

FICTION AND OCEAN WORLD: MARITIME KNOWLEDGE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *GUN ISLAND*

Dr. Vrushali V. Bhosale Kaneri

Head & Associate Professor Department of English, R. A. Podar College of Commerce & Economics (Autonomous), Matunga, Mumbai 19.

Email: vrushali.kaneri@rapodar.ac.in

Abstract

Oceanic fiction, also known as Indian Ocean novels, deals with the oceanic world along with the representations of maritime realities. This form of fiction contextualises Oceanographic details such as tides, marine life, sea levels and others. Furthermore, it provides the readers with experiences of oceanic journeys and the characters who spend considerable time on ships, islands, shores, etc. Considered under the lens of Post Colonial Studies, Indian Ocean novels have been found rich in oceanic details, and they contribute immensely to the development of Blue Humanities, touching upon areas of knowledge such as Thalassology, Marine Currents, Island Life and so on. These oceanic novels have demanded new approaches in reading and analysing them. This paper closely examines Amitav Ghosh's sea-based narrative, *Gun Island*, as a source that imaginatively documents climate change in the ocean and its impact on its inhabitants. It explains how Ghosh's novel serves as a commentary on rising sea levels, ecological degradation and the resultant dislocation of both human beings and non-humans. It also traces Ghosh's scientific approach in depicting oceanic realities, such as storms, marine ecosystems and water salinity. This paper mobilises the tenets of Oceanography, Post-Colonialism and Blue Humanities to analyse Ghosh's narrative and to foreground the oceanic knowledge the novel provides.

Keywords: Blue Humanity, Oceanography, Post Colonialism, Indian Ocean novels.

► *Corresponding Author: Dr. Vrushali V. Bhosale Kaneri*

Introduction

The ocean, with its vast span and mysterious depths, has long inspired the human imagination. In literature, it functions as both a setting and a metaphor, enabling narratives that cross geographical and psychological boundaries. Oceanic fiction, particularly in the context of Indian Ocean novels, foregrounds the lived realities of maritime worlds. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* significantly contributes to this genre by integrating environmental concerns, maritime knowledge and postcolonial anxieties into a cohesive narrative. This paper investigates how *Gun Island* documents and interprets oceanic realities and climate change, providing insights into the expanding field of Blue Humanities.

Theoretical Framework: Blue Humanities, Oceanography and Postcolonialism

The Blue Humanities is a recent theoretical approach that examines the significance of oceans, seas and other bodies of water in shaping human cultures and histories. It highlights the interconnectedness of marine environments and human societies, encouraging appreciation of aquatic worlds in cultural discourse. Blue Humanities has emerged as a vital area of research across

disciplines such as history, visual arts and literary studies. In 2009, Steve Mentz introduced the term “blue cultural studies” or “blue humanities”, providing a platform for scholars who shifted their focus from terrestrial to oceanic concerns. This field is characterised by disciplinary fluidity and interdisciplinary engagement with environmental and science studies. Scholars, including Dan Brayton, Steve Mentz and Hester Blum, employ the ocean as a lens to move beyond metaphor. Through their research, they emphasise the ocean’s material and social dimensions and centre the experiences of those whose lives are shaped by the sea. The Blue Humanities applies critical tools from literature, cultural studies and history to oceanic contexts, challenging the dominant epistemologies and necessitating contingent, interdisciplinary approaches. From Homer’s *Odyssey* to contemporary works such as *Life between the Tides* by Adam Nicolson and *The Ocean Speaks* by Matt Porteous, the ocean has consistently inspired poets, writers and artists. Despite increased artistic and activist engagement with water in response to climate change, there remains a lack of comprehensive cultural and literary analysis addressing this heightened interest and the urgent need to reconsider humanity’s relationship with nature.

The emergence of Blue Humanities reflects a broader environmental shift in the humanities, aiming to understand humanity’s relationship with nature beyond land-based perspectives. Drawing on oceanography, marine biology, maritime history and ecology, Blue Humanities scholars promote a critical re-evaluation of human-ocean relationships. This transdisciplinary approach integrates literature, cultural studies and both social and natural sciences to achieve a holistic understanding of the ocean’s influence on human life.

Oceanography is the scientific study of the ocean. It provides critical insights into marine currents, tides, ecosystems, and climate patterns. This knowledge is increasingly vital amid global warming and the ecological crisis. In contrast, Postcolonial Studies examine the ways colonial histories and power dynamics are embedded in maritime spaces, migration routes and cultural imaginaries. By integrating these frameworks, this paper closely scrutinises Amitav Ghosh’s sea-based narrative, *Gun Island*, as a source that creatively documents climate change in the ocean and its impact on its inhabitants. It also explains how Ghosh’s novel serves as an observation on rising sea levels, ecological degradation and the resultant dislocation of both human beings and non-humans. It also traces Ghosh’s scientific approach in depicting oceanic realities, such as storms, marine ecosystems, and water salinity.

