# Critical Ecofeminism in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction: From *The Hungry Tide* to *Gun Island*[1]

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## Setting the Ground: Amitav Ghosh's Green Postcolonial Novels

In recent times, theoretical discourses built around the growing diversity of the global world have increasingly acknowledged the need to respect the rights of human and non-human life alike. Postcolonialism, which had come of age in the nineties, having accomplished its mission of writing back to the former centres of empires[2], has since developed a productive dialogue with ecocriticism. In their editorial to a 2008 special issue of the journal *Interventions*, dedicated to "Green Postcolonialism," as well as in their subsequent collection *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin accuse colonial empires of genocide and environmental destruction in the colonised lands. They point out the mutual benefits that a dialogue between postcolonialism and ecocriticism could bring:

> As several of the contributors to this issue note, environmental studies can learn much from postcolonial theory, while the general neglect of environmental issues in postcolonial studies sorely needs to be addressed. (3)

Such a dialogue can take place productively in literature, a powerful framework of reflection on the world through its individual stories. Amitav Ghosh's novels *The*

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2 See Salman Rushdie's article "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance" (1982), which alludes to George Lucas's 1980 film *The Empire Strikes Back* from the *Star Wars* series to suggest that the eighties were a time of consolidation of postcolonial literatures, which responded to the literary canons of former colonial empires through their own strong literary voices. This dialogue is relevant to the former colonial languages that were adopted by force of law or habit by the elites.

*Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), the focus of this article, are such literary examples. As I will aim to argue, the two novels also lend themselves favourably to a critical ecofeminist lens, as the female protagonists' key instrumental input foregrounds the positive impact of female (and feminist) agency in situations of environmental crisis.

*The Hungry Tide* focuses around Bengali American cetologist Piyali Roy, or Piya, who travels to the Sundarbans to study Gangetic dolphins, famously known to be dwelling in the area in large numbers. There, she comes across a different dolphin species, the Irawaddy (*Orcaella brevirostris*) which is akin to the killer whale (*Orcinus orca*) inhabiting the Puget Sound of the Pacific Northwest of the United States, in the vicinity of which she had grown with her unhappily married parents. As she pursues her research, she bonds with local people such as Nilima, the founder of the Badabon trust, which supports poor women without means, Kanai, her nephew, owner of a translating company in Delhi, and Fokir, the fisherman who takes her around the Sundarbans in support of her research and dies protecting her from a deadly tornado. Following his death, Piya commits to supporting his wife Moyna and their child. The Sundarbans have taught her not only about the dolphins' behaviour, but also about how similar the local people's issues are to the surrounding endangered environment.

In *Gun Island*, years later, we come across Piya and Nilima again, as well as Kanai, Moyna and a growing Tipu (Fokir's son), who has not benefited much from the spoiling offered him by Piya. Tipu is, in fact, like a typical western teenager, at odds with everybody (especially the traditional society of the Sundarbans) and in search of his own journey. The perspective in the novel is enriched through the presence of a narrator-protagonist, Dinanath – or Deen, as everybody calls him – a rare book dealer who commutes annually between Brooklyn and Calcutta and who, at the outset of the novel, is recovering from a disturbing breakup. An important thread in the novel's plot is the legend of Bonduki Sadagar. Deen initially connects this character to the legend he studied during his PhD research and calls him the Gun Merchant. This Gun Merchant is originally believed to have built a shrine dedicated to the snake goddess Manasa Devi, but then, through a more accurate translation, he turns out as "the merchant who went to Venice". The legend of the mysterious Gun Merchant changes as Deen goes along his path of discovery (and self-discovery), with the help of the three strong female figures that change his views on the world:

Piya and Nilima (who continue the journeys started in *The Hungry Tide*) and his Venetian friend Giacinta Schiavon. Considering their strong individualist trajectories and successful professional paths, as well as their commitment to the environment, I will argue that the three of them hold ecofeminist views and reflect Ghosh's own commitment to the environment. Moreover, it is profitable to read the two novels by employing a critical feminist lens, which highlights Ghosh's message that the world of the humans and the natural environment should be treated with equal respect.

