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Research Article

Myth As a Collective Memory and The Primal Language of Nature in *Gun Island*

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Abstract

Indian literature is profoundly infused with myths and the collective memory of Indian civilization and cultures. Indian collective memory is a tapestry or pastiche where multidimensional truths coexist without erasing the other truths for the dominion of a single narrative. Myths are not just irrational superstitions but serve as a living archive of the collective unconsciousness of the human psyche. Indian myths are echoes of its traditional belief in environmental protection, great reverence for nature, and emphasis on the interdependence of humans and nature. The myths bind the modern Indian psyche to the historical past and serve as a caution and warning against environmental degradation and its aftereffects. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* explores such a Bengali folklore, which serves as a link between the present and the past, reminding the consequences of ecological destruction for the future of mankind. The novel connects the fragile environmental condition of the Sundarbans and the impending global disaster of climate change due to human violence against natural habitats, flora and fauna. The novel draws parallels between the environmental refugees and human migration. It warns that human greed and capitalism strip the ecological system, the myths of Mansa Devi and the Gun merchant expose the primaevial capitalistic human nature and its constant transgression and violence against Nature, and the aftermaths. Myth serves as a connection between the past and present in India and other parts of the world. *Gun Island* highlights the modern crisis of migration, refugees, neo-colonialism, displacement and illegal organ trafficking.

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INTRODUCTION

The word “Myth” originates from the Greek word “Mythos” which means narrative, fiction or speech. Ancient Greeks used two distinct terms for understanding and explaining the world: “Mythos” and “Logos”. Mythos stands for imaginative story narration and Logos stands for rational inquiry or rational thinking. Both Mythos and Logos contradict and complement each other enabling the comprehensive understanding of the world. Mythology provides a foundational structure to human culture, values, experiences, morality and identity. Veronica Ions defines myth as a greater reality in her book *The World's Mythology*: “The myth, in a primitive society that is in its original living form, is not just a tale. It is a reality these stories are of an original greater more important reality through which the present life fate and mankind are governed. This knowledge provides man with motives for rituals and moral acts” (Ions 8). Myths are not merely fictions but the archive or collective memory of a culture and civilization, they carry the values and experiences across generations. Myths contain historical facts without claiming factuality. A community interprets its shared values, past and experiences through myths and its mythology. Myths answer the unanswered questions and explain the things that can't be explained through rational and logical thinking. It serves as a bridge between past and present, fact and fiction and intuition and wisdom, preserving generational culture and heritage. It acts as a tool of resistance against precariousness, and preservation of cultural identity. Myths function as an analogy of collective dreams, and present the symbols to address the universal expressions and questions. Carl Jung views myth as a symbol of Collective Unconsciousness rather an outdated fictitious phenomenon in his *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*: “Myths are first and foremost psychic phenomena that reveal the nature of the soul is something they have absolutely refused to see until now. Primitive man is not much interested in in objective explanation of the obvious, but he has an imperative need—or rather, his unconscious psyche has Irresistible urge- to assimilate all outer experiences to inner psychic events” (Jung 6).

Amitav Ghosh is a prominent Indian origin American writer. He has been writing on colonialism, fragile identities, and climate change for decades. Amitav Ghosh's works deal with Indian history and mythology. His historical fiction works include his debut novel *The Circle of Reason* and other novels including *The Shadow Line*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*. *Gun Island* explores a 17th century Indian myth or rather Bengali mythical tale of Bonduki Saudagar, a wealthy merchant who angered Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes by refusing devotion to her. He was chased by snakes, droughts, famines, cyclones and other natural disasters and finally took shelter in Bonduki dwip from Manasa Devi's wrath to save him. But he could not save himself from the Goddess wrath even at the Bonduki dwip or the Gun Island. Mansa Devi and its creatures were everywhere, he hid himself in an iron-walled room, but Mansa Devi hunted him there and a tiny poisonous creature bit him, surviving the

