

# Accentuating Environmental Migration, And Resisting Essentialism In Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island And Salman Rushdie's Quichotte

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## ABSTRACT

The Anthropocene is not only characterized by the detrimental effects on the non-human world, but also by the large-scale movement of humans in search of resources to survive as their native places are rapidly becoming uninhabitable. This paper would attempt to trace the literary exploration of the impending crisis of climactic cataclysm, the condition of migrants, and gender politics. Salman Rushdie delineates the trope of environmental apocalypse, the dynamics of gender relationships, and racial politics in Quichotte. Whereas, Amitav Ghosh enunciates his ecocentric concern and focuses on the issues of forced migration and displacement in Gun Island. There is a striking similarity in the two texts, both thematically and stylistically in terms of the sense of urgency to address the issue of climate change, and the presence of dominant female characters who resist essentialist categories. Rushdie and Ghosh have thus both explored the topical issues represented in the texts with regards to environmental politics/migration, race relations and gender essentialism.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Migration, Essentialism, Gender Politics.

## INTRODUCTION

Climate change is perhaps the most conspicuous global crisis of contemporary times. There is a pervading state of perplexity and uncertainty as to whether there is any permanent or better answer to this crisis. In recent times, the climate has been changing at an alarming rate in various parts of the world and it is becoming difficult for humans to survive through extreme weather fluctuations/situations. These extreme changes in weather have forced humans to migrate from one place to another in order to survive. A large number of environmental migrants all over the world have no permanent new home to continue their existence. François Gemenne states that:

...environmental migration is an ancient phenomenon, as can be attested from many historical documents, the concern for this type of displacement

is relatively new, and research on the issue has experienced rapid and increasingly numerous developments in recent years... Two major disasters have served to stress the impact that environmental changes have on migration. On 26 December 2004, a major tsunami hit Southeast Asia, resulting in a mass displacement of over two million people. Eight months later hurricane Katrina devastated the US Gulf Coast, triggering yet another massive population displacement, which lasted for months and evolved into permanent relocation for a third of New Orleans', displaces (Gemenne 239).

These two major natural disasters have forcefully evacuated a large number of masses from their native places. As stated above, a large number of displaced people have turned out to be refugees losing their belongings and possessions in the aftermath.

With this notion, this paper would accomplish its various objectives by blending the topical issues represented in the texts of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* and Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte* with regards to environmental politics/migration and feminism. It would further trace the root cause behind the displacement and unstoppable transition of migrants, and also examine the nature-culture dichotomy and its symbolic attachments to gender. To effectuate these arguments, it would critically analyze the perspectives of both the contemporary writers and their recent works with emphasis on eco-critical and feminist viewpoints.

### **Migration and Climate Change**

Anthropogenic activities have not only affected the environment and the non-human world adversely, but have also displaced indigenous populations as their homes have been rendered inhabitable. Shashi Tharoor and Samir Saran observe that "the world's poorest suffer the most when ecosystems are degraded...Today, for the first time, environmental refugees outnumber political refugees" (99). Salman Rushdie thinks that 'we live in an age which is defined by migration' (271). In *Quichotte*, he asserts that:

...so many of today's stories are and must be of this plural, sprawling kind, because a kind of nuclear fission has taken place in human lives and relations, families have been divided, millions upon millions of us have traveled to the four corners of the (admittedly spherical, and therefore cornerless) globe, whether by necessity or choice. Such broken families may be our best available lenses through which to view this broken world. (Rushdie 37)

Ghosh has mentioned his concern for ecology and environment in various articles and books in both fictional and non-fictional writings. Laura A. White affirms that, "Ghosh's evocative descriptions of the Sunderbans have impressed literary critics, but the islands are more than a fictional backdrop for Ghosh; they are also a focus for his environmental activism" (White 515). In 2004, Ghosh's inclination towards environmental activism was determined in his articles where he argued about the importance of ecology in the Sunderbans opposing Sahara India Parivar's decision to construct a resort in the region. Amitav Ghosh criticized the Sahara India Parivar's decision in his essay, "Folly in the Sunderbans" that, "...the waters of the Sunderbans were home to great numbers of whales and dolphins...for all we know the cataecean population of this region has already

dwindled catastrophically. It would be nothing less than an outrage if an area that has been closed to zoologists should now be thrown open to tourist developers" (Ghosh 2004). In the *Gun Island*, his predilection for Sunderbans was used as a metaphor to explain the dichotomy between nature and humans. It also raises question on how humans are irresponsible towards the ecology of the nature and therefore one should bear the consequences of his/her grievances. The following words may be quoted from *Gun Island*:

