

Reclaiming the Sacred: The Mythic Imagination in Amitav Ghoshâ s Gun Island

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Abstract:

Amitav Ghosh's *The Gun Island* intricately weaves myth with contemporary issues of climate change, migration, and globalization. Ghosh employs myth not as mere ornamentation but as a narrative framework that connects the ancient with the modern, emphasizing the cyclical relationship between human actions and environmental consequences. Through myth, Ghosh presents the Anthropocene as a continuation of age-old struggles between humans and nature, suggesting that environmental disasters are moral and spiritual reckonings rather than random occurrences. The mythical elements also serve to dismantle the binaries between the real and the supernatural, the human and the nonhuman, highlighting how divine and ecological forces shape human destiny. The reimagined legend becomes a metaphor for displacement and migration, reflecting the contemporary global crisis of refugees driven by climate change and economic instability. By linking mythic journeys with modern voyages across continents, Ghosh demonstrates how stories can preserve collective memory and offer ethical insights for the future. Thus, myth becomes both a storytelling device and a medium of ecological and moral awakening.

Key words: Myth, Ecology, History, Reality, Journey

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Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* is a novel that bridges myth, history, and environmental reality, offering a layered narrative capable of addressing contemporary crises in both local and global contexts. His novels frequently traverse geographical boundaries, connecting India's historical past to contemporary global challenges. In works such as *The Shadow Lines* (1988) and the *Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2015), Ghosh examines the movement of peoples across borders, the impact of colonial histories, and the interconnections of culture, memory, and geography. *Gun Island* continues this trajectory, blending myth, environmental awareness, and global migration into a narrative that addresses twenty-first-century concerns.

The novel's engagement with myths situates it within a broader tradition in

Indian English literature, where folklore and legend are often used to explore social, political, and ethical questions. Ghosh extends this tradition by connecting myth to environmental and social crises, showing how folklore can provide insight into contemporary ecological and human challenges.

This chapter explores the legend of the Gun Merchant and other folkloric elements in the novel. It examines how myth functions as both a narrative and cultural mechanism, shaping the novel's interpretation of history, migration, and ecological consciousness. The chapter engages with myth-related literary theories, such as those of Campbell and Eliade, to analyze the symbolic and archetypal dimensions of Ghosh's storytelling.

Myth is one of the oldest and most enduring forms of storytelling, deeply woven into the cultural, religious, and historical fabric of human society. It is not simply a tale of gods, curses, and heroes; rather, myth encodes a community's worldview, fears, and hopes. In literature, myth often serves as a symbolic lens through which contemporary realities can be interpreted. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* is a striking example of the reactivation of myth in modern fiction. By reimagining the myth of the Gun Merchant, who is cursed by Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, Ghosh brings an old story into conversation with today's issues of displacement, migration, and climate change.

The novel demonstrates that myth is not a relic of the past; instead, it continues to shape human imagination and responses to crises. Myths are living narratives retold, reinterpreted, and adapted to new contexts. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh presents myth as a tool for understanding ecological collapse and forced migration, showing how folklore and oral traditions contain deep wisdom about humanity's relationship with the natural world.

Joseph Campbell's in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) explains "it does not matter how long one has lived, for, you see everything begins with inspiration, and inspiration is ageless—as is the journey (26)". His concept of the 'monomyth' or 'hero's journey' illustrates

how myths from diverse cultures share a common pattern departure, initiation, and return symbolizing transformation and self-realization. Campbell explains that the hero's journey represents an inner quest for meaning and balance, where the hero confronts trials that lead to enlightenment or renewal.

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant when analyzing how modern Indian writers, including Amitav Ghosh in *Gun Island*, reinterpret myth to engage with contemporary issues such as migration, identity, and environmental crisis. By integrating traditional mythic structures with present-day realities, these writers transform the mythic journey into a metaphor for human resilience and cultural continuity. Campbell's idea thus provides a critical lens to understand how myth continues to shape literary imagination and narrative form.

Deen, the protagonist, encounters this story during his research trip to a shrine in the Sundarbans. The shrine itself, half-sunken and decaying, symbolizes the fading yet persistent presence of myth in the modern world. This myth acts as an allegory for ecological awareness, reminding readers of humanity's vulnerability in the face of nature's power. When the villagers recount the story to Deen, the words carry an air of inevitability: "The Merchant was never allowed to rest; wherever he went, the goddess's power followed him, driving him further away from home (13)."

This passage connects myth with displacement. The merchant's fate mirrors the condition of countless modern refugees who, due to war, poverty, or ecological disaster, are forced to leave home without the possibility of return. In this way, myth foreshadows the realities of globalization and climate change that Ghosh wants his readers to confront. This passage also connects nature and human relationship.

