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Reinvestigating Migrations and Porous Borders in Amitav Ghosh's *The Gun Island*

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Abstract: *This paper re-examines the themes of migration and porous borders in Amitav Ghosh's novel The Gun Island, exploring how these concepts reflect contemporary global issues. Set against the backdrop of climate change and socio-political upheaval, Ghosh weaves a narrative that highlights the fluidity of borders and the complexities of human movement. Through rich symbolism and evocative imagery, Ghosh critiques the rigid notions of national identity and examines the socio-economic forces driving migration. The porous nature of borders serves as a metaphor for resilience and adaptation in the face of adversity. By juxtaposing the past and present, the paper elucidates the historical context of migration and its implications for contemporary society. This paper critically examines how Ghosh reimagines the idea of migration as a multi-layered phenomenon—historical, ecological, and mythic. It explores how the concept of “porous border” operates not just spatially but also temporally and ontologically where human and non human narratives intersect. Drawing on postcolonial, ecocritical, and migration studies framework, the paper situates The Gun Island within a larger context of global precarity and environmental catastrophe, arguing that Ghosh’s narrative strategy interrogates the politics of borders and invites a rethinking of displacement as both crisis and continuum. Thus this paper explores and underscores the necessity of rethinking borders in an age marked by transnational movements, urging readers to engage with the broader notion of migration and displacement.*

Keywords: *Migration; porous borders; climate change; culturalism; identity and displacement.*

Introduction

In an era marked by massive displacements—whether due to climate change, political instability, or economic destitution—literary responses to migration have become increasingly urgent. In an article, Ambreem Hai maintains that recent postcolonial writings are concerned not only with “boundary crossing” (which takes border to be a signifier of division constraint or limitation), but also border inhabitation”. Living on the border signifies living where the spaces overlap. Hai asserts that such border inhabitation “regards the border itself (and the subjectivity of those positioned on the border) as a crucial if ambiguous site of vital reconstruction, a position replete with contradictions and difficulty, but regenerative promise”. In the context of recent writings, therefore, straddling two or more worlds, territorial or cultural, is seen positively, as giving birth to new identities that are dynamic and hybrid. This interstitial border space, according to Bhabha, provides “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood — singular or communal — that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation in the act of defining the idea itself”. Bhabha remarks that “it is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices, that introduces creative invention into existence” (9). Encounter between cultures creates a space for experimentation and creativity that is not possible in a state of rootedness — seeking new routes gives way to the



possibilities for creative innovation. Such writings are, in a sense, border writings, which, according to Hai, “arises from the heterogeneity of multiple cultural effects”. An acute sense of difference in a multi-ethnic society may lead to polarization. Denial of any scope for interaction leads to monologic mindset which gives birth to binarism. But a heterogeneous society is an appropriate space for dialogic imagination in the Bakhtinian sense. An individual or even a community located in a border space is a site of dialogues between perspectives. Ambreem Hai asserts that border writing arises from “heterogeneity of multiple cultural effects” as already mentioned. It is located in border regions of heterogeneous cultures “bearing the marks and carrying the benefits of historical overlay” (381). Border work, then, according to Hai, can offer “crucial perspectival shifts because it can undo binaristic and hierarchical categories of opposition, offering useful critique and reconceptualisation of either side of an opposition — be it cultural, political or intellectual” (381). Recent postcolonial works often subvertly tend to negotiate the contradictions of cultural heterogeneity, modernity, nationalism or diasporic identity. Mary Poovey notes that the notion of the “in-between” is a politically useful strategy for “dismantling binary thinking.”⁷

James Clifford in his article “The Transit Lounge of Culture” suggests that such Diaspora cultures are not oriented towards lost origin or homelands, but they are created by continuous process of ongoing migratory histories and its transitional cultural flows. Clifford argues that the moment we begin to focus on these intercultural processes, the notion of separate, discrete cultures evaporates. We thus become aware that all cultures definitely have long histories of border crossings, diasporas and migrations.⁸

Amitav Ghosh’s work explores how such border crossings take place in the present and took place even in the past. Such endeavors, as he shows, need not be colonial and hegemonic in nature. As Ghosh demonstrates in *In An Antique Land* there were a meaningful relationship between peoples of India and Egypt, while West, through its interventions, has destroyed the process of dialogue between the two peoples. Robert Dixon rightly points out that “Ghosh’s writing reflects the recent concern of an anthropologist with the porosity of cultural boundaries.” The concept of ‘difference’ often leads to stereotyping and even hate politics. This concept of difference metaphorically emerges through border. Gender differences, caste differences, class differences are indicated through the metaphor of border, thereby leading to the marginalization of the other. Dixon rightly points out:

Ghosh’s training in historical and anthropological research, his eschewing of grand theoreticist gestures and his links with the subaltern studies project make his work an interesting site around which current arguments in postcolonial theory can be conducted. (10)

This paper intends to show how Ghosh, problematises the concept of ‘borders’. He tries to maintain that man-made borders are basically porous. This dissertation thus will try to investigate how Amitav Ghosh takes up the issue of geographical borders, deterritorialisation and problematisation of identity arising out of the emergence of new cultural and territorial borders and defiance of such borders through ‘migratory’ movements.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Gun Island* (2019) is one such intervention that seeks to reframe the ways in which we understand migrations and borders. This novel diverges from traditional representations of migration as a singular linear movement and instead renders it a dynamic and layered process, shaped by myth, memory, and environmental shifts which does not remain confined within nation and territories but permeates across cultures as well.

The cultural porousness of which Dixon speaks is highly in contrast with the ‘classic view’ which “posits cultures as a self-contained whole made up of coherent patterns.” (Rosaldo, 20) .



But as Rosaldo asserts, culture can be “conceived as a more porous array of intersections where distinct processes cross from within and beyond its borders” (Rosaldo, 20). Thus crossing and uncrossing of different boundaries or demarcation lines become an engrossing area in Ghosh’s works. Dixon argues:

The characters in Ghosh’s novels do not occupy discrete cultures, but ‘dwell in travel’ in cultural spaces that flows across borders — the ‘shadow lines’ drawn across modern nation states. Yet, like Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, these novels also remain bound up in the notion of a universal humanity; and like the otherwise very different work of Homi K. Bhabha, they postulate a global theory of the colonial subject. (10)

James Clifford in his ‘Notes on Theory and Travel’ describes travel as a “figure for different modes of dwelling and displacement, for trajectories and identities, for story telling and theorizing in the post colonial world of global contracts.” Travel, Clifford suggests, is “a range of practices for situating the self in the space or spaces grown too large, a form of both exploration and discipline”. These spaces are already peopled and culturally specific and travel brings these spaces in contact with different other cultures. Syed Islam posits two kinds of travelers: sedentary and a nomadic ‘traveler’. There remains of course a degree of rigidity in sedentary travel and travel writing. Sedentary travellers are those who establish essential difference on a ‘binary frame’. Although they may traverse vast distance, no travel are undertaken at all. Only nomadic travel, Islam argues, is the real travel in an ethical sense because it deals with ‘encounters with otherness that fractures both boundary and an apparatus of representation.’ In nomadic travel, ‘dwelling and traveling merge into one another.’ (Islam, p-vii) Travel then, Mongia argues, ‘is not so much about physical movement and journey from here to there as it is a figure for different modes of stasis, movement and knowledge.’ Amitav Ghosh’s characters undertake ‘nomadic travels’ and they encounter different cultures and are enriched in the process. Dialogues among different cultures lead to enhancement of knowledge about human beings located in different spaces which are characterized by different cultures. The borderlines among cultures are ignored in the process and the gulfs of differences are bridged. If we consider travel as a mode of situating the self, then we have to focus our attention on the traveler as well as on the places and geographies to which he/she travels both physically and mentally.

Amitav Ghosh thus tries to interrogate the very existence of man-made boundaries or even more precisely, demarcations in every aspect of human lives — be it nation, culture, religion, or relations — through different episodes in the novel. Each of these units may be distinct but this distinction is no bar to creating understanding. Ghosh also tries to focus on the specificity of cultures whose rootedness in geography and history often creates an impression of its basic difference from other cultures. But at the same time he seems to show that cultures are porous and they intersect. This intersection of different cultures takes place throughout the novel in various modes, across time and space. Time and space are however two essential elements in Ghosh’s novels.

As with many of Ghosh’s earlier works, particularly *The Shadow Lines*, *The Hungry Tide* and the Ibis Trilogy, *The Gun Island* centers on the interrelation between human and ecological histories. Here, the narrative is driven by the protagonist Deen Datta, a rare book dealer whose journey takes him from Kolkata to the Sundarbans, Venice, and Los Angeles. The novel’s global topography reflects the fluidity of movement and underscores the futility of strict territorial demarcations in the face of transnational crisis.



Migration as Myth and Memory

One of the most powerful narrative devices in *The Gun Island* is the use of myth to illuminate the persistent nature of migration. The story of the “Gun Merchant,” a Bengali folktale that Deen attempts to decipher, serves as a symbolic framework for the contemporary refugee experience. This folktale is not just an allegory but a historically embedded narrative that connects past maritime journeys to present-day displacements (Ghosh 45).