... it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who live in the Sunderbans. When people tried to dig wells, an arsenic laced-brew gushed out of the soil; when they tried to shore up embankments the tides rose higher and pulled them down again. Even fishermen could barely get by; where once their boats would come back loaded with catch, now they counted themselves lucky if they netted a handful of fry. (Ghosh 49 )

Vaishna Roy states in her review that:

*Gun Island* has bits of everything-magic, myth, history, science, zoology, etymology. It's about climate change, but suddenly it's also about migration and trafficking, and with the feeblest linkages (Roy 2019).

The climate of the Earth is changing with an alarming alacrity and the possibility of an apocalypse does not seem far-fetched anymore. Indeed, apocalyptic visions of the future are not merely confined to the realm of speculative or science fiction but are even presented in United Nations conferences by climate change scientists. (Whyte 3) Climatic cataclysm is not a thing of the distant future, it is an impending crisis that can potentially eradicate life on earth. Dylan M. Harris notes that:

...the way we largely come to know about climate change is through the language of science, but this is not a universal language. Telling stories, however, is a shared experience. Stories make the symbolic visceral, the unknowable known...With regards to climate change and our perceived inability to address it, stories – when listened to – provide not only a roadmap for understanding where we are but are also a point of departure from the status quo. (179-180)

In *Quichotte*, Rushdie presents the premonitions of an imminent apocalypse as "their generation having made a royal mess of the planet, was on its way out" (19). Kyle Powys Whyte notes that "the Anthropocene period is sometimes described

through dystopian or postapocalyptic narratives of climate crises that will leave humans in horrific science-fiction scenarios” (2). Though Rushdie incorporates science fictional elements into the narrative with ruptures and voids appearing in the sky and people migrating into another planet, his message is abundantly clear –“The universe is fraying at the edges. It’s coming apart. We need to recognize that and take action” (158). In the *Gun Island*, Ghosh mentions that, “... people everywhere have always imagined themselves to be heading towards apocalypse... that’s because every generation likes to think that it’s special and everything will come to an end when they’re gone ...” (Ghosh 123). Infact, there is a glimpse of ecological catastrophe in both the novels – warnings and indications of the impending crisis from these prominent contemporary writers.

### **Gun Island**

*Gun Island* provides an eco-critical insight focusing on various real life events. It is the latest novel of Amitav Ghosh which was originally published on 6<sup>th</sup> June 2019. It reflects the mirror images of the migrant refugees who were displaced due to various natural disasters and their pathetic conditions throughout the world. Aashish Khakha remarks that, “Ghosh does reflect the narrow-mindedness of right-wing regimes; it is more to do with the issue of refugees than with climate change” (Khakha 2019). In an article (Huffington post), Karthik Shankar wrote that:

*Gun Island*, is a dreamlike ecological fable. Dinanath ‘Deen’ Dutta, an Indian-American rare books seller, finds himself entranced by the tale of the mysterious Bonduki Sadagar, the *Gun Merchant* whose legend is commemorated with a hidden shrine in the Sunderbans. The novel weaves together the folk tales of Manasa Devi, the goddess who set snakes and storms to besiege the mortals who refuse to kowtow to her, the destruction of ecosystems from Bangladesh to Los Angeles, and the great migration—of labourers who flock to the shores of Italy and schls of dolphins in its waters (Shankar 2019).

*Gun Island* deals with the complexities of the present times highlighting on the extremities of the human-nature crisisoo. As narrated by Moyna in the novel:

... I made the acquaintance of Cyclone Aila, which hit the Sunderbans in 2009...was quite different from the cyclones of the past... Mass evacuations had been planned in advance and millions of people were

moved to safety, in India and in Bangladesh...Yet Aila’s long-term consequences were even more devastating than those of earlier cyclones...many evacuees had decided not to return, knowing that their lives, always hard, would be even more precarious now. Communities had been destroyed and families dispersed; the young had drifted to cities, swelling already-swollen slums; among the elderly many had given up trying to eke out a living and had taken to begging on the streets. (Ghosh 48-49)

