



## Polycrisis: An Ecocritical and Historical Reading of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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### Abstract

*This research article aims to examine the cascading crises presented in Amitav Ghosh's novel "Gun Island." It centres around the different crises resulting from the impacts of colonialism, migration, climate change and pervasive inequalities. Amitav Ghosh's novels are known for the amalgamation of historical events, cultural elements and present-day concerns over the nation. Ghosh is a postcolonial writer and conservationist. His works transcend national and geographical boundaries. It links the past colonial histories with present global vulnerabilities and offers a clear understanding of the connection between humans and nature. The reading of the novel in polycrisis perspective is primarily based on Edgar Morin's concept to justify the incidents and conflicts faced by the characters. By foregrounding the journey of characters like Deen, Nilima Moyna, Tipu, Rafi, Piya, and Cinta, the research paper elucidates how ecological migration, migration, trafficking, refugee crisis and forcing individuals into a precarious loop of displacement and exploitation in the Anthropocene.*

**Keywords:** Ecology, Polycrisis, Ecocriticism, Historical Study, Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island*.

### Introduction

Millions of people around the world suffer from different crises in the long term and all of them mostly share the same roots of problems. The twenty-first century is described in terms of global crisis, societal shifts, pervasive inequality, climate crisis, economic inequities, and issues of geopolitics, which are reflected in the writings of contemporary writers. Amitav Ghosh has emerged as a leading voice who consistently draws attention to the environmental crisis and awakens ecological consciousness among his readers. This study focuses on *Gun Island* at the intersection of Edgar Morin's polycrisis theory and postcolonial ecocriticism, drawing on the insights of ecocritical and historical study. *Gun Island* deals with themes like ecological loss, human precarity, revealing myths, migration, human trafficking and refugee crisis. Ghosh highlights the resilient myths, memory and human and nonhuman relations which act as cultural resources to enable survivalism amidst disruption. In doing so, the novel both diagnoses the fragility of the present and gestures toward the imaginative solidarities that are necessary for confronting the Anthropocentric crisis. The lines below explain the important traits of human beings in the anthropocentric world.

**Do not literature, the art, and the 'humanities' at large reflect the incomplete becoming - the struggle of the human to assume and inhabit definite form? To come to terms with and give shape to an entirely incidental embodiment? It is only after this initial humanizing that other animals can be brought into the field**

**of human semblance. (Pick 83)**

Anat Pick clearly pointed out that humans' intellectual pursuit not only depends upon the happiness of life but also on understanding the purpose of life through bonding and understanding the other nonhuman entities within the shared environment.

**Polycrisis**

The theory 'Polycrisis' was coined by the thinker and philosopher Edgar Morin, along with Anne-Brigitte Kern. He defines multiple crises like economic, ecological, political, social and cultural crises in which each crisis is connected with others. The term 'polycrisis' was first used by Jean-Claude Juncker to describe the financial crisis of the European Union. In short, a polycrisis targets socio-economics, politics, geopolitics and ecological crisis. These four things are not constrained for a single factor. In a broader sense, modernisation and the greatest acceleration of economic development (from 1945 onwards) focus more on the climatic changes. Mohd Shahril Abdul Rahman et.al says,

**Various health crises, economic crises, armed conflicts, warfare, and climate change have inflicted harm upon human lives, residences, infrastructure, ecosystems, and economies. These crises result in joblessness, restricted availability of healthcare and education, heightened poverty levels, displacement, psychological distress, and longlasting economic consequences. That phenomenon is known as polycrisis or metacrisis, which denotes a formidable and all-encompassing challenge currently faced by the world. (1)**

Although the polycrisis affects all walks of life in a country, community or even as an individual. In making together these overlapping crises, Ghosh not only revisits the colonial past but also exposes the colonial roots of global crises and reveals the contemporary challenges. The term 'polycrisis' that Edgar Morin defines as a convergence of multiple crises across ecological, social, political and cultural spheres, where each amplifies the other instead of remaining isolated. The novel *Gun Island* opted for this convergence through the *Bhola Cyclone* (1970), *The Aila Cyclone* (2009), human trafficking, forced migration, social exploitation and purporting cultural belief through the snake goddess Manasa Devi. Environmental devastation plunges the people of the Sundarbans towards uncertain futures. Human Trafficking exploits the immigrants' lives and their hope by luring them with promises of coerced jobs in the Middle East or Europe. Ghosh shows how refugees often become the victims of human trafficking, a direct link between ecological collapse and socio-political violence. Siirilä, J. and Salonen points out that,

