

ISSN 0976 - 8165



THE CRITERION
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH
— 11th Year of Open Access —

**Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal**

Vol. XI, Issue-2 (April 2020)

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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Postcolonial Eco-Discourse in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* and *The Great Derangement*

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Article History: Submitted-28/02/2020, Revised-25/04/2020, Accepted-28/04/2020, Published-10/05/2020.

Abstract:

This paper will begin with a survey of the extant literature on the intersection between postcolonialism and ecocriticism. I will then deal with the difficulties emerging from the application of Ursula K. Heise's conceptualization of eco-cosmopolitanism in the Indian or non-western subcontinent, in relation to Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*. I will also explore how the landscape of global eco-discourse has been transformed by the resurgence of the political Right in various parts of the world. Additionally, I will demonstrate how Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement* jointly critiques colonialism and climate change and traces both their roots to the European Enlightenment. Finally, I will show how the conversation about local, national and global has progressed to a kind of post-local scenario where territorial rootedness is impossible and displacement is the norm.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, globalization, postcolonialism, Climate change, environmentalism, cosmopolitanism, migration, local, national, global.

Ramchandra Guha and Martinez in *Varieties of Environmentalism* (1997), explored and critiqued the postmaterialist scholarship that addressed the material basis of environmentalism whereby an ecological concern and preservation is limited to the developed Global North or the upper-middle-class segment of the population in a country. A direct corollary of this understanding, symbolized by the Brundtland Report of 1987, is a presumed apathy of the subaltern individuals and developing countries towards environmental degradation. Guha and Martinez present an alternate variety of environmentalism, that of the poor, that challenges the social science scholarship from the North. They contend that the practitioners and articulators of this type of environmentalism are peasants and rural communities who, contrary to Western

opinion, do respond to ecological destruction that invariably jeopardizes their existence and way of life.

In "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique" (1989), Guha highlighted the historicity of deep ecology and the occlusion of the social inequity in the American preservation drive exported to the global south before and during the 1990s. He also argued that the attribution of Eastern traditions, spirituality, and lineage to deep ecology serves to universalize what is primarily an American Western environmental philosophy transplanted to the peripheries, and is furthermore not far from a kind of Oriental essentialism of the non-western. Guha also lauded German and Indian environmentalism for their integration with livelihood and work instead of the American focus on wilderness conservation, as well as their endeavor for greater social equity and social justice (6).

Talking about the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, Vandana Shiva said that the notion of "global" was used by the Global North to lay claim to the South while maintaining its own ecological autonomy. The global environment thus opens up new areas for Global North while hemming the South in its own territory. "Through its global reach, the North exists in the South. The South, however, exists only within itself because it has no global reach. Thus, the South can exist only locally, whereas only the North exists globally." (Shiva 199)

In 2002, Susie O'Brien briefly recounted the points of divergence between postcolonial and ecocritical approach and emphasis. Contrary to the palatial rootedness and stability of ecocriticism, postcolonialism conceives place as constructed and provisional which in turn gives way to a kind of "cosmopolitan restlessness." (O'Brien 2) She presents the schematization of the synthesis of the dual palatial focus of eco critique: local as well as global. This "easy slippage" to the global is circumscribed by the planetary consciousness of the ecocritical approach. On the other hand, in postcolonialism, the relationship between global and local is not that of a synecdoche or a microcosm-macrocosm dyad, but a constant negotiation and contestation that challenges the staid placidity of "concrete palatial or abstract global belonging in favor of what Homi Bhabha terms the "unhomely... the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world" (O'Brien 2). O'Brien conceded to the synthesis of postcolonialism and ecocriticism and widening the scope of global citizenship so it does not exclude anyone in the face of a common global ecological threat. However, unlike Nixon, O'Brien is wary of the

disproportionate reach and outcome of globalization. Globalization has indeed paved the way for an all-inclusive responsibility and interconnectedness but it has also set off a worrying trend of envisaging life, scholarship, and experiences in economic terms, she asserts. She alerts us to the trend in humanities scholarship to remain in currency by co-opting the drive of “synergy” and “convergence” found in economic and political discourse, comprehensiveness and easy resolution of complex issues of titanic proportion, prefiguring a more “worldly” form of academic practice.

