

Book Review

Gun Island. Written by Amitav Ghosh

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

Reviewed by Kritish Rajbhandari, Reed College.ⁱ

In *The Great Derangement* (2016), Amitav Ghosh calls attention to the limitations of the realist fiction to engage effectively with the reality of the climate crisis. Ghosh traces this resistance to two features of the genre. First, he argues that the realist novel is wedded to the idea of probability, such that events deemed improbable or exceptional are often banished or concealed in favor of the ordinary and the every day. The second is the issue of scale. The novel, unlike myths, folklore, or the epic, is unable to deal with “forces of unthinkable magnitude that create unbearably intimate connections over vast gaps in time and space” (63). Ghosh’s most recent novel *Gun Island* (2019) comes as his own response to these provocations. *Gun Island* abounds in extraordinary and inexplicable weather events that are becoming increasingly common around the world. Such events take the center stage as the narrative moves across time and space, connecting storms in the Sundarbans to fires in California and tornadoes and floods in Venice, and at the same time linking the adventures of a seventeenth-century Bengali merchant traveling between the Bay of Bengal and the Mediterranean to the struggles of the present-day migrants making dangerous journeys to Europe. The novel pushes the boundaries of the realist fiction, blending myths with science, folklore with history, and the supernatural with the everyday, portraying a world where surreal phenomena can no longer be relegated to the realm of myths and dreams.

Gun Island begins in the present-day Calcutta, where, Deen, short for Dinanath, a middle-aged Bengali rare book dealer based in Brooklyn, chances upon the strange story of the Gun Merchant, the “bonduki Sadagar.” He then visits a shrine dedicated to Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, believed to have been built by the merchant in an island hidden in the Sundarbans. The symbols he finds in the shrine set him off on a quest from the Sundarbans to Los Angeles and Venice. Deen immediately strikes one as a scholar. In the opening passage of the novel, he ponders

on the word *bundook*, the word for gun in many languages including Bengali. It also happens to be the Arabic word for Venice, evoking the island in the book's title. The narrative is peppered with such musings on the intersecting histories of words and places. Deen's pursuit of the Gun Merchant, similarly, brings together a series of intersecting stories of human and non-human migrations across space and time fueled by yearnings for a new world in the face of a global catastrophe. First, we have Deen, a successful migrant settled in New York, traveling across the world with relative ease. He represents the class of global citizens who enjoy the privileges bestowed by the carbon economy, and yet he lives an unfulfilled life searching for both love and purpose. Second, two Bengali teenagers, Tipu, a computer whiz, and Rafi, a fisherman, who meet at the shrine, both end up on an overland route to Europe aided by human smugglers. The stories of Tipu and Rafi told from the perspective Bengali refugees in Europe reveal the underside the carbon economy that has forced millions of migrants from the global South to take dangerous journeys over land and sea, escaping floods, droughts or other environmental and economic crises in search of the fruits of the same "progress" responsible for those crises. Third, the novel draws a direct parallel between the migrants leaving their homes in search of a better life elsewhere and the dolphins and other marine animals forced to beach or abandon to their old and familiar habitats due to rising temperatures and pollution, revealing the intertwined destinies of human and non-human beings on earth. Piya, a US-based Bengali marine biologist and Tipu's self-appointed guardian, makes a reappearance from Ghosh's earlier novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), along with the dolphins of the Sundarbans whose numbers have declined drastically compared to the previous book. Finally, all of these narrative strands are interlaced with the story of the Gun Merchant, and his journey between India and Europe in the seventeenth century, repeatedly thwarted and aided by Manasa Devi and her army of creatures. This legend about the power of nature and the divine over human pursuit for profit and progress turns out to be not a mystery to be solved but a clue to understanding the improbable and mysterious events that have come to shape today's unpredictable world.