**Addressing Colonial Damage: The Benefits of Critical Ecofeminism**

Critical ecofeminism, as promoted by theorists such as Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies or Greta Gaard, capitalises on the mutually benefiting parallels that can be drawn between inter-human gendered relations and the relations between humans and the natural world. If green postcolonialism highlights the connections between the history of colonial empires and the abuses committed by humans on nature, critical ecofeminism points out that these humans usually represent western patriarchal mentality and builds a set of critical tools against their indiscriminate oppression. Maria Mies (a Germany-based social scientist active in the feminist movement) and Vandana Shiva (an India-based theoretical physicist active in the ecological movement) decided in the early nineties to write a book together, and published the first edition of *Ecofeminism* in 1993.

*Ecofeminism* is a book authored by two people engaged in a dialogue across their respective disciplines. It is mostly composed of parts written by each of the authors separately, in response to similar questions, and with one common Introduction explaining the genesis of the book. As they confess in their individual introductions to the 2014 second edition, their solutions to the various problems tackled by their respective movements were strikingly similar, and so it was productive to connect them (Mies and Shiva 3). As Ariel Salleh, a fellow ecofeminist, notices in her Foreword to the 2014 edition of *Ecofeminism*, Mies and Shiva agreed on a shared commitment to "women's efforts to save their livelihood and make their communities safe" (Mies and Shiva ix). Women's "natural" drive to care for nature therefore comes from their dependence on the environment for the good of those they mother and generally nurture. But, as Shiva insists, women and nature also share a similar exposure to patriarchal violence: "the rape of the Earth and rape of women are intimately linked" (Shiva, in Mies and Shiva xvi).

Amitav Ghosh's recent non-fiction book *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021) calls for an increased awareness of the reality of pollution and climate change, largely due to centuries of reckless colonial exploitation, as also suggested by Huggan and Tiffin's concept of green postcolonialism. This is also in tune with Maria Mies's "myth of catching-up development," which prompted Western colonialism to impose universally a "model of 'the good life'" that emulates "the affluent societies of the North: the USA, Europe and Japan" (Mies, in Mies and Shiva 55). This was backed up by the scientific reductionism of the age of the Scientific Revolution (Shiva, in Mies and Shiva 22) and often had destructive effects across the nature/culture divide in societies where this divide had been a lot milder before. What Maria Mies calls capitalist-patriarchy becomes a system universally imposed by colonial empires, which "interprets difference as hierarchical and uniformity as a prerequisite for equality" (Mies and Shiva 2). The disparities between this model and the previous ways of life of the colonised non-European countries where it was applied led indiscriminately to disasters in the respective countries. One such disaster was the Banda genocide, caused by Dutch settlers in the Banda islands in 1621 with the purpose of gaining complete control over the cultivation of nutmeg trees in the Bandas. This genocide is Amitav Ghosh's starting point in a historically aware discussion of the contribution of colonial imperialism to the current climate crisis.

Ecofeminism addresses such issues by combining gender activism with a care for the environment. It highlights a shared vulnerability of women and nature (the more so as women have often traditionally been regarded *as* nature). Its value as a tool for addressing disparities and injustices across disciplines is emphasised in Australian philosopher Val Plumwood's discourse of *critical* ecofeminism, taken over by Greta Gaard and enriched with a critique of all forms of oppressive normative laws, coming from queer studies. Greta Gaard's queer ecofeminism adds the awareness of gender as being socially constructed and, therefore, of human intervention in nature as being oppressive. As early as her 1997 article "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," she outlines the similarities of all oppressive "-isms," along similar lines to Ghosh's critique of the ongoing oppression of colonialism, which continues since *The Shadow Lines* (1988):

> At the root of ecofeminism is the understanding that the many systems of oppression are mutually reinforcing. Building on the socialist feminist insight that racism, classism, and sexism are interconnected, ecofeminists recognized additional similarities between those forms of human oppression and the oppressive structures of speciesism and naturism. An early impetus for the ecofeminist movement was the realization that the liberation of women – the aim

> of all branches of feminism – cannot be fully effected without the liberation of nature. (Gaard, “Toward a Queer Ecofeminism” 114)

In the article, Gaard shows that ecofeminist theory explores “the connections among many issues: racism, environmental degradation, economics, electoral politics, animal liberation, reproductive politics, biotechnology, bioregionalism, spirituality, holistic health practices, sustainable agriculture, and others” (115). Critical ecofeminism provides a more incisive analysis of the similar kinds of wrongs coming from the various forms of oppression at work in the contemporary world. In tune with Gaard, in a collection dedicated to ecofeminism and meant to reflect the field’s multidisciplinarity and multidirectional historical roots, Karen Warren insists that “there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on tone hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other” (xi). Warren suggests that, more than an emancipatory social movement, exporting the task of feminism into nature activism, ecofeminism becomes a form of deep ecology that uses models borrowed from the feminist movement to address various forms of inequality present in society as much as in nature. An anticolonial, non-dualist form of thinking, ecofeminism prompts a recognition of the fact that all forms of oppression and emancipation share very similar features.