bite, he left the island on a ship, misfortune fell over him, he was captured by the pirates and enslaved, before his auction at the Shikol dwip (Island of Chains), he promised to Manasa Devi to be her devotee and build a shrine of her in the Sundarbans, his native place. Some miracles happened; the ship was attacked by the different sea and sky creatures. The Captives took over the ship and captured the pirates' money. The gun merchant's share of money enabled him to return to his home, become wealthy and make a shrine dedicated to Mansa Devi in the Sundarbans, Bengal. He brought back a handsome amount of wealth and an amazing tale; the people would recognise him as Bonduki Saudagar or the gun merchant. The gun merchant toured the world in order to escape the wrath of Manasa Devi but her creatures and natural calamities hunted him wherever he went. Finally, after his promise to Manasa Devi, all types of sea and sky creatures assembled and got him rescued from the slave ship. Turning nature against him made him a slave and turning it in his favour made him, a freeman wise and wealthy trader again. The gun merchant represents the human violence against Nature to satiate human's infinite desires at the expense of nature and the natural world. His pride not to submit before Manasa Devi presents the modern hubris of man or anthropocentric utilitarian approach to neglect nature conservation. On the other hand, Mansa Devi is a metaphoric presentation of Mother Nature and its boundless powers. Man exploits the environment, ignores the planetary limits and gets punished by nature through natural disasters such as cyclone, global warming and climate change. Climatic catastrophes are ramifications of man's own actions. Post colonial societies often neglect the need for environmental conservation for economic, social and political reasons. Mansa Devi's creatures are the natural forces which create havoc after ruthless exploitation of natural resources; the final submission of the gun merchant to Mansa Devi is a pact of coexistence, harmony and mutual reverence between man and nature. Amitav Ghosh draws the reader's attention towards the climatic condition of the Sundarbans through this novel and interconnects the deteriorating condition of the Sundarbans and the environment around the world. In his novel *Hungry Tides*, Amitav Ghosh has highlighted the conditions of the Sundarbans. As Upamanyu Mukherjee says: A perfect imaginative and even mythic expression of the historical and empirical reality of the Sundarbans today, where decades of conservation and development work have produced a drastically impoverished environment where human and non-humans must engage in deadly competition in order to survive. (Mukherjee 121)

A Climate Odyssey

The Gun Island is a present age Odyssey, a climate fiction and Ambitopian fiction as Asiri Amin describes it “Climate fiction is a way to imagine consequences of the ecological crisis as well as solutions” and “Ambitopian fiction breaks away from binary climate narrative that focus on dystopia or utopia, and may be most effective in inspiring action” (Amin 1). The major

characters are on a quest, a journey to decode a mythical story and to escape the circumstances and disasters.

Amitav Ghosh applies story within story device in *Gun Island*. *Gun Island* is a quest of the modern Odysseus, Dinanath Datta or Deen (American version of his name), an ethnic Bengali dealer of rare and antiquarian books, who shifted from Kolkata to New York and trades there in Brooklyn, New York. His sceptic and rational nature do not allow him to sympathise with nature, still a chain of events forces him to start his reluctant quest to uncover the legend of Bonduki Saudagar or the Gun merchant. On his quest, he moves to New York to Los Angeles, to Venice and finally to Sicily. Deen is a rationalist; he demands scientific explanations for every phenomenon, ignores the myths initially and is reluctant to visit the Mansa Devi shrine in the Sundarbans. Along with Deen, the other characters are on the quest: Tipu (a tech savvy enthusiastic boy) and Rafi (a climate migrant), Palash (a Bangladeshi student) are migrants in different parts of the world, they migrate to Europe from Indian subcontinent to escape the ecological crisis and socio-political scenario back at home. Natural disasters as cyclone has snatched Tipu's father Fokir, a poor fisherman from him. Tipu's father dies while saving Piya's life. Piya, a biologist by profession, feels guilty for his death and sponsors Tipu's education and brings him to the USA. Tipu feels constant alienation and ostracizing in the USA. He came back to India but further faced discrimination due to his Dalit caste. Eventually he gives up formal study and focuses on technology and engages himself in people moving industry (Illegal migration and immigration of the people). Tipu gets bitten by a king cobra in the Mansa Devi shrine while trying to save Deen's life, he survives poisonous cobra's bite but he is completely changed person, he gets episodic premonitory seizures which enable him to see the future ecological disasters. Tipu and Rafi share a deep camaraderie, Rafi leaves the Sundarbans for his survival, he has been listening to the stories of Mansa Devi since his childhood, and he is an orphan and victim of ecological disasters and climate change. Rafi is a climate refugee who migrates illegally to Venice from Eastern India. Another character Cinta, an acclaimed Italian historian and anthropologist moves from Venice to the United State to escape the Paparazzi after the death of her husband and daughter, Lucia. Cinta believes in myths, unexplainable phenomena and supernatural elements, she discards the notion of strict rationality and reason. Cinta's profound knowledge of Italian history helps Deen in decoding the 17th century journey route of the gun merchant. Cinta helps Deen, Piya and Gisa in rescue of the climate crisis refugees. Cinta serves as a spiritual mentor of Deen, the central character of the novel. Piya or Piyali Roy, a marine biologist, studying river dolphins raises the environmental concerns in the novel. She is an ecological expert and investigates the absurd behaviour of the sea creatures and reveals the underlying cause behind beaching and other abnormalities. Piya serves as a bridge between humanity and the natural world exposing the role of manmade industry, submarine signals and toxic refineries in the suffering of marine creatures. Piya gets death threats from the industrialists