**The current era of polycrisis can cause societies and the whole planet to face significant challenges, including increasing inequality, social instability, and environmental devastation. Because human activity is causing climate change, a loss of biodiversity, and the depletion of natural resources, humans have a responsibility to confront the consequences of their actions, but they also have the power to act. As later citizens, societies, and humankind come to realize this, the more difficult and expensive it will become to live in the age of polycrisis. Large-scale systemic change, driven by a collective effort of progressive political leaders, inclusive coalitions, active citizens, and social movements can solve this dire situation. Together, we can pave the way for a sustainable future. As polycrisis poses an existential threat to humanity, our generation needs to do everything we can regarding international collaboration, national decisionmaking, industries, households, and also the choices we make in our everyday lives. After all, building a sustainable future is all about making future**

**generations proud of our generation's decisions. (4)**

Amid the desperation of life, destruction of agriculturally fertile lands and depletion of fishing ponds, survival becomes nearly impossible. Human trafficking is a crime forcing people into forced labour, selling organs, forced begging and sexual exploitation. Many women are unable to feed their families and are pushed into brothels and exploitative labour. These incidents explain how the climate-induced displacement triggers a chain of gendered exploitation and social cohesion. In *Gun Island*, Gosh portrays that the crisis does not overlap with others. The following crisis is understandably described by Ghosh.

1. **The Ecological crises are cyclones, flooding and climate change.**
2. **The Economic Crisis are loss of livelihood and food scarcity.**
3. **The Social crises are trafficking and illegal work, like brothels and selling organs.**
4. **The Cultural Crisis is defined as the displacement of communities and erosion of indigenous ecology.**

Each of these crises reinforces the other, by producing a polycrisis, where the destruction of land leads to poverty, poverty leads to migration, migration enables trafficking, and fuels human suffering on a large global scale. Thus, the novel becomes a narrative of polycrisis in the Anthropocene, showing how local disasters in the Sundarbans resonate across oceans and continents, linking climate collapse with human exploitation, and framing migration not as a choice but as a compulsion born from systemic failure.

**Ecocritical and Historical Reading of *Gun Island***

In Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*, he talks about myth and folklore and also discusses the confrontation of migration and the planetary crisis. The novel opens with the life journey of the protagonist Deen, whose path leads him from the buzzing streets of Calcutta to the frail landscapes of the Sundarbans, and eventually he travels across continents to Los Angeles, Venice and the Mediterranean. Albert writes that **"The world-system of which we are all a part faces multiple calamities: climate change and mass extinction, energy supply shocks, the economic and existential threat of AI, the chilling rise of far-right populism, and ratcheting geopolitical tensions..."** So, Deen understands how locals struggle to save their lives and their lives are tied to global disruptions through his journey. Deen's meeting with the social worker Nilima in the novel elucidates the mythical references of Manasa Devi and Gun Merchant to Deen. Later, he got to know the characters Moyna and Tipu, their life entangled with the Sundarban region; with migrants in Venice and with Cinta and Piya in their different modes. Ghosh vividly penned the picture of climate change, human displacement and ecological destruction. It leads to an increase in the curiosity of Deen to search for the story of the legend of the Snake Goddess and Gun Merchant, and soon it reveals itself as an allegory of human greed and nature's retaliation. The wrath of Manasa Devi recurs symbolically in cyclones, droughts and wildfires that cross borders with the same ease as myths and migrants. As Deen himself observes that the planet had accelerated as a conceding of how capitalism and modernity have compressed time and space into a condition of permanent crisis. In an article, Hoydis, J. elucidates,

***Gun Island* reflects this by engaging with intersecting causalities of migration: the personal, the economic, and the ecological. The narrative also bestows agency on the Bangladeshi characters Rafi and Tipu, who undertake the precarious journey from the Sundarbans to Italy; it emancipates them from a status of victimhood, while suggesting that the complexity of their migration stories typically remains untold in discourses about climate migration in the Global**