While the Gun Merchant's tale is rooted in Bengali folklore, its themes resonate universally. Myths of divine punishment, wandering, and exile can be found across cultures. For example, in Greek mythology, Odysseus is condemned to wander the seas for years before returning home, while in Abrahamic traditions, Cain is cursed to be restless

wanderer. By aligning the Gun Merchant with these archetypal figures, Ghosh universalizes the Bengali myth, suggesting that displacement is a recurring human experience that transcends geography and time.

Moreover, Ghosh links this myth to the broader experience of ecological crisis. Just as the merchant was exiled by the wrath of a goddess, modern populations face exile due to the wrath of nature rising seas, storms, droughts, and fires. The myth becomes a metaphor for humanity's disobedience to the natural world. Another idea is that myth functions as a counter – narrative to Western rationality.

In *Myth and Reality*, Mircea Eliade (1963) says that “myths maintain their significance by expressing and shaping cultural realities, guiding human understanding through the ages” (39). He argues that myths are not mere stories from the past but living realities that reveal the sacred dimensions of existence. According to Eliade, myth serves as a model for human behavior, connecting individuals to cosmic order and offering meaning in a fragmented world. Eliade's insights thus illuminate how myth operates as both a cultural foundation and a dynamic force in literary creation.

The Shrine in the Sundarbans Deen's discovery of the half-buried shrine is the first major mythic incident. Locals believe it to be the sacred site connected with the Gun Merchant. The decaying structure, consumed by rising waters, symbolizes the fragility of cultural memory in the face of ecological destruction. Dreams and Serpent Encounters throughout his journey, Deen experiences visions and dreams filled with snakes, storms, and omens. Ghosh narrates, “it was as though I were in a forest and the whispering voices of a certain stream, or a kind of tree, were reaching out towards me, not to draw me into the spirit of the place, but rather into its living flesh” (222). These episodes blur the line between rational history and mythic reality. The serpent in his dreams recalls Manasa Devi's power, suggesting that the goddess's influence persists even in the modern world.

Venice and the Merchant's Global Journey Deen follows the traces of the Gun Merchant; he discovers connections stretching from Bengal to Venice and Los Angeles. The myth, once

114 thought to be local folklore, reveals itself as a global story of migration and trade. Venice, with its
115 own history of maritime trade and plagues,
116 becomes an unexpected but fitting setting for the continuation of the Gun Merchant's wanderings.

117 Unlike traditional realist novels, *Gun Island* adopts a palimpsestic approach
118 where myth overlays empirical reality. Thenatural disaster droughts, floods, cyclones mirror the
119 myth's ecological warnings, dramatizing the consequences of human
120 disregard for the environment. By integrating myth into the narrative fabric, Ghosh revitalizes
121 storytelling as a mode of ecological consciousness.

122 Language plays a pivotal role in *Gun Island*, especially in how myth is communicated
123 and transformed. The novel foregrounds nonverbal and visual
124 storytelling, such as the dharm's hieroglyphic symbols, emphasizing that myths
125 transcend all language and enter the realm of imagery and imagination. This challenges the
126 primacy of logos (reason) and centers mythic modes of knowing.

127 What makes *Gun Island* remarkable is Ghosh's insistence that myths are not irrelevant
128 in the twenty-first century. For Deen, a rational historian, the myth initially appears as
129 superstition. Yet, as the narrative unfolds, he realizes that the myth
130 anticipates modern realities. The curse of exile resembles the plight of today's climate refugees; the
131 goddess's wrath echoes the fury of ecological disasters.

132 In *Gun Island*, myth becomes a bridge between folklore and modern issues like
133 migration and climate change. By reviving an old story of a snake goddess and a merchant,
134 Ghosh shows that myths are not just
135 old tales but living forces that shape how people experience the world today. Through this, he proves
136 that myths continue to guide human imagination and survival in times of crisis.

137 Ghosh therefore bridges myth and modernity, showing that traditional stories contain
138 truths that science and history often overlook. The novel challenges readers to reconsider myth not as
139 fantasy but as coded knowledge about humanity's fragile relationship with nature. Through
140 the Gun Merchant's tale, Ghosh critiques the arrogance of

141 ignoring ecological limits. The merchant's refusal to honor Manasa Devi mirrors humanity's
142 disregard for the environment. His punishment eternal wandering parallels the displacement
143 faced by millions today due to climate change.

144 Furthermore, the novel shows how myth functions as a transnational narrative. The
145 merchant's journey across continents parallels modern patterns of migration,
146 linking rural Bengal to global cities like Venice and Los Angeles. By doing so, Ghosh
147 suggests that myth is not bound to one culture but is instead a shared human language that connects
148 past, present, and future.