Rob Nixon in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, referred to the American underpinning of ecocriticism in its early stages. Ecocriticism’s focus then was hemmed within the geographical, theoretical and literary domain of one nation, that is, USA (Nixon 234). The earlier debates negotiated with a neo-imperial bent of ecocriticism, dominated and colored by Thoreau’s lineage by recuperating national traditions and practices, while simultaneously curbing the nativist local drive. Nixon and his ilk of globalization academicians had firmly underscored the presence and significance of the nation-state and its attendant practices and institutions in the face of transnational environmental protests and corporations. While Nixon advocated the instrumentality of postcolonial studies for ecocriticism, he saw ecocriticism as constituting a predominantly western scholarship and theoretical paradigm (247) that could potentially reify the center-periphery model by its unchanged exportation to the periphery in the process of “diversification” of the field. To avoid this, Nixon proposed a revision and enrichment of the ecocritical paradigm by its contact with the former colonies so that the field is hospitable to the postcolonial ecological activist scholars and writers.

In 2008, the intersection of cosmopolitanism and ecocriticism was enunciated in Ursula K Heise’s *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet* wherein Heise shifted the focus of environmentalism from local affiliation and attachment to a global planetary consciousness, named as eco-cosmopolitanism. She defined Eco-cosmopolitanism as “an attempt to envision individuals and groups as part of planetary ‘imagined communities’ of both human and nonhuman kinds” (61). Nixon had earlier drawn attention to tensions between cosmopolitanism and bio-regionalism where the latter was a type of local affiliation corresponding with the natural characteristics of a geographical location that may or may not transcend national boundaries. However, Heise does not seem to renounce the local in favour of global environmental consciousness. She maps out an

approach to environmentalism that clubs a sense of place (local knowledge and practice local attachment) with a sense of planet and envisages an “ecologically based advocacy on behalf of the nonhuman world as well as on behalf of greater socio-environmental justice ... formulated in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole” (Heise 10).

Although place-based models of eco-discourse were popular in the last decade, climate change and the concomitant forced displacement has disrupted the rootedness of “ethics of proximity” and forced eco-theorists to re-investigate ideas of place, nationality and global. The waning enthusiasm for transnational connectedness has also gained momentum with the rise of right-wing nationalism parallelly across various parts of the world. The landscape of global post-colonial eco discourse has been drastically transformed by the xenophobic strengthening of borders, political populism, anti-immigration policies, and national nativism. The unobtrusive nation-state in global capitalism is repeatedly asserting its dominance in various parts of the world, quelling citizen protests in France in 2019, the British exit from the European Union, America's exit from the Paris Agreement, Indian State's suppression of dissent, so on and so forth. On the other side of the spectrum is the global climate threat or global ecological crisis that mocks the protrusion of nation-states and borders in the public and political sphere across the world (Ghosh, *Derangement* 83).

The anthropomorphic globalization, defined as global flows of people, culture, capital and information across national boundaries and continents coursing through various dimensions like technoscape, financescape ethnoscares, mediascapes, ideoscapes (Appadurai 589) runs parallel to the interconnectedness of the biosphere, which finds representation in the form of the Gaia hypothesis (James Lovelock), Blue Planet and Google Earth. These extensive global networks have resulted in the weakening of cultural, individual, communal and national ties to geographical territories, a condition termed deterritorialization. Deterritorialization, considered to be a defining symptom of globalization ordinarily entails rootlessness or homelessness in individuals but offsets that untethered-ness by the sense of belonging in the global village. Numerous theorists have drawn attention to the inadequacy of the term cosmopolitanism to encompass the heterogeneous experiences and subjectivities across various spectrums and to address this lack, multiple conceptualizations of cosmopolitanism from the margins have been