From his first novel *The Circle of Reason* (1986) to the *Ibis* trilogy including his non-fiction work, *In an Antique Land* (1992), Ghosh has written stories that travel across nations, continents, and cultures and reimagine the past from the perspectives of marginalized subjects often erased in dominant historical accounts. *Gun Island* takes up these themes and ties them explicitly to climate

change. Unlike Ghosh's earlier works appreciated for his rich and memorable characters, *Gun Island* is less interested in the lives of its characters than in the events around them that shape their lives. Although we follow Deen through his sometimes fussy and pedantic narration, he is not the protagonist of the novel, nor are any other characters. This novel is rather about the stories that tie them with the environment, the planet, and each other. What drives the narrative forward is the tale of the Gun Merchant, an obscure Bengali legend that appears throughout the novel, bringing the mangroves in the Sundarbans, a museum in Los Angeles, and the old Jewish quarter of Venice all under a single narrative fold. The legend not only reveals a past deeply interconnected by trade, travel, and global events like the plague and the little ice age, it also functions as a prophetic mirror to the events of the present. *Gun Island* presents a world where snakes and spiders materialize in modern spaces out of old legends and marine creatures behave in ways that baffle science, a world beyond the grasp of human reason and agency. To make sense of such a world the novel turns to the stories of the past that decenter the human and acknowledge invisible and silent forces that have shaped human existence. Echoing some of the new scholarship that speak of non-human agencies and animate materialities like Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013), Cinta, a Venetian scholar and Deen's close friend, who holds a high regard for mystical aspects of life, asks about halfway through the novel, "What if the faculty of storytelling were not specifically human but rather the last remnant of our animal selves? A vestige left over from a time before language, when we communicated as other living being do?" (141). In *Gun Island*, nature is no longer a literary device, a foil for human stories, but is itself a storyteller whose language humans have barely begun to understand after being blinded by reason, profit, and progress.

The narrative momentum of *Gun Island* mimics the relentless speed of environmental, technological, and socio-political changes that have occurred in the recent decades. The novel makes direct references to many contemporary events including the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, the rise of the far right in Europe, the California fires, and the declining number of dolphins in the Bay of Bengal, to name only a few. While the mystery of the Gun Merchant pulls the reader on at a swirling pace, the sheer density of references to contemporary phenomena juxtaposed alongside long excursions into the rich history of travel between early modern Europe and Asia makes it necessary to pause and reflect. Compared to Ghosh's earlier fiction, the prose is less descriptive and more expository, reminiscent of his non-fiction. The novel presents itself as

a collage of genres including, historical exposition, science writing, folklore, journalistic investigation, documentary, and testimonials. This seems a necessary ploy on Ghosh's part as a means of presenting the interconnectedness in today's increasingly compartmentalized world, whether among humans, between humans and nature, or between the past and the present. Take for instance the use of technology in the novel. Many interactions take place though phone, email, and social media, driving the plot forward, but these interactions are almost always accompanied by intuitive and unconscious revelations communicated through dreams, visions, and uncanny coincidences, without any rational explanations, suggesting connections beyond the ones enabled by the carbon economy, beyond human control and comprehension. By the end of the novel, along with Deen, the reader too is asked to surrender to the mysterious and inexplicable ways of nature.

Unlike most climate fiction, *Gun Island* takes places in the contemporary era. Many events described in the novel, including the fires outside of Los Angeles and flash floods and tornadoes in Italy have been occurring in reality since the publication of the novel. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh reworks the genre of the novel, bringing it closer to the realities of Anthropocene by establishing a place for the improbable at the center of the realist fiction. This does not mean that the novel offers a solution to the problems facing mankind. It does not prescribe a set of actions or attitudes to be adopted to fight climate change. Nor does it take the pessimistic stance of despairing over the impending apocalyptic doom. Instead, it offers a diagnosis in the form of stories that affirm the limitation of human knowledge and agency. This novel serves as Ghosh's response to the urgent need to reimagine human existence on earth as co-existence with other living and non-living entities. It ultimately suggests that only by decentering the human from our stories and modes of thinking can we begin to confront the realities of climate change.

Works Cited

Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

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