149 India is a land where myths are deeply rooted in everyday life. Ancient Indian texts like the
150 Mahabharata and Ramayana are not just epics but collections of myths that teach moral
151 lessons, explain human duties, and portray the relationship between humans and gods. In
152 villages and rural spaces, myths are connected to local deities, forests, rivers, and animals. For
153 example, Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, is
154 worshipped in Bengal as a protector against snake bites and illnesses. This shows how myth and
155 ecology are connected: people respected nature through these stories.

156 Another important dimension of myth in *Gun Island* is its reliance on oral tradition.
157 The story of the Gun Merchant does not exist in a single written text; it is preserved in the
158 memories of villagers, passed down through generations of storytelling. This reflects how
159 myths survive not through fixed documentation but through retelling and adaptation. When
160 Deen listens to the Sundarbans villagers narrating the tale, he realizes that myth is not only a
161 part of the past but also a living cultural practice.

162 Oral traditions keep myth relevant because they allow it to evolve with each generation,
163 incorporating new meanings into ancient frameworks. This is why the Gun Merchant's story,
164 though centuries old, continues to resonate with the modern experiences of migration,
165 ecological destruction, and displacement. The myth of Manasa Devi's curse can also be read
166 as an ecological parable.

167 The merchant's refusal to honor the goddess represents human arrogance in

ignoring nature's demands for respect and balance. His punishment being forced into endless exile echoes the ecological consequences faced by humanity today. Rising seas, cyclones, and wildfires displace entire populations, forcing them to wander much like the cursed merchant. In this way, Ghosh repositions myth as a form of environmental wisdom, warning against the dangers of human greed and the neglect of ecological systems. The serpent, an animal often associated with rebirth and destruction, becomes a fitting symbol of this ecological balance.

The Gun Merchant's wandering also places him within a global lineage of mythical wanderers. Just as Odysseus in Homeric epic journeys across the Mediterranean, or Ahasuerus, the legendary 'Wandering Jew,' roams the earth, the Bengali merchant too is condemned to ceaseless migration. These parallels suggest that the condition of wandering is a universal motif in myth, reflecting humanity's deep anxiety about exile and rootlessness.

By linking the Gun Merchant's tale with such archetypes, Ghosh positions Bengali myth within a world literary context. This not only broadens the myth's significance but also demonstrates how localized folklore carries universal truths about human existence. Finally, the myth resonates strongly with present-day migrant crises. The merchant's fate mirrors that of refugees who flee their homes because of war, poverty, or ecological collapse.

Just as the merchant cannot return to Bengal, modern migrants often find themselves trapped in liminal spaces: detention centers, refugee camps, or foreign cities where they struggle for recognition. Ghosh uses the myth as a metaphor for these realities, suggesting that ancient stories anticipated the painful truths of modern globalization. Through this parallel, the novel bridges folklore with the lived experiences of displaced communities, making the myth more urgent and contemporary.

One of the most important roles of myth in *Gun Island* is its function as a form of collective memory. Scholars like Mircea Eliade and Claude Lévi-Strauss argue that myths preserve a community's values, anxieties, and survival knowledge. In the novel, the story of

the Gun Merchant acts as the memory of Bengal's historical vulnerabilities its dependence on rivers, its struggles against floods, and its encounters with displacement. Even when written records fade, myths carry these memories across time, allowing communities to learn from the past. For Deen, rediscovering the Gun Merchant's tale becomes a way of reconnecting with cultural memory that continues to speak to the ecological and migratory crises of the present.

The myth also encodes power struggles. The Gun Merchant resists the authority of the goddess, refusing to acknowledge her supremacy. His punishment can be read as an allegory of human resistance to larger forces whether divine, natural, or political. In this sense, myth is not only a religious or cultural story but also a political commentary. Within the Sundarbans, the goddess represents the uncontrollable power of nature; the merchant, human arrogance and defiance.

Their clash symbolizes the larger tension between human ambition and ecological limits, a theme Ghosh develops throughout *Gun Island*. The myth of the Gun Merchant, cursed by Manasa Devi, illustrates the interconnectedness of ecology, migration, and human survival. By weaving myth with history, personal journeys, and ecological crises, Ghosh shows that myths remain relevant as tools of cultural memory and ecological wisdom.

The chapter demonstrates that myth, while ancient, has profound modern implications. It reveals that humanity's failure to respect natural forces leads to displacement, exile, and suffering. Ultimately, Ghosh reclaims myth as both a narrative strategy and a moral compass, urging readers to learn from the past in order to confront the ecological challenges of the present.

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