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***Gun Island*, by Amitav Ghosh, Publisher: Penguin Hamish Hamilton, Year: 2019, Language: English, ISBN-978-0670089168, Pages:288**

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The *Gun Island*, is the latest novel of Amitav Ghosh who was born in Calcutta and grew up in Bangladesh. His first novel in the Ibis trilogy, *Sea of Poppies*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. His *Gun Island* was published on June 6<sup>th</sup> 2019 by John Murray. In this story we find such a world which is increasing displacement and unstoppable transition. But it is also a tale of a man believing in the world and the future is restored by two remarkable women. The novel begins with a promise and the reader expects Ghosh's love for history and his remarkable storytelling to treat her with an engrossing tale.

The book deals with a three-hundred-year-old oral tale of Chand Sadagar who travelled across the world, pursuing wealth and incurring the wrath of goddess Manasa Devi, to whom he ignores to pledge his allegiance. The central character of the book is the narrator- Deen, or Dinanath Dutta, a rare book dealer. The narrator is a fifty years old fellow. He lives in Brooklyn, but we meet him in Kolkata, where he winters, and eventually follows him to Venice- the global village and all that. In India, a relative tells Deen the folk tale of Bonduki Sadagar, or the Gun Merchant. The Gun Merchant is said to have run afoul of Manasa Devi whose shrine is on an island in Sundarbans. The mangrove forest is where India and Bangladesh meet, and thus the story braids together Hindu & Muslim cosmology. Deen is respectful of folklore but still skeptical. "The story's appeal is, as we may think, not unlike that of the *Odyssey*, with a resourceful human protagonist being pitted against vastly more powerful forces, earthly and divine." "*Gun Island*" may be taken as the *Odyssey*, the tale of men fought against the forces of nature & nation. In the beginning of the story, Deen is lead to the island, not yet swallowed by a rising sea, by a native of the region named Tipu. The rest of the story in the book is a quest: Deen's search for the meaning in the myth, and Tipu's search for safe passage into the West. He believes in borders and logic, despite a world increasingly porous and strange. The world

requires explanation, so we turn to language, whether it is a holy name or a phrase like “climate change.” The main happenings in the novel don’t wholly imitate the beats of the Gun Merchant’s tale, but the echo between these fictions gives “*Gun Island*” a particular charge. Deen’s quest also involves Piya whose research involves tracking river dolphins fleeing pollution in the Sundarbans. He ventures into the mythical world of Chand Sadagar and the goddess of snakes Manasa Devi. – A merchant of bundooks (guns), Sadagar flees to bundook – dwip (gun island) after he angers Manasa by refusing to become her devotee.

The canvas of this novel is classic Ghosh, and the story has the epic sweep of the *Ibis* trilogy. He weaves a tale that irresistibly links myths, legends, folklore and the power of nature. In this book the whole story touched on many prevalent issues ( i.e climate change & migration), we see the impact humanity has on the world, both negative and positive. For instance, we see how climate change is related to mass migrations of both people, and animals. Ghosh shows us how we are all interconnected. What we do in the past shapes the future, one person can shape the lives of millions. The burning issues of migration, refugees, and fortress Europe, and the personal search for identity, faced by so many, are encapsulated within the vibrant narrative and its colorful diversity of characters, and the life changing adventurous journey through a myriad of locations, of the middle-aged protagonist, Deen Datta. The narrator of the novel is a New York dealer of rare books with a Bengali background. He feels a sense of dissonance, feeling he is neither at home where he lives nor as part of the Indian Bengali Community. His world of faith is twisted upside down as he is to encounter with Piya, Tipu, and the Venetian Cinta, and opened to connections with an ancient history and mythologies, and of all their inter-connections that link to him and who he is.

But Ghosh’s treatment of this story in *Gun Island* is surprising in some ways. For one thing, although key characters from the *Hungry Tide* (Nilima Bose, Moyna and the ecologist Piya) return in this story, in its telling and concerns it feels far closer to what Ghosh did with the *Calcutta Chromosome*. In some way *Gun Island* goes a step further than *Chromosome*, out rightly debating the merits of a positivist worldview with the bemused, Anglicised Deen. It does this through the voice of Cinta, a brilliant academic from Venice with a long, celebrated career and a tragic personal history. It doesn’t hurt that Deen is utterly fascinated by and a little besotted with her. We find that the occult and the supernatural elements haunt the pages of *Gun Island*

and propel it forward at every turn-whether it is via haunting or by the repeated appearance of the creatures associated with Manasa Devi- snakes and spiders. But Ghosh seems to have marvelously lost his own argument. Nothing about the non-realistic parts of his story takes away from the telling of its story about two intertwined issues – human rights (specifically the rights of refugees) and the climate crisis. He asks urgent and very important questions about what migration and movement means, what closed borders and xenophobia are doing to people whose own countries have been historically divested by colonialism, what this repeating of imperialist history ( including the history of the slave trade) means for today’s world. They find their most compelling realization in the love story between Rafi and Tipu.

It is the turning over of several binaries and his deeply felt, gentle turning away from the ideals of anthropocentrism that is compelling about his approach to telling *Gun Island*. Cinta, who is in many ways Deen’s intellectual and emotional mentor (and perform the gendered labour of ‘educating’ him that is very familiar to anyone who is not a cisgender man but has to deal with them) tells him.