Creative fiction and non-fiction provide an auspicious framework for thinking about the world and the environment, as, I will argue, is particularly the case in the work of Amitav Ghosh. By “creative,” I mean to refer to Ghosh’s way of addressing the concerns of the environment and society through a kind of direct essayistic analysis which relies on narrative scenarios for exemplification. Such is, for instance, the case in *The Great Derangement* (2016), where the account of Ghosh’s own experience of the tornado that hit Delhi unexpectedly in March 1978 is the starting point of a complex historicised discussion of climate change. At the same time, however, it also becomes the ground on which a parallel discussion around the inadequacy of the realist novel form to address the current realities of our world is built. To Ghosh, writing a novel and writing a reflective essay about the current concerns of the world are cognate endeavours. Coming in the wake of the long tradition of oral and written storytelling in India (where the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are archetypal

repositories of everything that ever happened or will happen in the world[3]) he resorts to a kind of narrative knowledge, which involves knowing and acting upon the world through listening to, telling and writing stories.

**Humans and Non-Humans in the Sundarbans**

Ghosh's fiction is a space of reflection on the world that benefits from the power of persuasion granted by the concrete, narrated evidence of case studies. In *The Hungry Tide*, the stories told by humans do not always make sense, as in the case of Kanai, the owner of a translation company, fluent in six languages, who however does not always manage to communicate very well with either his aunt Nilima or his new acquaintance Piya. The novel suggests more than once that human languages are not always the best media for successful communication. In the chapter entitled "Words" we discover that Piya's not knowing Bengali is due to her emotional refusal to learn the language in which her parents were always fighting (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 89). Yet with Fokir, whose native Bengali she cannot speak, Piya finds a bond that comes close to the one she establishes with the dolphins whose behaviour she studies.

The dolphins have their own stories, which Piya gradually learns to decipher. At the beginning of her research in the Sundarbans, she realizes that not everything is as she had expected and that the predicament of people is not completely different from that of the dolphins:

> That these waters had once contained large number of dolphins was known beyond a doubt. Several nineteenth-century zoologists had testified to it. The "discoverer" of the Gangetic dolphin, William Roxburgh, had said explicitly that the freshwater dolphins of the Ganges delighted in the "labyrinth of rivers and creeks to the South and South-East of Calcutta". This was exactly where she was and yet, after hours of careful surveillance she had still to spot her first dolphin. Nor had she seen many fishermen: Piya had been hoping that the trip would yield a few encounters with knowledgeable boat people but such opportunities had been scarce today. (43-44)

While it is a surprise to Piya that she comes across a different species than expected – the Irawaddy, rather than the Gangetic, dolphin – she discovers that the dolphins had found ways to adapt to adverse circumstances by migrating between fresh and salt waters. But she also realises that people are as much victims of changing circumstances as the dolphins were. Like human migrants, dolphins adapt and

3 I have discussed the re-performance of the oral and written tradition of mythical storytelling in significant part of contemporary Indian writing in English elsewhere (Draga Alexandru 2015).

sometimes provide clues to people's stories. But humans are also sometimes defeated by the adversity of the environment, as is the case with Piya's mother, who dies of cancer in an America that had not provided her with a home, or with Fokir, who has to choose between saving himself and saving Piya. For Piya, America does provide the freedom she needs as a female scientist, but it is her native Bengal where she goes for fieldwork. In the process, she also begins to understand who she is and how she may forge her own path. The connection between the two cetacean species living in the waters by which her family had been dwelling (the Sundarbans and the Puget Sound) becomes relevant and provides clues to her life and career.

