

# Ecofeminist Perspectives in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

Mr. K. Senthil Kumar<sup>1</sup>, Dr. D. Franklin Vaseekaran<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, Bishop Appasamy College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor, Department of English, Bishop Appasamy College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

## Abstract

Ecofeminism is a critical theory which examines the interrelatedness between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women emerging in the 1970s. Ecofeminism combines ideas from Feminism, Environmentalism and Social Justice. This research article explores Amitav Ghosh's "*Gun Island*" from an ecofeminist perspective. It provides a critical framework to examine how environmental degradation affects climate change. Ghosh portrays ecological crises such as rising sea levels, cyclones and forced migration which directly affects indigenous people, women and the downtrodden people. "*Gun Island*" advocates for ecological balance, care and coexistence through characters like piya and Tipu. Further, it challenges anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies in a vehemently. The novel also explores the dire consequences of modern scientific rationalism and capitalist exploitation upon environmental degradation and social inequality.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Environmental, degradation, climate change, cyclones, forced migration, anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies, scientific rationalism and social inequality.

## 1. Introduction

Ecofeminism is an interdisciplinary framework that examines the interrelatedness between environmental degradation and gender oppression. Basically, ecofeminism critiques the structures of patriarchy and capitalism. As a response to both feminist and environmental movements, ecofeminism defies anthropocentric and androcentric world views that position Men as superior over both Women and Nature. Scholars like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Karen J. Warren have stressed how the subjugation of marginalized groups, particularly women in developing countries mirrors the exploitation of natural resources.

Ecofeminism extends beyond traditional feminism by incorporating environmental ethics into its critique of social hierarchies. It argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of natural resources stem from the same patriarchal mindset which prioritizes power and control over harmony and sustainability. Ecofeminism encompasses issues like climate change, animal rights, deforestation and

indigenous knowledge systems. Ecofeminism serves as an analytical lens to explore the marginalized women and their position in patriarchal society. It also examines gender dynamics. Nature is feminized in many narratives and often portrayed as nurturing, passive, or in need of control-mirroring. Usually, ecofeminist literature challenges this notion by depicting nature as an active force and women as an integral part of ecological preservation.

Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Ursula K. Le Guin and Margaret Atwood highlight the resilience of women and the interrelatedness of environmental and social struggles. Indian Literature, especially postcolonial and contemporary fiction provides a rich variety of ecofeminist themes. As India has rich colonial history, Indian Environmental degradation is directly associated with issues of economic exploitation and gender inequality. Women, particularly those in rural and indigenous communities, are frequently the first to experience the adverse effects of climate change, water scarcity and deforestation. Ecofeminist narratives in Indian Literature, therefore, not only critique environmental destruction but also highlight the resistance and agency of women in reclaiming ecological harmony.

The ecofeminist perspective is particularly significant in the Indian context, where mythology, folklore and oral traditions deeply connected with environmental consciousness. Amitav Ghosh's "Gun Island" examines the fragile relationship between human beings and nature through the lens of gender and displacement. The Bonbibi Myth which is central to Amitav Ghosh's novel "The Hungry Tide" embodies ecofeminist principles by presenting a female deity as a protector of both the environment and marginalized communities.

Ecofeminism sheds light on how literature can function as a tool for resistance, encouraging readers to rethink human-nature relationship in the face of climate change and socio-political inequalities. Ecofeminist literature remains a crucial means of fostering awareness and inspiring sustainable, inclusive futures even in an era of growing ecological crises.

As a critical framework, ecofeminism emerged in response to the interrelatedness between gender oppression and environmental degradation. It critiques the patriarchal structures that exploit both women and nature, stressing the need for a more holistic and sustainable approach to ecological and social justice.

In literature, ecofeminism provides a lens to analyze how women's experiences are intertwined with the environment, especially in postcolonial contexts where imperialism, capitalism and gender-based oppression intersect.

The term "ecofeminism" was first coined by French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death), where she argued that patriarchal societies were responsible for environmental destruction. Ecofeminism gained prominence throughout the 1970s and 1980s, within both feminist and environmental movements, particularly in response to the growing threats of industrial pollution, nuclear proliferation and deforestation. An early example of ecofeminist activism in India is the Chipko Movement in which women played a pivotal role in safeguarding forests from commercial logging. In 1990s, ecofeminism had evolved into multiple strands including Spiritual ecofeminism, which emphasized the sacred connection between women and nature and Materialist ecofeminism, which focuses on socio-political structures that exploit both women and nature.