### North. (395)

The novel insists on planetary environmentalism, displacement from a central position of the human to include the lives of animals like Rani the Dolphin, who becomes a climate migrant in her own right. Ghosh portrays the rising sea levels against the precarious lives of refugees. It proves the climate crisis is not limited to the Global South but is felt differently across inequalities. The blue boat of migrants becomes a symbol of the polycrisis where the economic injustice, environmental breakdown, and geopolitical resentment intersect. It also embodies the collective hope, as even whales and birds rise in cohesion. Ultimately, *Gun Island* argues that no one is exempt: the plight of the Sundarbans fisherfolk echoes in California wildfires and Venetian floods. Ghosh blends folklore, science and lived experience to remind us that the climate crisis is a planetary crisis, inseparably human and nonhuman, past and present, local and global. In the selected novel for the discussion, Ghosh's *Gun Island*, infused with ecological loss, is not a single entity; it's a part of human suffering. The Sundarbans ecology was damaged by cyclones. The natural disaster, cyclones, hit again and again. It emerges as a landscape where survival is constantly under siege. Through the lines of Ghosh, one can understand the situation. **"Making a life in the Sundarbans facing the had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere."** (Ghosh 49) This quote emphasises the profound desperation confronted by the people who lived in the marginalised regions, such as the Sundarbans. It clearly shows the Sundarbans facing the natural disasters, which force people to leave and find a new shelter to lead a better life. This evacuation occurred due to the impact of nature's living on the margins. As the concept of survivalism becomes progressively precarious, immigrants are compelled into perilous choices, exposing the structural failures that deny them basic needs. It captures the tragic reality that the pursuit of a better life often pushes individuals towards dangerous paths, where hope for safety becomes entangled with vulnerability.

The novel exposes the dark side of migrant trafficking and their illegal border crossing. Ghosh states that through the character Moyna,

**The Sundarbans had always attracted traffickers, because of its poverty, but never in such numbers after Aila; they had descended in swarms springing women off to distant brothels and able-bodied men to work in faraway cities."** (Ghosh 49)

This single line encapsulates how humans prey upon ecological vulnerability, showing that environmental crises increase social exploitation. The author clearly states that nature's devastation becomes the trafficker's business, and they do it for their survival. Lawrence et.al. warn that, as per the views of Ghosh, in a scientific manner. They points out that,

**We argue that the world is experiencing a worsening polycrisis and propose a conceptual framework for understanding how crises (and their precursor stresses and triggers) become entangled across global systems. This framework will help researchers identify and study the causal mechanisms that produce crisis amplification, acceleration, and synchronization. We thus place the polycrisis concept at the center of an urgent new research program. This program can draw on theories and methods in other fields to explain the dynamics of crisis interaction. (12)**

The migrations of the refugees are shown not merely as corporeal movements but as existential conditions. Rafi and Tipu have migrated to Venice, where they live as invisible labourers, tolerable individuals, but are denied all the rights. Venice itself is a city sinking



into the sea; it mirrors the weakness and also symbolises how the centres of power are no longer secure. Migrants are becoming the symbols of the polycrisis, displaced from home by floods and political upheavals, their lives split by borders and their existence is marked by precarity and exclusion.

Ghosh uses indigenous folklore and myth to understand the crises that have deep cultural roots. The curse given by Snake Goddess, Manasa Devi, to Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar) is doomed to be strolled endlessly, and it echoes in the plight of the modern migrant. As Ghosh reflects the myth through the selected novel, the character Deen decodes the symbols and cryptic elements to understand the myth and the history of the folklore. The myth of Manasa Devi was not just a story; it was a moral lesson of the costs of disobedience and the weight of survival. Through the interconnection of history and myth, Ghosh probes that forced displacement is not a new phenomenon, but it is strengthened by modern capitalism and climate change. *Gun Island* is a tale of environmental catastrophes that have different crises. Rakibul Hasan Khan affirms that the novel *Gun Island* speaks about the ecological crisis. Khan writes,

**The novel's engagement with the suffering of environmental victims in remote locations of the Global South, and their struggle to find refuge in the Global North, highlights the need for planetary environmental justice. Ghosh's focus on the environmental crisis moves from the regional effects of climate change to a broader planetary crisis, foregrounding the question of justice for climate migrants. The climate migrants whom the novel represents are those at the margins of their societies. The despair that leads those migrants to risk their lives and to leave behind their possessions highlights the imminent dangers of climate change and social inequality. (435-436)**