Despite the lack of a common language, Piya builds a strong bond with Fokir, the local Dalit fisherman who takes her around the Sundarbans looking for dolphins and finally dies while protecting her. This leads her to forming a family of sorts with Fokir's wife Moyna and his son Tipu. Despite her efforts, this family is as unsuccessful as her parents' had been, with America being equally confusing to Tipu as it had been to her mother. While Tipu finds his own way in life by overcoming the difficulties of his own migration journey (to Italy), Piya does eventually find the promise of emotional fulfilment through her budding relationship with Deen at the end of *Gun Island.*

In the fluid land of the Sundarbans, alternative worlds are built through stories. In *Gun Island*, stories coming from different directions, which interact and flow into one another, are the basis on which the novel is built. It is, actually, the legend of the Gun Merchant that triggers all the other threads of the plot. As Deen's Venetian friend, the *Professoressa* Giacinta Schiavon (or Cinta, as he calls her), argues, stories are not the monopoly of humans (traditionally thought to be "storytelling animals"), but, on the contrary, the terrain that unites them with animals:

> What if the faculty of storytelling were not specifically human but rather the last remnant of our animal selves? A vestige left from a time before language, when we communicated as other living beings do? Why else is it that only in stories do animals speak? Not to speak of demons, and gods, and indeed God himself? It is only through stories that the universe can speak to us, and if we don't learn to listen you may be sure that we will be punished for it. (141)

This act of connecting the whole chain of being through stories takes the dolphins' stories further. In *Gun Island*, stories travel from East to West, from the Sundarbans to Venice and to Los Angeles and, last but not least, between narrative texts. Thus, *Gun Island* is not technically a sequel to the plot of *The Hungry Tide*, though Piya's presence is important in both. But the two novels certainly follow from each other on

the level of the ideas on which they are based, as well as of the environment-oriented parallel plot. One trigger of the plot of *The Hungry Tide* is the absurdity of the fact that the Bengal tiger, a protected species, suddenly becomes more important than the people living in the Sundarbans. The questioning of this status quo is continued in *Gun Island* in a much vaster system of transgenerational, transhistorical and even trans-species connectivity, placed in similar relations of endangering and protecting one another. The problem raised here by Ghosh is similar to one that fuels Greta Gaard's need for critical ecofeminism:

> In Minnesota, migrant farmworkers arrive and depart seasonally, like the butterflies. But these migrants are not treated the same.
> While most Minnesotans don't see the Mexican migrant farmworkers who pick up to 85% of the food eaten in the United States, the annual migration of Monarch butterflies from the Oyamel trees of Mexico's Michoacan forests to the lakes and rivers of Minnesota is eagerly anticipated, celebrated, and tracked. (Gaard, *Critical Ecofeminism*, vii-viii)

That humans can be less visible than certain non-human species seems absurd and yet this is a central issue in the emerging genre of climate fiction. *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* are both connected to it. In their article entitled "A Short History of Climate Fiction," Andrew Milner and J.R. Burgman argue that "climate fiction is a subgenre of science-fiction rather than a distinct and separate genre," and that it is

> first, because its texts and practitioners relate primarily to the sf 'selective tradition'; and, second, because its texts and practitioners articulate a 'structure of feeling' that accords centrality to science and technology, in this case normally climate science. (1)

The implications of such observations are that, like science-fiction, cli-fi often allows unlimited powers to the author's imagination to construct narrative spaces whose complexity benefits from the unleashed powers of fantasy. This certainly is the case with Amitav Ghosh, whose novels of ideas, fuelled by the author's academic background in anthropology, employ fantasy in plots that borrow elements from science-fiction and even detective fiction to make their environment-oriented points.

Both novels here discussed problematise the increasingly flawed relationship between humans and the environment by placing in the centre of their plots female protagonists of different generations and backgrounds. In *The Hungry Tide*, Nilima (the local activist and founder of the Badabon trust) and her younger friend Piya build a sustainable plan to protect and coexist with the Sundarbans. In *Gun Island*, Piya, now a middle-aged marine biologist, while still very attached to an aging Nilima, forms a connection of sorts with Giacinta Schiavon, the older Italian academic who

provides a narrative of history that parallels and to a certain extent explains Piya's narrative about the environment. Both novels share an approach to the plot which problematises human hierarchies and genealogies through the lens of the environment, reminding one of Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's "green postcolonialism".

Green postcolonialism, as a development of postcolonial ecocriticism, provides an opportunity to examine relationships between humans, animals and nature in postcolonial literary texts. The point is to show that

> human liberation will never be fully achieved without challenging the ways human societies have constructed themselves in hierarchical relation to other human and non-human communities, and without imagining new ways in which these ecologically connected groupings can be creatively transformed" (ii).