proposed. Homi Bhabha's vernacular cosmopolitan is one such idea that combines seemingly contradictory particularity of place to universality. Another notable example is Werbner Pnina's working-class cosmopolitanism. This suggests that a unitary cosmopolitan orientation does not exist. Taking cognizance of the differentiated cosmopolitanisms, Heise posits, "But whether this understanding is framed as thinking in terms of shared humanity or in terms of access to and valuation of cultural differences, cosmopolitanism in these discussions is circumscribed by human social experience. Eco-cosmopolitanism, by contrast, reaches toward what some environmental writers and philosophers have called the "more-than-human world"—the realm of nonhuman species, but also that of connectedness with both animate and inanimate networks of influence and exchange. (60-61)" It appears then that eco-cosmopolitanism, as postulated by Heise necessitates openness to trans-local and transnational biotic elements in addition to culture. This invariably requires widening the realm circumscribed by the ethics of proximity to include a planetary effect and consciousness that transcends regional and national jurisdiction and affiliation. However, what are the pragmatic and logistical barriers to such a global ecological orientation? How does a refugee or even a non-Western, non-white academic effortlessly espouse eco-cosmopolitanism in the face of heightened border vigilance, austere immigration policies and intensified security measures at airports? Ghosh's *Gun Island* grapples with these dilemmas in the figure of Tipu, and Rafi two working-class Bengali adolescents and Deen an affluent Bengali academic who divides his time between India and the USA. Overtly, Tipu is a global citizen by virtue of his American accent acquired from his trip to the USA, funded by a marine biologist named Piya who is riddled with guilt from her involvement in the death of Tipu's father, his incessant techno-mediated connectivity and his sartorial choices. Yet, Tipu would be hard-pressed to call the world or the Amazon bioregion his home with the same nonchalant entitlement as the French President Macron.¹ Despite the personal cosmopolitan orientation espoused by Tipu, people like Tipu face external hostilities which can be as subtle as the Othering white gaze or the more pronounced anti-immigrant violence perpetrated by nationalist subjects seen in the novel. Similarly, Deen's self-effacing body language at the airport also indicates the opposition to a personal endorsement of cosmopolitanism by a non-white human. Another opposition is seen in the hostile non-human elements (reptiles and insects) that inhabit the novel and further the plot of the Gun Merchant folk tale. It is possible that the aggression exhibited by the non-human species could be an extended meta-performance of the

folk tale, nevertheless, it allows us to question an open disposition to biotic life forms in the absence of a shared communicative model. Ghosh painstakingly insinuates on a number of occasions of communicative signaling by the animal species that is incomprehensible to humans. For instance, the readers are told that after Piya had saved the dolphin named Rani, the “dolphin had begun to make eye contact with her... that suggested something more than mere recognition (132).” However, until a common sign system or a global language between the biotic and abiotic species is found, an enterprise of eco-cosmopolitanism creating an imagined community of animate and inanimate seems difficult to accomplish. An alternate reading could proffer a different conclusion: both anthropomorphic cosmopolitanism and eco-cosmopolitanism are experiencing acute strife from various directions. Whether this opposition to cosmopolitanism is the norm or not is debatable.

Even though it cannot be ascertained whether the process of globalization lost steam as a result of rising nationalism in various countries or whether the overlap of the two processes was incidental, however, as far as environmentalism is concerned, a two strands become clear: global environmentalism continues to grapple with the North-South political disparity and the anti-globalization narrative is in the danger of being co-opted by nationalist forces for their own interest. An instance from the novel that supports this claim is the labeling of the environmentalist as “foreign agents” for protesting against the refinery that was polluting the waters (Ghosh, *Gun* 89). So, while environmental discourse can critique both imperial and neo-imperial forces, it runs the risk of becoming a pawn in the xenophobic narrative of the Right.

