highlights the posthuman perspectives in the novel.

Braidotti discusses the process of "becoming-animal", where she focuses on the discursive practices that allow *anthropos* to distinguish themselves and consider themselves to be in a higher position than the rest of the animal kingdom. She expresses that the connection between human and non-human is inherently unequal and structured around deeply biased anthropocentric assumptions that other animals

are submissive and exist primarily concerning humans. Braidotti points out that how animals have been reduced to metaphorical indicators to portray human virtues. Thus, these non-human animals are reduced to mere symbols and reinterpreted through human notions. This degrades them to entities beneath humans. One of the major goals of a posthuman viewpoint is to see non-human organisms as independent of human constructs and equivalent to humans. Amitav Ghosh has tried to transform this practise of attributing metaphorical indicators to animals to portray human virtues by doing exactly the opposite in the novel. At many instances in the novel, Ghosh describes humans by attributing them with the virtues and characteristics of animals.

Deen, when he meets Tipu for the first time, describes him as “he had probing eyes and darting movements of a hungry barracuda. He even glistened, barracuda-like, because of a silver ear stud and glittering highlights in his hair, which was spiky on top and flat at the sides” (Ghosh 52). Similarly, Deen uses a similar description after his first encounter with Rafi “with his mop of unkempt hair and glistening watchful eyes, he was at once feral and delicately graceful, like some wild, wary creature that could at any movement take flight” (Ghosh 72). Also, after Tipu gets bitten by the cobra inside the shrine, it is said that “all at once his body began to twitch and shake, making spasmodic little motions, like those of a dreaming animal” (Ghosh 80). Even Rafi who was very protective and caring towards Tipu, who was in a constant struggle after the snake bite is described to be “like a wild creature standing over its young” (Ghosh 81). The dalals whose job was to get the illegal migrants and refugees across the borders are referred to as “jackals”. On the journey to the shrines in the mangroves, Deen being quite unused to the marshy soil and deep forests faces a hard time. Horen gives Deen advice on how to deal with the mud like “use your big toe like a claw and dig it in” (Ghosh 66). Further while describing the plight of natives of Sundarbans after the massive blow of the cyclone of 1970, it is being said that “people had been reduced to eating carcasses and cadavers” (Ghosh 55). Also, Deen, when he narrates about annual visits to Calcutta when the weather turns cold in the northern climes, says that “great flocks of foreign –settled Culcuttans, like myself, take wing and fly back to overwinter in the city” (Ghosh 4). In all these instances in the novel, Ghosh describes human’s predicament by drawing parallels with animals and their characteristic traits. This explicitly asserts that no animals are more equal but all are equally inscribed into the web of life.

Braidotti then moves to the process of “becoming-earth”. Here she brings forth a return to holism and a notion of the whole earth as a single, sacred organism” (Braidotti 84). The focus falls on the recognition of an inter-species goal of keeping the planet, as the only known habitable environment for all known strands of zoe, alive. Ghosh’s *Gun Island* is an eye-opener to the dark realities perpetuating the world. He has resorted to taking a posthuman turn on the aspects of climate change prevalent in the current in world and the migration induced as an impact of the changing

environmental conditions on not just humans but also other species. The novel brings a major shift in our ingrained anthropocentric concepts. Ghosh proposes a more engaged, more diffractive mode of viewing the aspects of life by throwing light on the co-evolution, sustenance, and survival tactics used by all the different strands of life, including humans. At every part of the novel, Ghosh makes it a point to make the readers aware that humans are just a part of this wide web of life and they would be equally affected as to all the other creatures by the mayhem of environmental crisis which subsequently affect their living conditions. The novel takes a posthuman, post-natural, and post-green turn in critiquing the taxonomy of the human and the non-human. Not just humans but various other living creatures are portrayed to be devastated by the wrath of climate and this sort of a posthuman turn ultimately unifies all species, all organisms. By taking such a posthuman turn in this climate fiction, Ghosh makes the readers aware of the biological fact that we are crisscrossed and cohabited by stranger beings, intimate visitors who affect our behaviour, appreciate our warmth and are in no rush to leave. Therefore, humans are entangled in the web of life with other living creatures because our environmental relations are always characterised by networks of complex crossings and interchanges with other beings and other natural and material forces as well. When environmental factors disrupt these forces, all the organisms get affected. All the organisms in this web of life will be placed in a vulnerable position as their living conditions get affected.