Sunderban is the deep ecological regions where both humans and non-humans survive to sustain their existence. It is the most affected region as it is situated in the Bay of Bengal and shares watery borders with Bangladesh. In 2009, the Aila devastated the poor people of the regions and marked longtime consequences as they were evacuated in order to save themselves from the terrific natural disaster. Although, they were evacuated to a safer zone but the post-effects were worst as their livelihood was destroyed due to the disastrous storm. On 20<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the cyclone Amphan landfall into the coast of West Bengal flooding the region with storms. Priya Ranganathan reported in *The Wire* that, “When Amphan struck the Ganges delta, it flooded coastal communities and pushed water up to 15 km inland in parts of the Sunderbans. IMD recorded winds of 150-160 km/hr” (Ranganathan 2020).

Harsimran Gill adds that, “Ghosh ties in the global movement of refugees in search of new lives and livelihoods as survival in their homelands becomes impossible, with climate change, gesturing at these two phenomena being effect and cause, respectively” (Gill 2019). It is very common for the residents of Sunderbans to move out from their homeland as the region is vastly affected by natural calamities. *Gun Island* evokes the idea of environmental migration as, “Making a life in Sunderbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were burrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere” (Ghosh 49).

Tipu and Rafi also play a pivotal role in the novel. Ghosh has initiated his view point about “the people-moving industry” through Tipu’s lenses. (60) In the beginning of the very novel, Tipu has explained the protagonist Deen (Pops) about the availabilities of the illegal passports and the easier version to vanish from his/her homeland. Tipu said that:

Who needs to spend all that time in government offices? There are easier ways of getting a passport

if you've got the money you can choose whichever kind you want- Bangladeshi, Indian, Malaysian, Sri Lankan, you name it, they've all got a price. But if it's just a matter of going for a couple of days, you don't need any of that-all you have to do is cross the river and you're in Bangladesh. (Ghosh 59)

Ghosh has critically examined the refugee life through Tipu's narratives. Tipu leads us to the other dark part of the world where money can buy anything. It was his belief to follow the illegal way and hire dalals to let him travel the other parts of the world. In the end, we found that Tipu arrived in Venice via the "blue boat" which was packed with refugees from every part of the world. The "blue boat" was not being accepted and there were a large number of people who were against it including the government. The situation depicted the global crisis of refugees who were deprived of their basic human rights. In this latest novel, Ghosh effectively narrates about the emergence of apocalyptic situation and highlights the crisis of humanity in these postmodern times. Arunava Sinha also reviewed that,

Climate change, present and past, is the glue in this novel, sticking together different geographies – and histories – around the world, most notably the Sundarbans and Venice. Both locations are threatened by the rising seas resulting from global heating, leading to premonitions of catastrophes that were edited out by modernist literature whose canvas was the relatively undramatic lives – except when wars raged – people led in the twentieth century (Sinha 2019).

### **Quichotte**

Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte* delineates a gamut of topical concerns relevant to contemporary times. The eponymous protagonist Quichotte is a postmodern recreation of Cervantes's Don Quixote who sets out on a quest across America to win the heart of Miss Salma R, a TV celebrity. The story is embedded within a parallel metafictional framework where the character referred to as the 'Brother' is writing the story of Quichotte. Both Quichotte and Brother are of Indian origin, settled in America and as the novel progresses it becomes evident that structurally the two stories are interlinked. Brian Finney in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* praises the book as "a typical Rushdie *mélange*...spilling over with invention and defying narrative convention with glee...[a] marvelous concoction by a masterly writer"(Finney 2019).

In an interview (The Guardian), Salman Rushdie spoke about his family life and how "Stories in families are colossally important...There's a lot of conflict and darkness inside everybody's family. We all pretend to outsiders that it's not so but behind locked doors there are usually high emotions running" (Sethi 2012). A central trope in *Quichotte* is the relationship between siblings – Quichotte with his half-sister who is given the epithet the 'Human Trampoline' and the Brother with his sister called 'Sister'. Both of them had hurt their sisters gravely and had not spoken with them for decades. Brother realizes that:

An empty cloud filled the space where family should have been...If he was honest with himself he knew it was up to him to make the first move, because she had a deeper grievance than he did. In a quarrel that had lasted for decades neither party could claim to be innocent. But the simple truth was that, in plain language, he had done her wrong. (Rushdie 25)

