

The Goose


Volume 18
Number 2 *Miscellany (An Extra-Open Issue) /*
méli-mélo (numéro très ouvert)

Article 24

10-15-2020

Gun Island by Amitav Ghosh

Tathagata Som
University of Calgary

 Part of the [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#)

Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:

<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Som, Tathagata. "Gun Island by Amitav Ghosh." *The Goose*, vol. 18 , no. 2 , article 24, 2020,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol18/iss2/24>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Gun Island by Amitav Ghosh: Rethinking Reality in the Time of Climate Change

***Gun Island* by AMITAV GHOSH**

Penguin Canada, 2019 \$34.00

Reviewed by TATHAGATA SOM

In his 2016 non-fiction work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh linked the European realist novel's failure to address climate change to its complicity in European modernity's imposition of a gradualist and homogenous understanding of time and space. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh also proposed a theory of narrative: "In essence, narrative proceeds by linking together moments and scenes that are in some way distinctive or different: these are, of course, nothing other than instances of exception" (22). In *Gun Island*, Ghosh puts this theory to test: the plot of the novel jumps from one exceptional event to another without caring for novelistic verisimilitude. The rather complicated plot centres on a Bengali immigrant rare-books dealer from Brooklyn, Dinanath Datta. During one of his annual visits to his native Kolkata (formerly, Calcutta), Dinanath becomes unwittingly involved in an old legend concerning a Gun Merchant, who himself was caught up in a legend involving the snake-goddess Manasa. Dinanath's search for the meaning behind the Gun Merchant's legend takes him from Kolkata to the swamp of the Sundarbans, to New York, to Los Angeles, and finally to Venice. Dinanath's journey is filled with cyclones and tornadoes as well as encounters with dolphins, poisonous snakes, shipworms, and venomous spiders. Ghosh's skillful use of the legend of Manasa, which acts as connective tissue in holding the different parts of Dinanath's journey together, allows him to address issues as diverse as climate change, mythology, Venetian history, and animal and human migration.

Ghosh has a penchant for questioning and subverting the stability of European modernity's epistemic systems through the insertion and re-staging of indigenous and postcolonial epistemes. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), for example, Ghosh up-ends the rational egoism of European science fiction and detective fiction by showing how a secret Indian cult, with its distinct systems of knowledge, guides Ronald Ross, the colonial British scientist and 1902 Nobel laureate, in his discovery of the malaria parasite in Calcutta. In *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the deployment of the legend of Bon Bibi challenges the anthropocentric assumptions of European modernity by showcasing how a localized and Indigenous episteme recognizes the agency of nonhuman beings.

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh's use of the Bengali legend of Manasa, with its "periodic revivals after long intervals of dormancy" (7), challenges the linear logic of European modernity. The legend of Manasa is the story of the snake-goddess' attempts to gain recognition from Chand Sadagar, a Brahmin merchant and devotee of Lord Siva. The central conflict of the legend of Manasa, in Ghosh's re-telling, is between the goddess and the stubborn and contumacious Chand. It is worth noting here that, although the legend of Manasa also describes how Chand's daughter-in-law Behula was instrumental in the reconciliation between the goddess and the merchant, Ghosh does not focus on the figure of Behula in *Gun Island*. However, the parallel between the

legend of Manasa and the plot of *Gun Island* is clear: just as the Gun Merchant gets involved in the legend of Manasa, Dinanath, who is also a *sadagar*, or dealer, gets drawn into the legend of the Gun Merchant. The climate refugee Rafi and his lover Tipu's journey to Italy parallels Dinanath's journey from the Sundarbans to Venice. When Dinanath, with the help of a charismatic Italian professor Cinta, finds out that the Gun Merchant's legend concerns a journey similar to the one undertaken by Rafi and Tipu, we realize that the narrative of the novel is sophisticatedly structured in terms of repetition and difference. What is different about Dinanath, Rafi, and Tipu's journeys is that they are caused by the global forces of capital and labour migration, on the one hand, and the scourge of climate change, on the other. Just as Chand Sadagar comes to recognize the power of Manasa in the legend, by the end of *Gun Island*, Dinanath comes to adopt a non-anthropocentric worldview by recognizing the agency of nonhuman beings.

Ghosh is as much concerned with culture and language as he is with climate change. The novel explores the relation of the Gun Merchant, or *Bandooki Sadagar*, to space and history. Rafi and Tipu retrace the etymological route/root of the word *bandook* in their attempt to find refuge and a livelihood in Europe. Moreover, the legend of the Gun Merchant, like the legend of Bon Bibi in *The Hungry Tide*, cuts across national and religious boundaries. The shrine of the Gun Merchant is situated on the India-Bangladesh border. The Muslim boatman who looks after the shrine of the Gun Merchant informs that it was "revered by all, irrespective of religion: Hindus believed that it was Manasa Devi who guarded the shrine, while Muslims believed that it was a place of jinns, protected by a Muslim *pir*, or saint, by the name of Ilyas" (16). Thus, Ghosh's use of the legend of the Gun Merchant serves as a paean to the syncretism that marks the Indian subcontinent's cultural history. It is not clear, however, why Ghosh decides to translate the Bengali words in the novel while leaving the Italian words – spoken by Cinta – untranslated. If Ghosh wants his readers to look up the meanings of the Italian words and phrases, why would he not want them to look up the meanings of the Bengali words and phrases as well? Without a doubt, *Gun Island* is a brave experimental novel invested in the making of large connections between humans and nonhumans, science and mythology, and climate change and migration. If Ghosh was harsh on the novel in *The Great Derangement* for what it cannot do, *Gun Island* is a testament to what the novel can do. *Gun Island* forces its readers to rethink the novel's relationship to the construction of reality itself. In light of the current climate crisis, our understanding of reality needs to be redefined and nuanced and novels like *Gun Island* can lead the way in doing so.

Work Cited

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Calcutta Chromosome*. 1995. Avon, 1997.

---. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Penguin India, 2016.

---. *The Hungry Tide*. HarperCollins, 2004.

TATHAGATA SOM is a Ph.D. student at the University of Calgary. He has an M.A. in English from Presidency University, Kolkata, and a B.A. (Hons.) in English from the University of Calcutta. His research interests include ecocriticism, postcolonial literature, Anthropocene studies, Bengali literature, and literary theory. He is a published poet and short story writer and his latest short story, "The Lascar," was published in *Postcolonial Text*.