Huggan and Tiffin thus prompt a reconsideration of the ways in which we position ourselves with respect to animals and the environment and how nature interferes with our actions and decisions. Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is to them a notable example of green postcolonialism in literature, where

> International pressure to protect the endangered Bengal tiger results in the brutal eviction of human refugees who have settled on one of the many islands that form the 'tide country' of the vast Ganges delta. These settlers, already 'displaced persons' from Bangladesh and elsewhere, have illegally occupied an island within the boundaries of the tiger sanctuary. (4)

Apart from healing nature, green postcolonialism is thus about healing human interaction. Piya's observation in *The Hungry Tide* on decisions about the environment is relevant to this concern: such decisions cannot be made by "footloose experts" like herself without consulting and involving

> the people who live here ... And for myself I know that I don't want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it. If I was to take on a project here, I'd want to be under the sponsorship of the Badabon Trust, so the local fishermen would be involved. (Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* 327, qtd. in Huggan and Tiffin 5)

Ghosh's work has always been pervaded by an ecological perspective on the world, not only on the level of content, but also that of narrative technique and character building. This involves a radical rethinking of human interactions in an ecological light in the work of this global writer, who is currently one of the most visible representatives of contemporary Indian writing in English and of global English-language writing. Ghosh's fiction is reputedly a fiction of fluid borders, to the point where his 1998 novel *The Shadow Lines* has long been an emblem of the

concept itself. He writes at a time when we can no longer talk of separate, discrete cultures, when all cultures have "histories of border crossings, diasporas and migrations" (Clifford 7). This relates to an interest in the dynamic of cultures and in cross-border movements, in the ever changing nature of identity rather than in the rigid categories responsible for dividing people. Proclaiming the fluidity of all borders also implies recognizing that many categories formerly perceived as strict (ethnic or national identity, caste, gender, religion, etc.) are, in fact in a perpetual process of becoming.

The psychology of Ghosh's characters is also influenced by this fluidity. As Robert Dixon puts it:

> The characters in Ghosh's novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but 'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that flow across borders – the 'shadow lines' drawn around modern nation states… [They inhabit] a discursive space that flows across political and national boundaries, and even across generations in time. (10 and 18)

They are complex, modern, mobile characters in constant movement and change, with an understanding of human relationships and values that goes far beyond contextual conditionings. This is true in particular of his female characters, whose complexity very often turns them into exemplary figures or guides. In *The Hungry Tide*, Nilima lives in Lusibari in a kind of symbiosis with the human and natural world of the Sundarbans. She is a kind of spirit of the place:

> At the age of seventy-six, Nilima Bose was almost circular in shape and her face had the dimpled roundness of a waxing moon. Her voice was soft and had the splintered quality of a note sounded on a length of cracked bamboo. She was small in height and her wispy hair, which she wore in a knot at the back of her head, was still more dark than gray. It was her practice to dress in saris woven and crafted in the workshops of the Badabon Trust, garments almost always of cotton with spidery borders executed in batik. It was in one such, a plain white widow's sari, thinly bordered in black, that she had come to the station to receive Kanai. (26)

Even though she married for love, defying the rules imposed by Indian society at the time, Nilima seems to always have been the stronger one in the couple, opposing her practical common-sense to her husband's more dreamy, poetic nature. For all this reversal of the usual gender dichotomy, however, she reaches a deep understanding of the Sundarbans as space of mystery and of the lives of people who live there, which makes her the ultimate authority to turn to. When Piya arrives, equipped with Western confidence, knowledge and technology, Nilima, with her strong personality that everybody looks up to, teaches her the first lesson about

another, intuitive kind of knowledge (which Kanai and Fokir also share to a certain extent). Without it, any scientific approach to life and the environment, no matter how well informed, is deemed useless. It is originally Nilima's guidance that sets Piya in the right direction. Years later, in *Gun Island,* we meet Nilima and Piya again, having built a very strong bond. Nilima is still the matriarch who understands the Sundarbans better than anybody else, while Piya's scientific knowledge backs up her more intuitive one. For Deen, the book dealer who gets involved in a whole quest in the depths of the Sundarbans, guided by the mysterious figures of Manasa Devi and of the Gun Merchant, Nilima embodies the spirit of the mysterious waterland and is the only one who has access to its true hidden meanings.