Maritime Knowledge in Indian Ocean Novels

Indian Ocean novels are distinguished by their emphasis on maritime journeys, coastal ecologies, and the complex interactions between humans and non-humans. These texts frequently portray the ocean as a storehouse of memory, trauma and hope. The Indian Ocean, historically a site of trade, migration and colonial exploitation, serves as a narrative space for reimagining histories and interrogating environmental crises. The novel under scrutiny exemplifies these dynamics, providing detailed descriptions of tides, storms and marine life while addressing themes of displacement, ecological degradation and cultural transformation.

Gun Island: An Outline

Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island* centres on Deen Datta, a rare books dealer, whose travels from Kolkata to the Sundarbans and ultimately to Venice. The narrative weaves together myth and reality, focusing on the legend of the Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar) and its contemporary significance. As Deen investigates the legend, he becomes involved in events marked by natural disasters, forced migration and encounters with both marine life and human refugees. The novel

skilfully explores the intersections of climate change, migration, and mythology, positioning the ocean as an active agent in shaping destinies.

Oceanographic Details in *Gun Island*

The narrative is rich in references to oceanographic phenomena. The Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest at the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, is portrayed as a place in which land and water are in constant flux. The author portrays in detail the tidal surges, shifting riverbanks and the precariousness of life in a deltaic environment. The novel highlights rising sea levels that threaten to flood entire villages, compelling people to migrate. These descriptions are integral to the narrative's examination of ecological precarity and adaptation. The text also addresses the significant role of cyclones in shaping political geography:

Eight days earlier – on November 12, 1970, to be precise – a Category 4 cyclone had torn through the Bengal delta, hitting both the Indian province of West Bengal and the state that was then called East Pakistan (a year later it would become a new nation, Bangladesh). Storms had no names in this region back then but the 1970 cyclone would later come to be known as the Bhola cyclone.

In terms of casualties the Bhola cyclone was the greatest natural disaster of the twentieth century; its toll is conservatively estimated at three hundred thousand lives lost but the actual number may have been as high as half a million. Most of those casualties were in East Pakistan where political tensions had long been simmering. West Pakistan's laggardly response to the disaster played a critical part in triggering the war of independence that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. (Ghosh 13)

The author also touches upon the issue of migrants caused by the cyclone: "The situation was aggravated by a steady flow of refugees from East Pakistan" (Ghosh 14).

The novel explains marine ecosystems by illustrating the interconnectedness of species and the vulnerability of their habitats. For example, the author examines the impact of water salinity on both plant and animal life, demonstrating how minor environmental changes can produce cascading effects. Storms, floods and cyclones recur as motifs, symbolising both natural forces and the unpredictability of human existence. Ghosh combines literary imagination, ecological reality and scientific details: "As sea levels rose, and the flow of fresh water diminished, salt water had begun to intrude deeper upstream, making certain stretches too saline for the dolphins. They had started to avoid some of the waterways they had frequented before; they had also, slowly, begun to venture further and further upriver, into populated, heavily fished areas" (Ghosh 92).

Climate Change and Displacement

One of the key concerns of the narrative is the relationship between climate change and human displacement. The work portrays the Sundarbans as a frontline in the battle against rising sea levels and extreme weather events: "In West Bengal, it was the Sundarbans that absorbed the impact of the cyclone. Lusibari, the island where Nilima and her husband lived, suffered a great deal of damage: a large chunk of the island was ripped away by the storm surge, houses and all" (Ghosh 13). The characters in the novel continually discuss the threats posed by floods, erosion and salinity intrusion. The changing environmental conditions resulted in the displacement of people from their ancestral lands. It is paralleled by the movement of animals, such as snakes and dolphins, who are also affected by changing environmental conditions. Through these narratives, Ghosh underscores the interconnection of human and non-human destinies: "Things about animals, and fish, and the water – he'd tell me that I didn't need to learn what he knew because the rivers and the forest and the animals are no longer as they were" (Ghosh 86).

The novel extends its focus beyond the Indian Ocean, tracing migration routes to the Mediterranean and highlighting the global dimensions of climate-induced displacement. The journeys of refugees from South Asia to Europe are depicted alongside those of marine species, highlighting the shared weaknesses of all life forms. Ghosh's approach is both empathetic and analytical, makes the reader pause and think about the ethical implications of ecological crises.

Thalassology and Island Life

The novel under scrutiny can also be analysed from a Thalassology perspective. Thalassology is the study of seas and oceans. It focuses on the study of the sea, oceanography, marine life and maritime history.