Brother strives to rehabilitate the ruined relationship with his estranged sister by apologizing and making amends, and this is mirrored by his invented character Quichotte. Hadas Doron and Adi Sharav-Nov assert that "Siblings are the longest-lasting relationship that people experience in their lives...In childhood and adolescence, this relationship usually involves intimate and daily interaction, but in adulthood, it becomes more distant" (1). Brother laments his actions that led to the erosion of this delectable bond between siblings and muses over the loss of innocence: "children don't have, in the shadows of their souls, a deep wound where once there had been a younger sister's kiss, an older brother's safe embrace" (Rushdie 25). But an idealistic portrayal of childhood as suggested by Brother belies the preferential treatment he received from their parents as for Sister "Childhood was just a story she could tell at dinner parties: a story about the hypocrisies and double standards of the supposedly free-thinking Indian intelligentsia" (Rushdie 37). Sister wanted to study abroad but their parents did not support her and she always had "the feeling of coming second to her brother" (Rushdie 37). Moreover, Brother instead of supporting her, always took their parents' side and even physically hurt her for getting romantically involved with an older artist. Though this can be rationalized as the protective measures of an older sibling, this incident left an indelible mark on Sister's psyche and fractured their relationship. After the demise of their parents, Brother accused Sister of not giving him an

equal share of their parents' estate and this heinous accusation was the final nail in the coffin of their already strained relation. Doron and Sharavi-Nov gather from two previous studies "that differential parental affection has a negative effect on the personal level and future romantic relationships of the siblings...parental favoritism was found to be a predictor of deteriorated inter sibling relations" (Rushdie 3). Quichotte similarly ruins the relationship between his sister the Human Trampoline and Evel Cent. However, both of them are consequently forgiven by their sisters, and the affectionate, profound bonds prevail over their animosity even after decades.

### **Gender Essentialism**

Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh have both created dominant female characters in their fiction and explored deviant sexualities while resisting gender essentialism. In *Step Across This Line*, Rushdie asserts that "In my writing, I have repeatedly sought to create female characters as rich and as powerful as those I have known. The men in my books are rarely as flamboyant as the women" (Rushdie 4). Salma R in *Quichotte* is not an exception to Rushdie's cast of 'flamboyant' and 'powerful' women. She is at the top of her profession as an actress and succeeds in subverting the masculine hegemony within the film industry:

She came from fame and money and made even more money and achieved even greater fame on her own, becoming the first Indian actress to make it big (very big) in America, to cross what might be called the - wood bridge from Bolly - to Holly-, and then transcended even Hollywood to become a brand, a television talk-show superstar and titanic cultural influencer, in America and India too. (Rushdie 26)

The other female characters in the novel are also self-assertive and highly successful. Sister studied in a law school in UK on her own without any support from her parents and became "a successful lawyer with a strong interest in civil and human rights issues, a stalwart fighter on behalf of minorities and the urban poor, who has devoted a good proportion of her time to pro bono work" (Rushdie 37). She was even nominated for a Peerage in the House of Lords. Quichotte's sister the Trampoline amassed a large wealth in Wall Street while she was in her twenties and started running "her own organization...generating global funding to offer small loans to women in South Asia trying to start up their own enterprises, beauty parlors, food catering,

child daycare centers; also fighting sex trafficking, campaigning against sexual violence toward women in India" (Rushdie 119). But both of them are unjustly persecuted when they air their radical views on feminism and social rights. Quichotte and Brother are redeemed and even salvaged by the female characters as Emilia Evancu observes that "in Rushdie's novels women are the central engines which start and keep the world moving, and through whose role the identity of a male character is saved" (Rushdie 83). Carrie Paechter notes that "femininity is conceived in strongly essentialist and stereotypical terms" and 'new femininities' "which valorise assertiveness, individuality and achievement, are not regarded as masculine because they maintain powerful markers of conventional femininity" (122-23). Sister and his husband call each other 'Jack' thus signifying a resistance to essentialist gender differences.