Ghosh shows that crises ruffled across geographies and histories, binding humans and nonhumans in a fragile interdependence. Through the application of Polycrisis theory, it foreshadows the fragility of the world. The despair of the displaced people in the Sundarbans reflects the second layer of crisis, forced migration. The characters Tipu and Rafi embody the struggles of a generation caught between ecological collapse and economic precarity. As a historian, he mentioned refugees fleeing from various countries like Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia and Bengal as well. Their decision to leave their native land is not treated as an act of choice but of indispensable dereliction. The novel portrays migration not as an isolated problem but as a symptom of extreme precarious planetary crises that destabilise local and global spaces alike. By linking the different places and regions like the Sundarbans to Venice and Los Angeles, Ghosh illustrates the ripple effect of displacement, where one ecological disaster becomes part of a wider network of human mobility and vulnerability. The third major layer of polycrisis is human trafficking, smuggling and stealing organs. These refugees' crimes, depicted with clarity in the novel, become another dimension of the polycrisis. Refugees are directly connected with the place Sinai in Egypt, where special operating rooms are used to remove kidneys and organs from the immigrants. They sold their organs to lead their daily livelihood. Ghosh paints a picture of the terrible realities of the slaves who sold their organs. It also talks about the horrible actions of traffickers who exploit the desperation of the displaced, preying on the vulnerability of families ruined by ecological collapse. After Cyclone Aila, traffickers descended in swarms, reinforcing how crises are never contained but attract exploitation. Rafi's entrapment within the smuggling networks exemplifies the boundaries between migration and trafficking, which brings a blur in times of desperation. The trafficking of men for physical labour exploitation and women for sexual



exploitation in the work throws light on how the economic supremacy thrives upon the ecological disaster.

The refugees like Rafi and Tipu are doubly displaced by climate disasters in their native land and then by hostile political disputes. Their invisibility, where they exist in precarious conditions of exclusion and bigotry, reflects the systemic neglect that defines the refugee crisis in the Anthropocene. Timothy Clark argues clearly on the impending danger as alarmed by Ghosh. Clark says, “...in literary and cultural criticism, the “Anthropocene”, which names the epoch in which human impacts on the planet's ecological systems reach a dangerous limit, also represents a threshold at which modes of interpretation that once seemed sufficient or progressive become, in this new counterintuitive context, inadequate or even latently destructive.” Nilima provides solidarity; she runs Badabun Community Trust, and her role supports the community that suffered from the cyclones and natural disasters. That trust saves refugees from illegal work like prostitution and smuggling. In the portrayal of the Sundarbans, Ghosh discusses the vulnerability of climate change through the margins and centre of the geographical location. The novel's invocation of myth and folklore adds another layer to its findings. This mythic parallel underscores that displacement is not new; more than that, it is a recurring cycle embedded in cultural memory. Writing climate fiction through the use of narrative tools and ecological symbols such as dolphins, snakes, and spiders is very common and appreciable to the novelist. Ghosh highlights that humans and nature are interdependent. Myth thus becomes a form of cultural resilience, preserving ecological wisdom that contrasts sharply with the exploitative logic of capitalism and empire.

### Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh foregrounds the ecological loss of the Sundarbans as a site where human greed and natural fragility collide. The Sundarban region, historically exploited for its resources, has become a symbol of how colonial and postcolonial oppression have destroyed the ecosystems and communities. Ghosh is concerned that environmental destruction is never merely about landscapes; it reflects systematic exploitation in which the poor bear the cost for survival. The continual cyclones and rising sea level of the Sundarbans force people to abandon their homes. He illustrates how ecological crises transform directly into social crises. This ecological fragility exposes the interconnectedness of nature and human existence. It shows that anthropocentric exploitation automatically returns as ecological blowback. The historical and ecological references in the novel reveal that global capitalism and natural calamity will remain at the core of overlapping crises. The Bhola and Aila Cyclones razed the Sundarbans region, killed thousands and destroyed the ecosystem. These disasters left the population without land, food, or livelihood, demonstrating how climate catastrophes intersect with human vulnerability. The recurring natural disasters and dangerous incidents in the history of the region become not just local tragedies but global reminders of the Anthropocene violence. The novel explores the exploitation; present-day human trafficking and migratory issues are bound in global inequalities. The world stands at a critical juncture, facing ecological challenges aggravated by centuries of industrialisation and economic expansion. By juxtaposing these geographies, Ghosh critiques the illusion that power protects nations from ecological disaster. Nevertheless, his critiques on that ecological crisis subvert the margins and centres alike.

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