for her ecological concerns and environmental activism. Piya takes responsibility for Tipu and his mother Moyna, after the death of Tipu's father Fokir in rescuing Piya in the Sundarban cyclone. Deen Datta, Rafi, Tipu, Cinta and Piya come together to save the immigrant vessel known as the Blue Boat. Cinta and Rafi can see through the archetypal images and empathise with all beings and phenomena which have been ignored by the rationalists as Deen and Piya. Gradually Deen and Piya learn to comprehend the symbols and archetypes presented by nature. Carl Jung points out in his *The Archetypes and Collective Unconscious*: "The fact is that archetypal images are so packed with meaning in themselves that people never think of asking what they really do mean...In reality, however he has merely discovered that up till then he has never thought about his image at all. And when he starts thinking about them, he does so with the help of what he calls "reason"- which in point of fact is nothing more than the sum total of all his prejudices and myopic views" (20).

Gun Island raises the same postmodern questions against anthropocentric utilitarian approach which has brought climatic catastrophe and huge waves of migration; migration of birds, marine creatures, animals and humans, all types of creatures have been forced to leave their natural habitats and migrate to escape the climate change and natural disasters. Ancient myths around the world warn the man against untamed exploitation of the natural resources. Unchecked exploitation of the resources causes catastrophic consequences and eventually leads to migration. Ghosh points out that the gun merchant's flight from place to place might have been the ramification of catastrophic natural disasters. Horen, the boatman's version of the gun merchant myth is different from that of Nilima. Ghosh mentions:

He remembered vividly, for example the disaster that had forced the gun merchant to flee his homeland: a drought, so terrible that the streams, rivers and ponds had dried up and the stench of rotting fish and dead life stock had hung heavy in the air. Half the people had died of starvation, parents had sold their children and people had been reduced to eating carcasses and cadavers (Ghosh 53).

The novel shows how myths connect the past, present and future. The Myth of Bonduki Saudagar and his flight mirror the present migrations due to wars, conflicts, poverty and ecological disasters. The gun merchant's constant mythical flight is not only a local folklore but a global archetype which exists in different cultures. The journey and plight of the gun merchant remind the reader of Biblical Cain's journey and curse. Cain killed his brother Abel, God cursed him to be a fugitive and wanderer, and the earth would not produce for him. Deen's journey from Kolkata to Sicily reminds us of the journey of Greek hero Odysseus. The Blue boat led by an Ethiopian woman presents the arc of Noah. Deen encounters a cobra at Mansa Devi Shrine, on board in America and a poisonous spider in Italy. He feels Mansa Devi's presence everywhere irrespective of his sceptic and scientific views. Deen and other characters witness nature's aid in the rescue of the Blue boat immigrants. The politicians and the xenophobic

youth of Italy and other European countries threaten the migrants but some miracles happen, the flock of birds flew around the ship, the whales and dolphins surrounded the Blue boat creating a barrier between the Blue boat and Italian warships and water filled with bright bioluminescence, Italian naval Admiral defies the high command orders and ensures the safe rescue of the immigrants quoting that the minister made an announcement in public only a miracle could ensure safe passage and landing of the Blue boat, and he allows it due to miracle and his faith in humanity. Admiral's faith in Black Madonna of La Salute who saved Venice from bubonic plague in the 17th century, his faith in protective powers of Mother Nature and belief in universal brotherhood persuade him to rescue the blue boat instead of attacking it. Mansa Devi in the Sundarbans and Lady Madonna of La Salute in Venice presents mother nature, its boundless powers and ultimate refuge of humanity. Karen Armstrong emphasises the idea of believing in myths to empathise with environment and natural world in her book *A Short History of Myth*:

We need myths that will help us to identify with all our fellow beings, not simply with those who belong to our ethnic national or ideological tribe. We need help to realise the importance of compassion which is not always regarded as sufficiently productive or efficient in our pragmatic rational war. We need myths that help us to create a spiritual attitude to see beyond our immediate requirements and enable us to experience a transcendent value that challenges our solipsistic selfishness. We need to make that help us to venerate the earth as sacred once again instead of merely using it as a resource. This is crucial because unless there is some kind of spiritual revolution that is able to keep abreast of our technological genius, we will not save our planet (Armstrong 15).

Anthropocene Approach to Climate Change

Gun Island draws the reader's attention towards Climate change and the underlying causes and consequences of the Climate change. Climate change has not affected only the Indian sub-continent; it has affected the entire world. The typhoons in the Sundarbans, wild fire in USA and tornado in Italy are intertwined climate disasters. Piya finds out that water pollution due to chemical dumping from refineries has caused aquatic dead zones; these dead zones have fatal impact on marine life and a disastrous effect on human livelihood. Another character back in the USA, Lisa, an entomologist researches on bark beetles, that changing their habitat due to rising temperature in the mountains and moving towards towns, bark beetles eat up trees from inside and make them hollow, it makes the trees to go up in flame easily when temperature rises. Nobody paid attention to Lisa, and during a huge wildfire break out in the town which cost several lives, she was accused of setting fire instead of getting applauded for her warnings. Deen witnesses the leaping waves of flames, ashes and predators that get opportunity in such disasters:

I could see a great mass of blackened tree trunks rising out of a vast field of ash. I noticed also that many birds were circling over the ashes of the burnt-out forest-this astonished me

because the destruction was so complete that it was difficult to think that any living thing would be drawn to this incinerated landscape...For certain species of birds – hawks, eagles and other raptors they present rare opportunity for hunting: the loss of tree cover makes it easy to spot those rodents and reptiles that have survived the fire by burrowing underground (49).

In the same way human traffickers search for opportunities in the Sundarban mangroves after cyclones, floods and other disasters by capitalising on loss of habitat, livelihood, and forced migrations. They offer the homeless people false hopes of better future, lives and stable jobs in distant lands, sell young women into forced prostitution and turn the desperate youth into exploitable and vulnerable labourers. Such greedy people thrive on adversity by exploiting the affected survivors. The people who migrate to other countries are treated as slaves, their organs; usually kidneys are removed and sold to the first world nations. Deen encounters poisonous spiders in Venice, appearance of Mediterranean recluse in Venice is not usual, it's impact of global warming that the various kinds of species are changing their habitats. Cinta exposes human role in global warming and changing the habitat of different types of species: "And where do these gases come from? Said Cinta. Do they not come from cars and planes and factories that make...whistling kettles and electric toasters and espresso machines? Is all this natural too- that we should need these things that nobody needed a hundred years ago" (Ghosh 201).

Ruthless violence, Vandana Shiva describes it as "whenever we engage in consumption or production patterns which take more than we need, we are engaging in violence" (Shiva 21), against nature has devastating consequences for human beings as well, unfortunately "those least responsible for climate change are worst affected by it" (Shiva 15).

CONCLUSION

In short, Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* explores myth as a living memory or living archive of the world community. Myths reveal the unexplainable and latent truth metaphorically. Myths have served as a link between human and nature giving voices to the all types of entities in the universe. Gun Merchant's myth and his mythical journey is a warning against unchecked consumption and exploitation of the natural resources. Environmental degradation, its consequences and climate change is a universal phenomenon. The human beings intentionally neglect nature's warnings because of their greed and insatiable hunger for profit, raising the concerns for environment protection cause threats for the environment activists by the people who reap profit at the cost of environment. It's life threatening for the environment activists to challenge the nexus of corrupt politicians, industrialists and traders. The ancestors of modern human beings could communicate with nature and understand nature in a better way; their relationship with nature was an unwritten pact of mutual reverence and coexistence but modern human's insatiable capitalistic greed has caused severe tension between Nature and man, and consequently apocalyptic outcomes for the universal life. Amitav Ghosh has raised the issues of

migration, human trafficking, bonded labour, neo-colonialism and illegal human organ sale through the novel.

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