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* establishes powerful women characters who opt to empower themselves as well as the other characters with their efficiency in order to uplift the societal imbalance created for the assertion of particular gender roles. Malathi and Prema note that, "Amitav Ghosh's fiction portrays the two images of women: women as a life-giver, sustainer and continuer of the race as against women in search of an identity. In the tradition of Raja Rao and others he creates woman with an imaginative grace. Ghosh's major women characters get rid of their dependency needs, break the pattern of sexuality and sensuality and take their place as whole human beings freely and equally along with men" (6). In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh has created the legendary 'Tha'mma'- the matriarch and pioneer of the family who was independent and strong headed even at her old age. Tha'mma was a lady with traditional values who developed her individual identity in her own way. In his latest novel, we are introduced to authoritative and supreme women characters who have dedicated themselves for the uplift of the society.

Nilima Bose...could not be scoffed at: wooed by politicians, revered by do-gooders, embraced by donors and celebrated by the press, she was a figure whose credibility was beyond question...born into a wealthy Calcutta legal dynasty,...had defied her family by marrying an impoverished school teacher...after the marriage, Nilima had moved with her husband to Lusibari, a small town on the edge of the Sunderbans. A few years later she had founded a women's group that had since grown into Badabon

Trust, one of India's most reputed charitable organizations. The trust now ran an extended network of free hospitals, schools, clinics and workshops. (Ghosh 9)

As continued from *The Hungry Tide*, Nilima Bose was also the celebrated founder of the Badabon Trust who has formed a women's group and her motive was to employ the widows of the Sunderbans so that they can survive on their own. She is better known as "Mashi Ma" in the Lusibari region. Piyali Roy, "A Bengali American, teaches somewhere in Oregon. She comes here for the winter, like you, and usually stays with my aunt" (Ghosh 9). She is a marine biologist introduced by Nilima Bose in the trust so that she could work more efficiently on the ground level. In his later novel, we see Piyali at a larger scale who fostered the son of Fokir as her own child and did every possible contribution in order to educate him. She is an environmentalist with a cause who travels back and through to various parts of the world. M.K. Raghavendra stated that in a review article with the first post, "Nilima Bose who runs the trust in the Sunderbans... has a younger friend Piyali Roy, a marine biologist... a character from *The Hungry Tide* in which she is investigating the Gangetic dolphin and she is still on the subject of dolphins here" (Raghavendra 2019). Moyna also played an important role in the novel. She is educated and dedicated her widowed life working for the trust. She is also a part of the women's group and a mother to Tipu. There are few characters that were created in the latest novel, "Cinta was a figure of note on many counts. Both glamorous and brilliant she was already a well-regarded historian and had published an authoritative study of the Inquisition in Venice" (Ghosh 26). Cinta is another celebrated female character who is an academician and a very close friend to the protagonist Dinanath. And then there is Durga, who was a beloved to the protagonist "... she was named after Durga, the warrior goddess... burst into my life-she was a legend already, known for her reckless courage. She would take incredible risks, carrying messages to armed insurgents in the countryside...one day Durga went out of town without telling me anything about where she was going...A few days later I found out that she'd been shot by the police in an "encounter" (Ghosh 44).

Gender essentialism plays a pivotal role in the formation of identities and Florian Coulmas observes that "In the West admonitions to avoid essentialism are of relatively recent origin, and with regard to identity not always heeded...identity has moved

from absolute sameness to perceived similarity, common interest, shared gods, shared space, shared history, and shared lifestyle" (130). An essentialist marker of gender is the material constancy of the body. In this context, both Sister and the Trampoline suffer from terminal diseases that took a debilitating toll on their bodies, and subsequently they transcend the barriers of gender essentialism: "You no longer think of yourself as having gender or sexuality. You think of yourself as an undead thing that is unaccountably continuing to live. In this state of aftermath one craves simple things: sympathy and love" (Rushdie 151).

## CONCLUSION

Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh persistently write about contemporary issues and they can be regarded as literary cosmopolitans. In both the novels, we come across the crisis of climatic change and a sense of apocalypse is created in order to make us aware about the serious environmental crisis. Both the writers have portrayed the emerging new world-where women are ambitiously unconventional and are very likely to empower other women in order to subvert the patriarchal structures. They resist essentialist categories and assert their own distinct voices. The plights of the environmental migrants and their abominable condition as displaced refugees have been highlighted in both the novels. Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh have delineated the impending crisis of climate change and the magnitude of devastation across the world. Their vigorous critique can be viewed as an urgent plea to immediately address these issues, but along with the criticism of unethical anthropomorphic activities, there is an underlying unmistakable note of optimism that perhaps humanity will take heed and protect Mother Nature.

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