In the novel, the various environmental factors also affect people, whether in Sundarbans, Venice, or Los Angeles. Climate change disrupts the living conditions of all living and non-living organisms, making the environment hostile and unfit for survival. In the novel, it is not just people like Tipu or Rafi who wish to have a more financially stable life rather than living a hard life in an ecologically fragile place like the Sundarbans but Ghosh provides an ample number of examples of other animals and living creatures being affected because of the threat of climate crisis. In one of the chatting sessions between Deen and Tipu, the concept of “bhuta” is brought in. “Bhuta” is a Bangla word which comes from a basic but very complicated Sanskrit root “bhu”, meaning “to be”, or “to manifest”. So, in this sense, “bhuta” means “a being” or “an existing presence”. Thus, this brings in the concept that all that exists, be it animals, snakes, dolphins, humans, plants all are “bhutas”. This concept demolishes all the hierarchical dominance that humans assume that they have. In the initial parts of the novel, Ghosh takes the readers back to Cyclone Bhola and Cyclone Alia that hit the Sundarbans. This affected the lives of the people in the Sundarbans and also affected the habitats of many living organisms. The plight of the inhabitants was extremely miserable. Having once been uprooted from their villages many evacuees decided not to return, knowing that their lives, always hard, would be more precarious as the climate threat continues. Interestingly, Ghosh depicts that this is not just the situation of humans but all other non-human organisms. Piya describes Rani or RN1, an individual river dolphin, the Irrawaddy dolphin, a

species she studied for most of her professional life. This species is known to science as *Orcaella brevirostris*. Piya describes to Deen how Rani and her pod had abandoned their old hunting grounds.

Piya questions Deen whether he would not be disappointed if he is suddenly uprooted from his place. She says, "Wouldn't you be stressed if you had to abandon all the places that you know and were forced to start all over again?" (Ghosh 97). Here, Piya laments over the creatures who deliberately beach themselves in a genuinely affecting turn. Ghosh here strikes a chord with the refugees and all those who are finding it hard to cope with the displacement caused by climate change. Piya says that: [Rani] perfectly adapted to her environment, perfectly at home in it – and then things begin to change so that all these years of learning become useless, the places you know best cannot sustain you more and you have got to find new hunting grounds. Rani must have felt that everything she knew, everything she was familiar with, the water, the currents, the earth itself – was rising against her. (Ghosh 17) These lines do have an oddly familiar ring with what Moyna talks about the people who were leaving the Sundarbans "it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans" (Ghosh 49). The islands of Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed by the sea, making a living in the Sundarbans an exodus and hard task. People started migrating to cities and foreign lands. Also, these situations attracted traffickers in large numbers after being hit with multiple havocs. Here, the writer highlights the fact that the plights of humans are not different from those of non-human creatures.

The ultimate example of this is evident in Lubna's narration of an event that happens with their family, back then when they lived in the Sundarbans. A cyclone hit the place. The wind was strong and carried off their house's roof. The water began to rise at an alarming rate and covered halfway up the walls of their house. Left with no choice, they all took shelter in a tree. All of them managed to get on to the tree. But then they discovered that the tree was full of snakes, "they had climbed up to get away from the water, just as [they] had" (Ghosh 160). As it is said in the novel all these events have its scientific explanations. Temperature is rising around the world because of global warming. This means that the habitats of various kinds of animals are also changing. Thus, all living creatures that depend on the earth as the only known habitable environment gets affected by these tumultuous changes in climate. Thereby, the sudden appearance of the brown recluse spider in Italy where it is not usually seen, the invasion of the shipworms in the lagoons of Venice, and the appearance of the deadly yellow-bellied snake all these events has its reasonable scientific explanations, that is climate change. All the living creatures are struggling to adapt to these changes. In fact, in Cinta's words "they all seem to be travelling in the same direction as us" (Ghosh 264). Towards the end of the novel, we get to see humankind and the world of nature intersects at the crossover of climate change. There is not much difference between the plight of the refugees on the blue boat or the animals, birds or fishes. Animal migrations

are being hugely impacted by climate change. Piya says "we'll see more of these intersecting events in the future" (Ghosh 284).

Finally, Braidotti moves into the process of "becoming-machine". The machine can no longer be conceived as a metaphor of humanity or the natural world but rather be conceived as an object of its own. The process stresses the link between the humanistic emphasis on Man, as the measure of all things, and the domination and exploitation of nature and condemn the abuse of science and technology. This involves epistemic and physical violence over the structural others. Man, often sees technology as one of his powerful weapon to have the ultimate agency over nature. Just like Tipu says, "the internet is the migrants magic carpet, it's his conveyor belt" (Ghosh 61). Man feels that technology has the power to protect man from the wrath of climate change. While travelling to the Gun Merchant's shrine, Deen, new to the marshy lands and deep forest, tips and falls into the mud. Mud seeped into his mouth, his ears, his eyes he felt "as if [his] body were being reclaimed by the primaeva ooze" (Ghosh 67). It seemed to him that eyeglasses were his last connection with the world of civilization. Finally, when Deen leaves Calcutta after the series of events, he feels a sense of gratitude as he steps into the plane. He says, "it was as if I had entered an impregnably metallic, mechanical, man-made womb, where everything served to protect me from that world of mud as its slithering, creeping inhabitants" (Ghosh 102). The truth is that technology is neither a metaphor for humankind nor vice-versa. The world has been hugely affected and improved because of technology. The human trafficking business is the biggest clandestine industry in the world. It reaches very deep into society, especially in poor societies. It is the information system that has made this possible. Social media connects people and helps them move. However, it has changed the world so much and has hugely impacted the cause of climate change. In spite of human's claim that they dominate over the rest of the creatures, forces like nature, material forces, technological advancements, scientific innovations etc. control humans. When environmental factors ostensibly disrupt these networks, thus the posthuman condition becomes an entanglement in many antagonistic forces with efficacy and humans are immune to their material effects just like all the other organisms. This ruptures the false conviction that humans are the crown of all creations. Posthumanism and Ecocriticism with their intersecting stories and theories have something in common: they introduce the way materiality, agency and nature are conceived. Thereby this highlights the theoretical interconnection between posthumanism and eco-criticism. Both these theoretical frameworks give agency to nature and shifts beyond human agency. Ghosh has used the exact technique in *Gun Island*. Throughout the novel, we see the agency exerted by the forces of nature. It is been written in the novel that "amidst all of this [all the environmental crisis going on in the world] the weather too turned against humanity" (Ghosh 220). Deen who unknowingly gets entangled in the myth always felt haunted by forces beyond his control he says