Amitav Ghosh's novel "Gun Island (2019)" explores the interconnectedness of climate change, migration and gender vulnerability through an ecofeminist lens. The novel blends contemporary environmental concerns with myth and folklore and illustrates how ecological crises disproportionately affect marginalized communities especially women. "Gun Island" underscores the role of gender in shaping responses to environmental and migratory challenges. In ecofeministic texts, women are portrayed as ecological protectors and agents of change. "Gun Island" focuses on how rising sea levels and extreme weather conditions displace entire communities particularly in the Sundarbans delta region. The novel exposes how ecological disasters exacerbate existing social inequalities by leaving women more vulnerable to displacement, exploitation and extreme poverty. Women in rural and coastal regions are often more dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. They are the first victims to bear the brunt of climatic changes.

Cinta, an academic and one of the novel's most insightful voices, draws attention to the historical patterns of migration caused by environmental disruptions, stressing that climate change is not just a contemporary crisis but a continuation of long-standing cycles of human displacement. Ghosh weaves a narrative that aligns with ecofeminist thought through her character. The character Cinta illustrates how patriarchal and capitalist structures marginalize both nature and women.

The protagonist, Deen, initially considers environmental issues as distant concerns but later slowly realizes their immediate impacts. For instance, his encounters with characters like Tipu and Raji who represent climate migrations, further reinforce the novel's argument that migration, ecological destruction and social injustice are intricately linked. In a patriarchal society, women migrants are more vulnerable to trafficking and economic exploitation. Ghosh employs Myth and Folklore as tools for environmental consciousness. The legend of the Merchant and Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, recurs throughout the novel to serve as an allegory for humanity's troubled relationship with nature. In this story, the merchant's resistance to the goddess reflects modern society's resistance to acknowledging and addressing climate change.

In "Gun Island", piya, a marine biologist, embodies the ecofeminist ethos through her deep connection with nature. She takes rigorous efforts to protect aquatic ecosystems. Her research on river dolphins and her commitment to biological conservation emphasizes the importance of preserving biodiversity amidst the face of human exploitation. While advocating for ecological sustainability, piya challenges traditional gender roles with ease.

Folk narratives like the Bonbibi myth also play a pivotal role in nurturing local environmental ethics. Bonbibi, revered as the protector of the Sundarbans, is the representing figure between human beings and nature. The women who uphold these traditions serve as custodians of ecological wisdom. Ghosh underscores the ecofeminist idea that women's knowledge and spiritual traditions can offer alternative, more sustainable ways of engaging with nature through these myths.

Women in "Gun Island" are portrayed as key figures in confronting ecological and social crises. Cinta, Piya and even the unnamed women of the Sundarbans actively challenge exploitative systems and work toward ecological preservation. Their roles emphasize how women act as leaders in environmental activism by actively participating in scientific research, story telling or grassroots efforts. Cinta's intellectual engagement with climate history broadens the novel's perspective on ecological crises by

linking past and present environmental challenges. On the other hand, Piya's scientific work reinforces the need for conservation-based approaches, proving that women's contributions to ecological research and activism are indispensable. Meanwhile, the rural women of the Sundarbans, through their daily interactions with nature, embody a lived ecofeminism which is rooted in traditional knowledge and communal resilience.

In "Gun Island", Ghosh highlights the importance of preserving both women and nature which can only be achieved when both gender and environmental justice are recognized as inseparable struggles. Being an ecofeminist narrative, "Gun Island" depicts women's experiences, knowledge and resistance in addressing ecological and humanitarian crises.

Goddess Manasa Devi is a symbol of the unity of all life in nature. Her power manifests in water and stone, in tomb and cave, in animals and birds, snakes and fish, hills, trees, and flowers. Ghosh believes in the holistic and mythopoetic perception of the sacredness and mystery of all there is on earth. According to the legend, the Goddess slowly retreated into the depths of forests or onto mountain tops. Today her presence is restrained to beliefs and fairy tales. The Goddess as revealed in "Gun Island" re-emerges from the forests and mountains human roots. The goddess Manasa Devi epitomizes the protective, possessive and passionate spirit of nature. When annihilation is systemic and complete, her capacity to regenerate, reproduce and replenish speaks volumes about her all-pervading and persistent nature. "Gun Island" moves from Brooklyn and Kolkata to Venice. Ghosh's narrative starts at a temple in the Sundarbans in West Bengal. The temple, a tribute to Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes was said to be constructed by the Gun Merchant. The legend that envelops the temple is a story which the protagonist Deen comes face to face with the king cobra, who guards the temple. Tipu who accompanies Deen attempts to subdue the king cobra and gets bitten. This sets off a series of peculiar and almost fantastical journeys that blur the borders between the natural and the supernatural, the known and the unknown, taking Deen across geographies and through time. The story revolves around Los Angeles, the Sundarbans, Venice and New York. Each of these has been the entry point for explorers who built vast empires on the riches they have extracted from defenceless nations. The slaves of the conquered land were carried across the oceans to unknown lands to serve ruthless masters.