The inhabitants of the Sundarbans are portrayed as having knowledge of tides, currents and weather patterns, which are crucial for survival. This indigenous knowledge is contrasted with scientific oceanography, creating a dialogue between local and global modes of understanding. Ghosh's depiction of island life emphasises resilience, adaptability and the creative strategies communities employ to cope with environmental uncertainty.

The novel also explores the symbolic significance of islands as spaces of refuge and entrapment. Islands are depicted as both sanctuaries from the chaos of the mainland and as sites vulnerable to ecological threats. The narrative thus complicates the romanticised notion of islands and presents them as dynamic spaces shaped by historical, cultural and environmental forces.

Myth, Memory and the Oceanic Imagination

A distinctive feature of the narrative is its combination of myth and science. The legend of the Gun Merchant serves as a lens through which the novel explores historical migrations, cultural exchanges and contemporary crises. Ghosh employs myth as a narrative strategy to connect past and present, suggesting that the ocean is both a witness to history and an agent of change. Memory, too, is linked to the oceanic imagination, as characters recall ancestral stories and grapple with the legacies of dislocation.

This interplay between myth and reality is central to the novel's exploration of the Blue Humanities. Ghosh explains that maritime knowledge is not limited to scientific facts, it also includes folklore, oral traditions and collective memory. By weaving together these different strands, the novel offers a holistic understanding of the ocean as a living archive.

When Nilima visited the Sundarbans, her boatman, Horen, took her to the part of the Sundarbans where the mighty Raimangal river flows, touching the borders of both India and Bangladesh. She was surprised to discover that people from a particular hamlet were unaffected by the cyclone. The people and their belongings were all safe. On the other hand, the other villages were swept away and nothing was left behind. As Nilima was curious to know the reason. She enquired with Horen and received an unexpected answer:

Spotting a few people on the riverbank, Nilima asked Horen to pull in. From the look of the place, she assumed that many of the hamlet's inhabitants had been killed or wounded – but on enquiring, she received an unexpected answer. She learnt that no one from that hamlet had suffered any bodily harm; they had even managed to salvage their belongings and stocks of food.

To what did the village owe its good fortune?

The answer startled Nilima: her informants told her that the miracle was due to Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, who, they said, was the protector of the nearby shrine. (Ghosh 14)

Postcolonial Perspectives: Migration, Power and the Sea

The author situates their narrative within the broader context of postcolonial histories. The Indian Ocean is depicted as a space of mobility and exchange. This space is shaped by centuries of trade, colonisation and migration. Ghosh's characters navigate literal and metaphorical borders and boundaries as they seek safety and belonging. The novel critiques the lingering effects of colonialism, which have worsened social and environmental vulnerabilities in coastal regions.

The sea, in this context, is both a conduit for migration and a site of contestation. Ghosh draws attention to how maritime routes are policed and controlled, reflecting contemporary anxieties about refugees and border security. At the same time, the ocean emerges as a space of possibility, offering opportunities for escape and transformation. The novel thus foregrounds the sea's ambivalence in postcolonial consciousness.

Scientific Approaches in Literary Narrative

One notable achievement of the novel is its integration of scientific knowledge into its literary narrative. Ghosh's attention to detail—whether describing the formation of cyclones, the behaviour of marine currents, or the impact of salinity on crops—reflects a deep engagement with oceanography. The novel serves as a bridge between scientific discourse and popular understanding, making complex ecological issues accessible to a broader audience. For the people staying on the coastal line, cyclones help in measuring time: “Storms, I soon discovered, were Horen's measure of time” (Ghosh 54).

By foregrounding scientific approaches, Ghosh challenges the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, suggesting that literature plays a vital role in educating readers about environmental crises. The novel becomes a site of knowledge production, where empirical observation and imaginative speculation coexist: “The islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they're disappearing before our eyes. That's why I feel that some record should be made of it; for all I know that temple is might be an important historical monument” (Ghosh 18).

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* stands as a testimony to the power of oceanic fiction to illuminate the complexities of maritime worlds. Through its detailed depiction of oceanographic phenomena, its engagement with postcolonial histories and its integration of scientific and mythical knowledge, the novel offers a detailed exploration of the challenges and possibilities facing coastal communities. *Gun Island* contributes to the development of the Blue Humanities by demonstrating the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding the ocean's role in shaping human destinies.

As climate change accelerates and sea levels continue to rise, the insights offered by oceanic fiction become ever more relevant. *Gun Island* prompts one to rethink one's relationship with the ocean, recognising it not as a passive backdrop but as an active agent in history and culture. In doing so, the novel opens new horizons for literary and ecological inquiry: “‘It's the river that's moved,’ came the answer. When I last saw the place it was still a good way inland. Now it's at the water's edge” (Ghosh 65).

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