The parts played by the Piya-Nilima encounter in *The Hungry Tide* follow a kind of master-apprentice pattern that endures in time and migrates into *Gun Island*. In *The Hungry Tide*, Piya is initially a young scientist and researcher who, for all her best intentions, is exposed to error and sometimes makes mistakes that are not easy to fix. Nilima is the wise problem-solver, who understands what it means to make sacrifices, since in her youth she gave up her caste to marry the man she loved. She has since committed to a much wider endeavour of helping people in need, through the Badabon trust, which she runs. Both characters are strong, educated, independent-minded women with progressive views. Their inherent (while not at all aggressively militant) ecofeminism reflects Ghosh's own views on the need to grant equal importance to all that has life.

### *Gun Island*: Spatial and Temporal Eco-Connectivities

On the level of metanarrative environmentalist discourse, *Gun Island* finalises the journey started in *The Hungry Tide*, through a plot whose cause-effect logic operates more in terms of fantasy, magic and myth than realist causality. It would be thus fair to say that *Gun Island* represents Ghosh's practical attempt to find a solution to the crisis of the realist novel signalled in *The Great Derangement.* In *Gun Island*, Nilima appears less as an active leader of people and more as a repository of ancient knowledge. Piya's original adherence to scientific knowledge alters throughout the novel under the impact of Nilima's wisdom, as well as through the encounter with a third powerful female figure, the mystical humanist Cinta. As for Deen, the narrator-protagonist, he is in search of the historical truths of the legend of the Gun Merchant and the shrine of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes in the Sundarbans, but, in

fact, through them, he is searching for himself. The focus on Deen as first person singular narrator in the novel creates a useful distance from the female protagonists. Their actions are thus put in perspective, while the male narrator, victim of repeated sentimental failures, acknowledges his own emotional vulnerability from the outset of the novel. Deen's personal quest becomes, by virtue of his narrator function, the guiding narrative thread of the novel. It is also an allegory of the quest of a confused humanity in search of a lost ancient knowledge that used to provide more balance than scientific knowledge ever could. Thus, to a certain extent, he is an alter-ego of the author, in his double hypostasis as an anthropology researcher and imaginative writer. He is also a representative of contemporary humanity in search for meaning in a world of global interconnectivities that proves to have existed for ever, through movements of populations that announced contemporary migrations.

Deen's insecurities and vulnerabilities make him open to advice from the three women who have, in turn, learnt the lessons of life. Of them, two – Nilima and Cinta – have drawn their conclusions and are wiser than him. The third, Piya, is engaged herself in personal searches that are quite similar to Deen's, which makes them compatible with each other. Women figures possess various kinds of knowledge in the novel, and this is the case not only on the human, but also on the superhuman level. Thus, the mystery behind the Gun Merchant, the historical and symbolical target of Deen's searches, is connected to Manasa Devi, the female goddess of snakes. Through the ubiquitous snake symbolism in the novel, from the Sundarbans to Venice and California, Manasa Devi is an underlying presence throughout the novel.

Deen's most direct mentor, as he confesses himself, is Cinta, the old friend to whom he owes his job as an ancient book dealer in Brooklyn. The Venetian *professoressa* has managed to outgrow personal tragedy (the death of her husband and daughter in a car crash) through developing her own version of an esoteric understanding of the world. This situates her own predicament within a coherent historical narrative that unites Venice with Salzburg, California and the Sundarbans, based on the conviction that the most important form of knowledge is narrative knowledge. At a conference in California where they meet, Cinta explains to Deen:

> In the seventeenth century no one would ever have said of something that it was "just a story" as we moderns do. At that time people recognized that stories could tap into dimensions that were beyond the ordinary, beyond the human even. They knew that only through stories was it possible to enter the most inward

> mysteries of our existence, where nothing that is really important can be proven to exist – like love, or loyalty, or even the faculty that makes us turn around when we feel the gaze of a stranger or an animal. Only through stories can invisible or inarticulate or silent beings speak to us; it is they who allow the past to reach out to us. (140-41)