Amitav Ghosh's advocacy to mitigate climate change involves the entrance of religion to mobilize large groups of people and counter the corporatization of climate change. Ghosh appears to align himself with the non-materialist environmentalism of Vandana Shiva, which attributes environmentalism to certain forms of Eastern spirituality. This can be seen in the quasi-spiritual folk tale of the Gun Merchant that forms the crux of the plot of the novel *Gun Island* as well as Ghosh's explicit commendation of Pope Francis's encyclical letter *Laudato Si* discussing climate change. This is highly problematic in the Indian continent where Indian nationalism works for hand in glove with majoritarian religion. Given the hyper vulnerability of those at the margins of the nation both literally and politically, a mass mobilization along religious lines needs to be thought through.

Ghosh believes that Nature was never as commonplace, calm, banal as it has been portrayed in literature. The ordinariness of nature depicted in the novel dovetailed with theories of gradualism (uniformitarianism) in science presented by James Hutton and Charles Lyell, whereby catastrophism was denounced as “un-modern”, as well as with the clemency in bourgeois life (Ghosh, *Derangement* 29). The uncanniness and improbability of climate and nature were pushed to the margins of public imagination and concealed the climatic instability and precarity of the world. Ghosh in an interview in *DW* points out that this concealment or ignorance of the underlying irresolution and predictability of the biosphere is effectively a Western notion(Knight). For the formerly colonized subjects, climate change is just another disruption on a massive scale that needs to be overcome. This is reinforced by the flippancy Tipu shows while discussing border crossing with Deen. He dismisses the legal route by pointing out the effortlessness by which borders can be traversed. “But if it’s just a matter of going over for a couple of days, you don’t need any of that(passport)- all you have to do is cross the river and you’re in Bangladesh.” (Ghosh, *Gun*89) This is indicative of the resourcefulness and agility of the subalterns in the face of crisis. Ghosh is not undermining the gravity of the refugee crisis by the insouciance of this conversation, because when Rafi and Tipu attempt to flee India, their journey is rife with danger. What Ghosh is revealing here is the porousness of borders and how national boundaries are mocked by both human and non-human forces of the planet.

Even though the subaltern in Third World countries are arguable more agile in dealing with climate change, they are also more vulnerable due to their geographical and class location. However, the upper-class population in port cities specifically is strategically vulnerable due to the confluence of the potency of real estate logic and construction lobbies, a consequence of decades of globalization (Ghosh, *Derangement* 5). The real estate logic is a remnant of the “colonial vision of the world in which proximity to the water represents power and security mastery and conquest” and is contrary to the reasonable fear of the ocean that was found in the populace prior to the global European expansion in 16th century (Ghosh, *Derangement* 48). Ghosh mounts a critique of the European Enlightenment, responsible for the twin catastrophes- colonialism (Adams and Mulligan 3) and climate change (Ghosh *Derangement* 39). The Enlightenment principles engendered a rift between matter and mind, subjugating the former by the latter. The Keynesian propositions furthered by the Scottish Enlightenment project linked personal greed to the common good as part of the free market logic (Ghosh, *Derangement*166).

Thus, Ghosh's critique of climate change aligns with the post-colonial critique of the empire and global economic network. This relationship is reconfigured in modern society and manifests in the collusion of the political class and industries or transnational corporations that adversely affect the environment. An illustration of such a relationship is presented in the form of the refinery in *Gun Island* that pollutes the river nearby which was a "giant conglomerate that's got politicians in its pocket on both sides of the border."