The novel "Gun Island" tells the story of a man attempted to escape the wrath of a goddess. Interwoven into this are stories of illegal immigrants, of characters in search for imagined lands, and of sea mammals whose homes are being destroyed by industrial pollution and capitalist society. The Myth of Goddess Manasa Devi is a part of Bengali Folklore. Her epic rivalry with Chand Sadagar is the weft and warp of the plot. Manasa Devi is the snake Goddess and epitomizes feminism and therefore earth whereas the Sadagar, the merchant is commercially inclined and bent on monetary gain. He epitomizes patriarchy and male power. The power of his gender, of his capital, topped by patronage from Lord Shiva makes Chand Sadagar strong, powerful and overbearing. On the other hand, Manasa is a 'woman' who has command over the netherworld of snakes and serpents. In today's context, Manasa is a genuine feminist icon. She is a semi-divine female confronting the established patriarchy, be it the divine Lord Shiva or the temporal capitalist authority of Chand Sadagar. Manasa is a fiercely independent 'lone warrior' who fights for recognition from the establishment of power systems, personified by Chand Sadagar. By weaving the story of Manasa Devi, Ghosh spells out the catastrophic process of displacement of human beings and

animals alike. Manasa Devi's pursuance of the merchant is nature's way of warning the human predators who are responsible for ecological destruction on Earth.

Ghosh employs the myth as a direct plea to the industrialists and capitalists to stop the carnage of the earth before it is too late. In Sunderbans, effluent of agriculture and indiscriminate dumping of chemicals from the refineries have led to massive fish kills and dolphins migrating away from their old hunting grounds. The composition of the waters changed. The sea levels rose, Piya observes that "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." (Gun Island, 92) Both Piya and Moyana realize that like humans, animals are also repressed, oppressed and stressed. As a result of this, they are constantly on the move in their quest for new hunting grounds. Ghosh clearly explains in "Gun Island" that life evolved from the sea. At the same time, destruction is also felt from the water. In Garjontola, in the Sundarbans, Rani, the individual dolphin and Pool had beached themselves. The birds were circling, leaving the region with a putrid odour that stank like hell. As Piya observes, the reason for this mass killing is man-made sounds from submarines and sonar equipment. Marine animals depend on echolocation for navigation, and any disruption to this sensory mechanism may cause them to become confused and lose their sense of direction.

Gosh reinforces the Myth of Manasa Devi via the Shrine's architecture which was built in the 17th century. He traces the path of the merchant in hot pursuit, via its panels, and symbols. The connection between the myth and belief systems was established by the physical appearance of king cobra. The king cobra follows Deen but at the same time it does not attack him as if in acknowledgement of his unthreatening intervention into its domain. Meanwhile, it attacks Tipu as it feels threatened. Tipu, actually, pays a price for his pride and insensitivity. Rafi grandfather says in the Gun Island, "If a cobra puts something in you, you can never be rid of it".(Gun Island, 78) In other words, once nature is harmed, there is no reversing it. In Tipu, Manasa Devi has now got a medium where she can make her presence felt and reminding man of the folly of his actions and their irreversible consequences.

The role of Manasa Devi as the eco feminine protector gains importance. Tipu gets sensitized to the impending devastation and gloom only after his encounter with the cobra. He falls into spells and can fathom the unseen unknown future. He begins getting the knowledge of the presence that pervades in nature. Tipu succeeds in knowing and informing Piya that, Rani, an individual dolphin, is endangered. Piya receives the alerts via the GPS fitted on Rani. The GPS system will provide general conditions and real-time information on Rani's whereabouts. But, Piya is shocked to find out that Tipu's prediction about Rani was intact in terms of time, place and event.