The mythic mode in *The Gun Island* allows Ghosh to stretch the temporality of migration beyond contemporary crisis. The journeys undertaken by the “Bonduki Sadagar” (Gun Merchant) echo the voyages of climate refugees asylum seekers and stateless people today. As Deen uncovers layers of the myth, it becomes evident that migration is not merely a response to violence or economic hardship, but a fundamental aspect of human- and non human- existence.

Ghosh’s reinvigoration of the oral and folk tradition thus serves to dismantle Enlightenment binaries between myth and reason, past and present, and East and West. In doing so, he also challenges the anthropocentric idea of history as solely human driven. This provides a compelling case for understanding migration as a long historical and epistemic continuum.

Ghosh is basically interested in going beyond ‘nation’ and achieving internationalism as a desired and desirable goal. Arjun Appadurai in his book *Modernity at Large* asserts, “We need to think ourselves beyond the nation” (158). He promotes the idea of ‘post national’, which suggests that “we are in the process of moving to a global order in which the nation-state has become obsolete and other formations for allegiance and identity have taken its place”(169). It may also suggest that “while nations may continue to exist, the steady erosion of the nation-state to monopolize loyalty will encourage the spread of national forms that are largely divorced from territorial states” (169). Appadurai also thinks that even as “the legitimacy of their nation-states in their own territorial contexts is increasingly under the threat, the idea of the nation flourishes transnationally” (172) — there is now a “delocalized transnation”. Post-nation thus attempts to locate a space that is far beyond from the notion of a nation. The concept of ‘nation’ tries to bring heterogeneous elements under one umbrella, where the heterogeneity of individuals ultimately vanishes. People form a nation only when they can ignore the prominence of their distinctive identity for the sake of greater unity. But Ghosh shows that the façade of unity that appears at a particular historical moment is just an appearance that hides the fissures within. Post-nation, on the hand, leads to a space where people can come together and maintain their cultural and ideological differences but can at the same time continue dialogues among themselves. The process of postnationalism is a process of ‘deterritorialisation’, as Arjun Appadurai has preferred to call it. Deterritorialisation is a concept of moving out of the territory and coming to terms with, according to Brinda Bose, “the bonds of the diaspora that transcend the ‘realities’ of nations and borders, and invade spaces between the extremes of war and friendship”. It is, Brinda Bose further asserts, “a process in which a national or even regional culture can no longer be conceived as necessarily reflecting a coherent and distinct identity, while people may feel connected to communities even when they do not share the same territory”. Through the ages of history, it can be seen that “political violence and its resultant chaos has very often instigated the mobility of peoples, producing inevitably that sense of ‘deterritorialisation’ which Appadurai talks about, and engendering a diasporic condition that is as much an aspect of the mind — and imagination — as it is a physical reality.”(Brinda Bose 21) Amitav Ghosh’s representation of human



relationship is akin to such post national conditions where mental bonds tend to erase cultural differences.

Ecological Displacement and the Anthropocene

One of the most innovative contributions of *The Gun Island* lies in its ecocritical interrogation of migration. The novel insists that climate change must be recognized as a central cause of displacement. The rising sea levels in the Sundarbans and the intrusion of saltwater into agricultural lands result in the forced migration of both humans and animals (Ghosh 110). The plight of Irrawaddy dolphins and venomous snakes, alongside human refugees, serves as a powerful metaphor for a shared ecological vulnerability.

In invoking the Anthropocene --- a term denoting the epoch in which human activity is the dominant influence on climate and environment --- Ghosh creates a narrative space where human and non-human migrations intersect, emphasizing how environmental catastrophes dismantle the illusion of stable nationhood. He explicitly positions climate change as a transgressive force that ignores national boundaries and renders geopolitical borders porous. As such environmental catastrophes dismantle any illusion of stable nationhood or secure belonging.

The journey of the character Cinta, a historian who survived wartime Venice, draws further parallel between wartime and environmental displacement, suggesting that both are symptoms of systematic violence albeit of different kinds. This alignment between historical trauma and ecological disaster prompts readers to reconsider the boundaries of victimhood and agency.

Porous Borders: Space, Identity, and Hybridity

Ghosh's portrayal of borders in *The Gun Island* defies their conventional understanding as rigid, impermeable lines of separation. Instead, borders in the novel are dynamic, unstable and often metaphorical. The shifting coastlines of the Sundarbans, the labyrinthine waterways of Venice and the smuggling routes across the Mediterranean all represent zones of liminality, where identities are reconfigured, and the distinction between legal and illegal, citizen and refugee become blurred.