These stories are associated with certain spaces in which the novel's characters are projected. If for Nilima and Piya those spaces are located primarily in the Sundarbans, Cinta has a more complex makeup, as her academic profile rightfully requires. She is a born and bred Venetian and she is also a specialist in the history of Venice. On the other hand, she has been grieving for the tragic death of her husband and daughter for many years. Consequently, Ghosh constructs her as a spiritual seeker for the meaning of life, engaged in a perpetual quest in which her academic interests mingle with a mystical version of her own personal trajectory and of world history. Through these interests and preoccupations, Cinta also becomes a guide for Deen, who is engaged in his own personal quest for meaning. He has been a lifelong mourner for the death of a woman he loved in his youth and has been having difficulties finding his own place in the world. His encounter with Cinta and, later in his life, with Nilima and Piya, as well as his increasingly committed pursuit of Bonduki Sadagar's legend, help him find a meaning in life that he has long lacked.

*The Hungry Tide* focuses around the general idea that those who should decide on the fate of the Sundarbans should be the inhabitants of the area and not various foreign instances who think they are in a better position for decisions. In contrast, *Gun Island* is somewhat too ambitious in its attempt at treating everybody – the protagonists, the South Asian refugees in Venice and even Cinta's niece Gisa's dog Leola, tragically bitten by a yellow sea snake in California – on a par. Indeed, the dog's death is perceived by Gisa, her partner and their two African adopted children (who stand proof for the couple's desire to act for good in the world) as an event as tragic as her husband and daughter's death was for Cinta in the past (144). This is all the more so as the yellow snake's lethal bite reminds us of Tipu's narrow escape from death after being bitten by a cobra earlier in the novel (84).

Cinta establishes cultural and historical connections between Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and Deen's Gun Merchant, whose name, *Bonduki Sadagar*, comes to be translated from Arabic as "the Merchant who visited Venice" (152). Her intricate argument is, at least to a certain extent, based on a speculation that reminds one of Milner and Burgman's above-mentioned argument that climate fiction borrows

from science-fiction the rich, even excessive use of imagination. Yet, in his other famous play set in Venice, *Othello*, Shakespeare does stress the fact that, at the time, Venice was the most cosmopolitan place in Europe, with people coming literally from everywhere. While noticing the influx of Bengali immigrants into contemporary Venice (among which we recognize familiar characters such as Tipu and Rafi), Cinta reminds Deen that Bengalis have been settling in Veneto for a long time, which proves that refugee crises are not only a phenomenon of our days (156).

For all its obvious speculative propensity, *Gun Island* should by no means be interpreted as a failed realist novel. It is rather an intellectual project based on fantasy narrative, which seems to be meant to prove the coherence of the world through the many connections between remote times and places. Its plot draws, to a great extent, on the ideas built by Deen and Cinta and exchanged in their sophisticated conversations. There is little that is realistic in *Gun Island*, with the very exception of the important world-affecting issues the novel brings up. One of them is the question of climate change to which the wildfires in California are connected. Their proportions are only suggested by the psychological impact they have on Deen. He sees a flying snake he immediately associates with the threat of what Ghosh would call a "deranged"[4] ecosystem turned evil. Another one is the wrongness of doing violence to animals, represented by the Californian scene of the dog's death from a snake bite (144). This recalls the above-mentioned similar scene where the protagonist was a human, Tipu, supported by the same threatening snake symbolism.

The three scenes thus become connected, as part of the same riddle that surrounds the trajectory of Deen's life. Their common snake symbolism places them under the sign of Manasa Devi, the snake goddess of the Sundarbans whose shrine Deen visits at the beginning of the novel, in search of the Gun Merchant. This brings us back to the ecofeminist conception that underlies the novel: the snake goddess becomes an epitome of the mystery behind all reality, but also of all the strong women that surround Deen and guide him towards the fulfilment of his journey.

Finally, the question of contemporary refugees is skillfully weaved into the novel's denouement and also brings Cinta's journey to a peaceful end, which she finds in being reunited with her daughter in death. The refugees' predicament finds its place in the intricate scheme of the novel through the similarities that Cinta finds between

4 As suggested by the title of Ghosh's essay *The Great Derangement*, which meditates on the dangers of climate change.

refugees and the great travellers that, centuries before, had set out from Venice to explore the world:

> ‘Sometimes I ask myself,’ she said, ‘what would happen if those great Venetian travellers – the Polos, Niccolò de’ Conti, Ambrosio Bembo – were to come back to the Venice of today? Who would they have more in common with? Us twenty-first century Italians, who rely on immigrants to do all our dirty work? The tourists, who come in luxury liners and aeroplanes? Or these *ragazzi migranti*, who take their lives in their hands to cross the seas, just like all those great Venetian travellers of the past?’ (240)

The young migrants that are here referred to provide connections between the past and the present, as well as between Bengal and Venice (where Bengali is a language commonly spoken). Like the great explorers of the past, they have the courage to face radical dislocation in search of a dream of a foreign land or of a better life. This capacity for dreaming is, for Cinta, the mentor figure in the novel, the key to a true understanding of what it would take to make the world a better place.