In Los Angeles, Deen is subtly warned by Tipu about the upcoming catastrophe by hinting that Deen might encounter a snake in Atlantis. It proves prophetic as Deen realizes that massive wildfires had been raging around Los Angeles for many days. From his flight, Deen, watches two eagles circling, targeting and capturing a snake. The recurrent snake motif brings the wrath of the snake goddess into play and making the ecological imbalance more pronounced. The presence of the yellow-bellied snake on the Venice beach is another indication of the recurrent and ominous presence of the Goddess. These snakes are not the natural inhabitants of Venice. Ghosh asserts that it is a stark revelation of climate change that snakes should appear in Venice and the resulting catastrophe is poignantly brought out when Gusa's pet dog Leola gets killed due to the bite of a snake in Venice beach. This incident intimates the impact of

displacement and migration. The snakes move northwards due to the warming up of the oceans. At this juncture, Manasa Devi, the true ecofeminist steps in. She apparently sends signals of global warming and its impact on animals and human beings as represented by the yellow-bellied snake. It was as if "a voice were crying out from the past to remind the world that the limits of human reason and ability become apparent not in the long, slow duration of everyday time but in the swift and terrible onslaught of fleeting instants of catastrophe". (Gun Island, 78)

The snake goddess, Manasa Devi, has command over worms, insects and spiders. The presence of spiders in Venice was deftly woven by Ghosh. First, Rafi points out to one Makorsha jumping from him to Deen and scuttling away. Next Deen is shocked to find the spider, a deadly variety on his laptop in his room in Venice. Piya recognizes it to be the brown *Loxosceles Reclusa* a poisonous variety, not a native of Venice. She explains that as Europe is getting hotter they are moving up far north. In "Gun Island", Nature is mystified in the presence of Manasa Devi. Ghosh's Concern on climatic derangement is never more acutely felt. The Goddess Manasa Devi manages to pursue and torment the gun merchant and reach out for him even when he appears to have hidden himself beyond her grasp. Her chasing the merchant to pay obeisance to her is Ghosh's request for a return to Nature. Ghosh wants to set the rocking balance of ecology right.

The Myth of Manasa Devi is an eco feministic challenge against the corporate patriarchal system. Deen realizes the tender nature of the pursuit when he sees it "from the perspective of... the goddess herself. And then the pursuit no longer seemed to be a story of an almost incomprehensible vindictiveness but something more fraught, and even tender, a search driven by fear and desperation". (Gun Island, 152) Piya functions as a mediator between humans and dolphins, facilitating communication and understanding between species that do not share a common language. Her role demonstrates the possibility of coexistence between humans and the natural world. In order to have proper communication, the Goddess must command the trust from both sides. Obviously, the merchant and his fellow human beings refused to accept her voice. Therefore, the urgency of her search for the merchant had taken place. If her authority is questioned "all those unseen boundaries would vanish" (Gun Island, 153) and the merchant and many others like him in their quest for profit would trample the earth's creatures and "would recognize no restraint in relation to other living beings". (Gun Island, 153) In order to strike a balance of harmony and peace, Manasa Devi attempts to save him and the other creatures of the planet. When Tipu tips Piya regarding the upcoming beaching of Dolphins in the Sundarbans, the power of the myth is doubly confirmed. All this is mysteriously connected with the movement of the Gun Merchant. Cinta argues that the catastrophe is nearing due to the impact of global warming, changing habitats, increasing amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and the ongoing impact of other greenhouse gases.

The modern gun merchants spurn and humiliate nature like they spurn and humiliate Manasa Devi. Hence, she is forced to reclaim her power either by coercion or revenge. In this regard, Cinta explains that we live in a world of impersonal systems and don't have to impose our presence on them. Evidently, the presence gradually fades and systems take over. Demonic possession seems to have overcome human beings. Regarding this, Ghosh says "everybody knows what must be done if the world is to continue being a liveable place...yet we are powerless. WE see shocking and monstrous things all around us and we avert our eyes: we surrender ourselves willingly to whatever it is that has us in its power" (Gun Island, 216/217)

Ghosh tries to recast Modern Venice through the eyes of the merchant. In the picture of 17th century Venice, the death toll increases because of the epidemic of plague in 1629 unfolds. The plague begins to recede only after the miraculous intervention of the Blessed Virgin. Cinta cleverly equates the Black Madonna with the A-Sa-Sa-ra-me, the Greek Minoan Goddess of Snakes similar to the Myth of Manasa Devi. Through the character of Cinta, Ghosh takes his readers to the present-day customs house point in Venice with the hope of spotting the monster that was believed to have its lair beneath the embankment of the customs house point. She recalls that the monster last sighted in 1930. The customs house point had become the busiest point in the city's network of canals since then and like many others of its kind, the monster has disappeared into oblivion. *Gun Island* highlights the impact of climate change through the spread of shipworms, which damage wooden embankments in the Sundarbans and have also begun to invade Venice as lagoon waters become warmer. They are eating up the very foundations of the city which is built on wood pilings.