In the *Great Derangement*, Ghosh attempts to investigate the silence of literature, specifically the novel in addressing climate change. Ecological catastrophe, which was at the forefront of a literary imagination of older literary forms like the epics, has been sidelined in the genre of American science fiction today. Why is "serious fiction" unable to underscore the catastrophe of climate change in the literary imagination? Among the many reasons provided by Ghosh, one is the presence of "discontinuities". He explains that the setting of the novel is created out of "discontinuities of space" wherein the connections to the non-literary world are made to recede and there is a decided exclusion of multiple worlds as seen in *Ramayana* or *Odyssey*. Discontinuities of space accompany discontinuities of time manifesting in the "telescoping" of the locus of the novel's temporal vision. The novel's literary scape, arguably, is temporally narrow and this narrowing is achieved by shunning inconceivably large spans of time. Thus, Ghosh contends that the "finitude, distinctiveness" and "delimited horizon" that characterize the modern novel make the form ill-equipped to rehabilitate the "insistent, inescapable continuities, animated by forces that are ... inconceivably vast" of global warming (Ghosh, *Derangement* 82-83). The prevalence of the state of mind embedded in the theory of discontinuity is traced to the Enlightenment hubris of the surveyors and cartographers tasked with the founding of the colonial cities. These officials operated with a distinct problem-solving methodology, that was, to deconstruct a problem into smaller portions until a solution appeared. It is a myopic perspective that focuses on something specific and excludes the externalities, and such a perspective would find the interconnectedness of the Gaia hypothesis inconceivable. Thus, Ghosh extends the analogies of the discontinuities in novels to the enclosures of nation-states.

Climate change, on the other hand, challenges enlightenment ideas (Ghosh, *Derangement* 41) and undermines the "discontinuities and boundaries of the nation-state... defy the boundaries

of ‘place,’ creating continuity of experience between Bengal and Louisiana, New York and Mumbai, Tibet and Alaska” (Ghosh, *Derangement* 83) or Sunderban and Venice in *Gun Island*.

Ghosh’s novel is staged in a post-local world, where the rapid velocity of climate change has made the geographical territory disappear. The local then exists only in memory and myth. The shrine of Mansa Devi, guarded by the fisherman Rafi, the son of a Muslim boatman is swept away by a storm. In *Great Derangement*, Ghosh observes a curious particularity of low-lying areas like Sunderban which are highly vulnerable to global warming. These territories undergo rapid metamorphoses and therefore resist realist literary mapping and upturn conventional temporal narrative sequence found in the literature. As Ghosh’s remark about the Sunderban shows, “This is a landscape so dynamic that... Here even a child will begin a story about his grandmother with the words: “in those days the river wasn’t here and the village was not where it is...” It must be pointed out that Ghosh’s treatment of climate change does not fall under the purview of apocalyptic or science fiction unlike that of most Anglophone writers. The realist style of writing imbues the narrative and subject with a much-needed urgency and immediacy. For, “those on the margins are the first to experience the future that awaits all of us.” Yet *Gun Island* is riddled with instances of magical realism, which underscores the uncanniness of climate change and unknowingness of the lived experiences of the subalterns.

Ghosh’s post-local world implicitly attacks the belated responses of environmental fiction and theory and its emphasis on “mitigation and adaptation” (Castles 239) because for a large population the catastrophe has already taken place. He implicitly draws the attention of the public imagination to the climate change-induced migration and the impasse² surrounding the environmental refugee debate and the “politicization and polarization” of eco-migration (Castles 243). Another discursive ramification of the disappearance of the island of Mansa Devi’s shrine is the denial of co-option of the island by developed world theorists as a location where developed nations’ anxieties of global warming are articulated (Farbotko 47). Giving agency to Rafi also prevents him from being represented as a passive victim of climate change.

The intellectual history of the discourse at the intersection of postcolonialism and ecocriticism is in the process of being transformed by the rapidity at which climate change is taking place as well as the paradigmatic shift to Far-Right nationalism in various parts of the world. Ghosh in *Gun Island* presents a literary representation of such a world where local

rootedness is impossible and dislocation is the norm. He also points out the irony of the increasing fragmentation of the world at a moment when there is a dire need for interconnectedness to preserve the biosphere. Global warming calls for continuity of response globally, yet the recent trend in the strengthening of borders of a nation state is a contrary force that not only undermines the globalization rhetoric of the last decade but also jeopardizes the lives of countless people who are forced to migrate due to climate change. Ghosh's admiration for the religious mobilization against climate change is therefore susceptible to critique. In India for instance, religious fanaticism works for hand in glove with political nationalism, and casting institutionalized religion as the savior in the climate crisis could doubly marginalize certain minority communities.

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