The last two chapters of the novel openly resort to fantasy, introducing a whole set of props that do not lend themselves to easy explanations. One of them is the halo of birds that crowns the arrival of the refugee ship, explained scientifically by Piya as bioluminescence. The phenomenon is made possible in this part of the world by the unusual bird migration patterns caused by climate change (309), yet does create a magic effect that goes beyond explanation. Another kind of such prop is the Madonna of La Salute, which has a history that connects the Christian faith with pagan ones. It originates from Heraklion in Crete and is thus connected to Asasarame, the Minoan goddess of snakes (244) and so, by extension, with Manasa Devi too. Cinta’s friendship with Deen also has a connection to Manasa Devi, whose presence is pervasive throughout the novel:

> Now at last I had an inkling of why she had chosen to bestow her friendship on me: it was as if she had had an intuition that someday we would bring each other *here*, to this juncture in time and space – and that not till then would she find release from the grief of her separation from her daughter. In that instant of clarity I heard again that familiar voice in my ear, repeating those words from La Salute – *Unde Origo Inde Salus* – ‘From the beginning salvation comes,’ and I understood what she had been trying to tell me that day: that the possibility of our deliverance lies not in the future but in the past, in a mystery beyond memory. (312)

This can be interpreted as a clear reference to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s concept of ‘The Climate of History’ in the 2009 article of the same title, in which, without a true knowledge of history, there is no way to understand the present and oneself. This conclusion, somewhat contrived as it may sound, launches a powerful message that

we must search in the past for answers to the great problems of the present, since nothing is new in the world. The novel ends with Deen having reached a deeper understanding of life and the world, but also a fulfilment he never had before. But, as protagonist and narrator of the novel, the answers he finds are to a great extent the answers found by the whole group of refugees on *Lucania*. The promise of a future with Piya establishes for Deen a symbolical continuity of the female guidance in his life, as Piya actually takes over Cinta's guiding role. But in the bigger picture, this re-establishes the continuity of a female principle of coherence in the world, represented by the snake goddess Manasa Devi and her avatars of different historical times (the Minoan snake goddess, Santa Maria della Salute or, for that matter, the many snakes that feature in the novel). This ultimately signals an urgent need for humanity to make an effort and turn the evil in the world to a good account.

**Conclusion: The Sundarbans, Fiction and Consciousness Raising**

Beyond the interference of world organizations wishing to protect the environment, Ghosh's Sundarbans in *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* (with the latter novel extending the symbolism of the Sundarbans over many other spaces) stand for a world in which all that has life becomes equal and should be treated with equal care. This is the ultimate message of the goddess Manasa Devi and the shrine connected to the mysterious Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar) in the title. Ghosh thus crowns his endeavour of using the novel form to voice his ecological concerns and thus his call for an erasure of categories of exclusion such as castes, genders and social class. *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* thus powerfully propose an erasure of artificial boundaries in a world which is in fact full of continuities, as suggested by the ubiquitousness of a protective female principle proclaimed at the end of the novel.

Reading Ghosh through a critical ecofeminist lens, as well as acknowledging the author's own indebtedness to the all-encompassing democratic views of ecofeminism, is justified not only by the importance of female characters in his novels. The author may not be a declared ecofeminist as such, but his commitment to the environment in his fiction and non-fiction certainly signals a search for a more thorough critique of oppressive neo-colonial practices that damage nature and the less privileged categories of people alike. Critical ecofeminism provides more incisive ways to approach the dangers of capitalist-patriarchal sacrifice of humans, non-humans and the environment to an indiscriminate, blind drive to economic growth.

Ghosh's writing is equally categorical in exposing the neo-colonial reasons behind the damage brought to the environment and to disadvantaged local populations. His writing ultimately launches an insistent call to a necessary ecological awareness that should govern policies towards nature and humans alike.

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