The story of human displacement and the myth of the Gun Merchant are closely connected. Rafi and Tipu decide to risk their lives and migrate to Europe. Rafi expresses that Tipu could see a kind of darkness closing in around him. Hence, he wants to alienate himself from Lusibari, his home in the Sundarbans. Through Deen, Ghosh explains that it is the potency of the dreams and derives generated by the modern technology of laptops and cell phones that there breeds a lunatic and unsettling relentlessness for pursuing those dreams. It is this desire and appetite of the metropolis that migrates people between continents in order to chum out ever-growing floods of saleable merchandise. In this dispensation, slaves and coolies are not consumers; rather they are mere producers who could never aspire to the derives of their masters. The youth today yearns for smart phone computers and cars. In this regard, Ghosh points out that, "Since childhood, the most attractive images that they beheld were not of rivers and fields that surrounded them but of things like these flashing across the screens of their phones" (*Gun Island*, 279). This is perhaps the heaviest penalty that we pay for our blatant and flagrant abuse of the environment. The Blue Boat of the refugees in Italy is "a symbol of everything that is going wrong with the world-inequality, climate change, capitalism, corruption, arms trade and oil industry". (*Gun Island*, 199).

Ghosh fuses mythic elements along with multiple folklore traditions across geographies. The recurring motif of the gun merchant and the snake Goddess Manasa Devi ties past ecological upheavals to present-day climate crises.

Women in "Gun Island", especially Piya and Cinta embody modern iterations of mythical figures bridging the past and present in their pursuit of ecological justice.

## CONCLUSION

Ecofeminism serves as a critical framework which concentrates on oppression of both women and nature, particularly which is evident in the writings of Amitav Ghosh. In "Gun Island", Ghosh brings out the impact of environmental degradation, the climate crisis, deforestation, industrial expansion, human and animal displacement and resource exploitation. Further, he points out the harmful effects of patriarchal and capitalist systems by which women are being enslaved. Patriarchal and capitalist systems not only collapse gender equality but also destroys ecology and indigenous knowledge system. In "Gun Island", Ghosh cleverly fuses mythical elements to proclaim the significance of Culture, History and

Environmental Preservation. The Myth of Snake Goddess Manasa Devi and the Myth of Gun Merchant serves well to bring forth the nuances of past life and the present one. In "Gun Island", the female characters like Piya and Cinta acted as ecological protectors. Ghosh proves that these women's knowledge—whether through folklore, lived experience or scientific expertise provides essential insights for sustainable ecological practices. Novel like "Gun Island" contribute to the growing discourse on how literature can serve as a powerful tool for advocacy, inspiring real world environmental movements and gender equity initiatives. "Gun Island" exemplify how literature can reframe ecological debates through an ecofeminist lens, offering alternative ways of understanding and addressing environmental crises.

The contributions of Ghosh to ecofeminist discourse lie not only in his thematic explorations but also his narrative techniques. By blending realism with myth, scientific inquiry with folklore, and personal trauma with environmental destruction, he challenges the binary between nature and culture, advocating for a more holistic and inclusive approach to ecological justice.

Ultimately, "Gun Island" reinforces the idea of including the voices of affected women, indigenous communities to secure great future for entire humanity. According to Ghosh, environmental advocacy is inseparable from gender justice. His novel "Gun Island" proposes a future where nature and humanity coexist not in conflict but in mutual respect and balance which is an essential vision in fighting against the ongoing climate crisis. Further, it is the duty of all human beings to protect the environment.

## References

1. Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island: A Novel*. Penguin Books India, 2019.
2. Barry, Peter. *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*. Manchester University Press, 2018.
3. Plumwood, val. "Gender, eco-feminism and the environment". *Controversies in environmental Sociology* (2004): 43-60
4. Mies, Maria, and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. Zed Books, 1993.
5. Shiva, Vandana, *Staying alive: Women, ecology and development*. North Atlantic Books, 2016
6. Agarwal B. *The gender and environment debate: Lessons from India*. *Feminist Stud.* 1992; 18(1): 119-158.
7. Biehl J. *Rethinking ecofeminist politics*. South End press: 1991
8. Goard G. Murphy P. *Ecofeminist literary criticism: Theory, interpretation, pedagogy*. University of Illionis press; 1998.
9. Griffin S. *Woman and nature: The roaring inside her*. Harper & Row; 1978.
10. Merchant C. *The death of nature: Women, ecology, and the Scientific revolution*. Harper one: 1980.
11. Warren KJ. *Ecofeminist philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and why it matters*. Rowman & Littlefield; 2000.
12. Williams L. *Feminist environmental humanities; activist articulations of ecofeminism*. *Feminist Stud Relig.* 2018; 34(2): 77-95.
13. yadav S., *Ecofeminism and Indian literature: A critical analysis of women's narratives in environmental discourse*. *Int. J Environ Stud Lit.* 2023; 10(1): 45-67.