“I had been haunted by the feeling that something that had long lain dormant in the mud of the Sundarbans had entered me” (Ghosh 128). When Cinta and Deen were trapped in the lagoon and attacked by the shipworms Deen says “and then worms were swarming over us- our legs, arms, faces, and heads. It was as though the earth itself had sent out tentacles to touch us, to feel the texture of our skin and see whether we were real” (Ghosh 231).

Humans distanced themselves from nature in spite of the truth that nature was their only known habitat to sustain their lives. Nature tried to confirm if humans were still part of nature. After a point when humans exploit nature, nature exerts back its powers to remind humans the truth that they can never overpower nature. At one instance Cinta says: Everybody knows what must be done if the world is to continue to be a liveable place if our homes are not to be invaded by the sea, or by creatures like that spider. Everybody knows ... and yet we are powerless, even the most powerful among us. We go about our daily business through habit, as though we were in the grip of forces that have overwhelmed our will; we see shocking and monstrous things happening all around us and we avert our eyes; we surrender ourselves willingly to whatever it is that has us in its power. (Ghosh 216) When nature acquires agency, humans are reduced to minute elements under its control. Even the most civilized of cities turned out to be utterly alone and helpless under the wrath of nature, humans were completely placed at the mercy of the earth. Thus, the only thing that can save humanity is living in union with all the living creatures and with the forces of nature. This is what Ghosh has dramatically portrayed through the final scene where the refugees in the blue boat get saved. The admirals’ words after saving the blue boat add on to this, “I have nothing to fear from the law ... I have acted in accordance with the laws of the sea, the law of humanity and the law of God ... those are the laws I will answer to” (Ghosh 285). Throughout the novel, there are innumerable numbers of instances where the borderline between humans and non-humans is merged. Ghosh portrays, the plight of all the creatures in the web of life, including humans when they befall under the wrath of the raging climate crisis. Humans being a mere strand of life under the forces of nature can never overpower nature’s power. The novel shifts the worldview from an anthropocentric perspective to a cumulative posthuman one. Thus, *Gun Island* is a fictional musing on climate change from a posthuman perspective.

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Conclusion

Climate change and its resultant impacts and consequences are a reality for all the people around the globe. Environmental educators make use of many tools to address the issue of climate change like newspapers, magazines, journals, literary fiction and so on. One of the most powerful tools to confront the realities of life is literary fiction and thereby definitely, it turns out to be one of the most effective tools to educate people and make them aware and conscious about one of the major challenge the world is trying to tackle. Fiction helps the readers or listeners to personalize the psychology of fictional characters and thus cultivates their ability to relate to the people around them who are battling with the same realities as them. Climate fictions help the readers to familiarize with the psychology of the characters who though fictional, are battling to survive the harsh patterns of climate variations. This inculcates in them a fear and awareness about the need to take actions to come to terms with these changes and the fear propels them to do their best to minimize the happening of such occurrences in future.

Gun Island, uses climate change as a backdrop. Through the fictional myth of the Gun Merchant, this acts as a sort of mystery, code for all the events that happen in the lives of Deen Dutta and all the other characters. This myth is like a fable, which is indicative of the entire climate crisis the characters meet with. The major highlight is Ghosh’s use of a posthuman approach. The novel proves the fact that applying posthuman concepts while addressing environmental issues is one of the most effective techniques to create awareness in people. We live in a posthuman world, and not just advancements in science and technology, but also climate change and related phenomena have made humans aware that non-human forces also determine human existence. In the novel, Ghosh draws a parallel between the impacts of climate change on humans and non-human organisms. This proves that humans are submissive to the mighty forces of nature and dismantles the wrong notion that humans are the crown of all creations. Through Piya’s character, Ghosh proves that scientists, in particular, are participants rather than masters of their environment. The intervention of the non-human in the thought process of the humans leads to the decentring of the human and the re-centring of the non-human. The novel discards the romantic notion regarding the environment as a benign force and portrays the changing relationship between humans and their environment.