This spatial fluidity is mirrored in the hybrid identities of characters like Tipu and Rafi. Tipu, a tech savvy young man from the Sundarbans, negotiates multiple identities --- local, migrant and transnational. His entrepreneurial ventures and eventual migration to the U.S. defy stereotypes of the passive refugee and highlight the agency of those navigating porous borders. Their stories highlight how porous borders create conditions of both vulnerability and resistance (Ghosh 153).

Ghosh's representation of migration also engages with the problematic nature of citizenship. Characters like Rafi, an undocumented Bangladeshi migrant in Venice, confront the cruelty of Europe's immigration policies. Yet, even within this hostile context, Ghosh resists portraying migrants solely as victims. Instead, he emphasizes resilience, adaptability and capacity for solidarity.

Postcolonial Geographies and Global Circulations

The diasporic movements in *The Gun Island* are shaped by the legacies of colonialism, global capitalism, and climate injustice. Ghosh's spatial mapping—from the Sundarbans to Venice to Los Angeles—is not arbitrary but reflects historical routes of empire and commerce. These routes, once used for colonial extraction, now serve as migration pathways for climate refugees and undocumented laborers. In this sense, *The Gun Island* operates within what Arjun Appadurai calls the "ethnoscapes" of globalization ---- Fluid landscapes marked by the mobility of people, technologies and capital (Appadurai, 33).



By threading together these geographies, Ghosh foregrounds how the afterlives of empire continue to shape contemporary migration. The Sundarbans, once a site of colonial forestry and displacement, now becomes the epicenter of climate crisis-induced migration. Similarly, Venice—symbol of Renaissance grandeur and mercantile dominance—is shown to be crumbling under the weight of rising tides and failing infrastructures. The decaying beauty of Venice mirrors the slow violence described by Rob Nixon, where environmental catastrophe disproportionately affects the poor and the displaced (Nixon, 2). Ghosh's narrative subsides the illusion of Western immunity, positioning Europe not as a citadel of stability but as another vulnerable zone in the global ecological network.

The novel also critiques the economic exploitation that underpins global circulations. Rafi and Tipu's journey through the illicit networks of human smuggling reveals how neoliberalism commodifies mobility, turning asylum seekers into disposable labor. As noted by Priya Kumar, contemporary South Asian migration literature often portrays migration as a "global border economy," where borders are not barriers but sites of biopolitical control and profit (Kumar, 77). Ghosh's depiction of the Mediterranean as a lethal passage for migrants reflects this reality challenging the Eurocentric framing of the "refugee crisis" as an external threat rather than a consequence of global inequality.

Furthermore, the technological circuits in the novel—from mobile phones to social media—highlight the contradictions of globalization. While technology facilitates surveillance and border policing, it also enables resistance and solidarity. Tipu, for instance, uses digital platforms to connect with transnational networks and advocate for migrant rights. These moments echo Homi Bhabha's notion of the "third space," where cultural hybridity and resistance are negotiated (Bhabha, 56). Ghosh's global narrative, then, is not just about displacement, but also about the possibilities of reimagined belongings.

Finally, by juxtaposing different scales—local myths, colonial histories, and planetary crises—*The Gun Island* participates in what Dipesh Chakrabarty describes as the "scaling up" of postcolonial thought in the Anthropocene. In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chakrabarty urges scholars to move beyond human-centric, national histories to address global ecological interdependencies (Chakrabarty, 77). Ghosh anticipates this move, making visible the intersections of climate, capitalism, and coloniality.

Language, Translation, and Transculturation

Language plays a crucial role in *The Gun Island*, not merely as communication but as a space where borders are negotiated. Deen's linguistic alienation and difficulty translating the "Bonduki Sadagar" legend mirror the transformation of stories—and people—across borders (Ghosh 83).

Cinta's polyglotism challenges the binary between native and foreign, reminding readers that cultural identities are always in flux.

Reimagining Home and Belonging

The idea of "home" is repeatedly interrogated in the novel. For Deen, home is both Kolkata and not-Kolkata. For Tipu and Rafi, home is shaped by opportunity and survival. Ghosh refuses to romanticize rootedness, instead presenting belonging as an ethical relationship with place and community—extending even to the non-human world (Ghosh 198).

Conclusion

The Gun Island offers a compelling literary meditation on the complex entanglements of migration, borders, and climate change. By weaving together myth, history, and contemporary geopolitics, Ghosh redefines migration as a phenomenon that transcends legal and territorial frameworks.



Ultimately, the novel is a meditation on the planetary crises that compel all species to rethink place, belonging, and survival. It is a call for solidarity across borders and a profound critique of the rigidities that define modern nation-states.

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