“You mustn’t underestimate the power of stories. There is something in them that is elemental and inexplicable. Haven’t you heard it said that what makes us human, what separated us from animals, is the faculty of storytelling?”

This is done through the experiences of extreme weather events (from an unseasonal hailstorm to devastating cyclone), but also through quieter encounters with the natural in ways that urban populations are increasingly not able to even contemplate- a snakebite in metro city, or a venomous spider in a flat apartment that has never been seen before.

*Gun Island* is a novel of precariously balanced eco-logies, endangered species in different biomes, and a conflict between the forces of development and nature. Ghosh of the past is nowhere present in *Gun Island*, unlike his folklore protagonist ‘Bonduki Sadagar’, who sweeps at the reader from almost every page. Sometimes it is not a welcome arrival. The narrative follows the chronological journey – a significant stylistic departure for Ghosh – of Dinanath Dutta’s search for meaning in a folk-lore from the Sunderbans. Bonduki Sadagar is haunted by goddess Manasa Devi, who chases him around the world. Only after he sheds his hubris and promises to build a shrine for her does the goddess leave him alone. Dinanath, or Deen/ Dino, is

taunted by his annoying relative Kanai Dutta for his ignorance of the folklore despite having obtained a Ph.d on the subject. Kanai is a character Ghosh resurrects from *The Hungry Tide*, as is Piyali Roy – the marine biologist.

Many of the events in the novel that seem magical are dismissed and explained away by its more ‘rational’ minded characters almost immediately. A seemingly miraculous ecological event that happens in a climactic scene toward the end of the book theoretically has logical explanation, as Piya hurriedly explains to Deen, who is finally worn down into being wonderstruck with what is happening to and around him. The haunting in this book, too, could simply have emotional or talismanic (as in the case of Cinta’s lost daughter) value to the characters they are happening to.

In the end, Ghosh, perhaps, has disagreed with the rationality for the mysterious world, but simply put them both on a spectrum of emotional experience. And it is via this emotional self-awareness, this open-mindedness that his protagonist beings to approach the world, and it’s very real and present problems. This is the inner world journey that a privileged NRI babu like Deen, with his particular background and history, is not equipped to make. In the end, the lesson he seems to learn is deceptively simple – in this vast and unknowable world that is being torn apart by human systems, this vulnerability matters, and fuels what we ultimately do with what we have to face in front of us.

The story has its problems, including its flaws in pacing, or its preoccupation with the inner life of its principal character to the neglect of many of its other compelling people, particularly the women (especially Cinta, who feels woefully underused and whose perspective could liven up a novel like this immensely). Even so, this is in some ways Ghosh’s most tender, even most personal novel.

*Gun Island* breaks the on the climate disaster waiting to happen, as it addresses cyclones, pollution and dead zones in the sea. *Gun Island* is racy, compelling and important, but it may not be his most perfect novel. The climate linked urgency, which looms large in the background, overtakes the storyteller in Ghosh in some ways. But then, *Gun Island* is his most committed and honest work. Characters like Tipu, Rafi or even the gun merchant in another time, are hurled outward, into other stories, by the violent centrifugal force of climate chaos and disaster. Chased

away from the punishing land they called home, these characters get drawn into other dreams, to other refuges, propelled by promises, towards other stories of life in the West, which constituted, so to speak, the surface narratives of this novel, where people like Deen, Piya, or Cinta play important parts. The climate change knows no boundaries and can spring surprises and violent retribution at a place of its choosing, and also because stories connect with stories riding microscopic filaments of probability and chance, the characters of *Gun Island* find out how an angry planet stitches them together in the present, as it had in the past, when the gun merchant was running away from a wrathful goddess. The trials and tribulations of Tipu and Rafia drive the plot at one level, as it travels from one continent to the next, just as the climate refugees, who are an important part of the story. Here in Deen, Tipu and Rafi's stories and their experiences we perceive climate change as a hyper object manifesting, in places far removed from one another, through cyclones, freak weather, first-size hailstones, and more characterized as "uncanny".

Ghosh has created an animated novel by climate strife, affected by displacements and the accumulated symptoms of everything humans have inflicted on the planet. Thus, we have dolphins beaching in Sunderbans, hungry birds of prey setting forests alight and poisonous snakes and spiders appearing far from their habitats, displaced by climate strife. Again Ghosh has engaged climate despair in his fiction. Here we find a coming together of his abiding themes of displacement and dislocation alongside climate strife as he creates a poly-phony of events and voices, from the past and the present, affected by the dark and unthinkable powers of climate change and unknown.

Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* has nature and climate change as its primary themes and therefore eco-criticism and its offshoots are relevant to the discussion of the aforesaid novel. The *Gun Island* is probably an answer to the question that he had raised in his non-fiction *The Great Derangement*: why are literary artists refrain from discussing issues related to climate change? The *Gun Island* explores the impact of climate change in various parts of the globe. While the myth of Manasa Devi is kept alive, the narrative reinforces the significant consequences of climate change in the lives of the individual characters and the lives of the individual characters and the lives of the animals in the story. It portrays the cyclones, tornadoes, forest fires, beaching of whales and dolphins and the appearance of poisonous snakes and spiders. It further examines the impacts of industrial effluents into the rivers surrounding the Sundarbans, the unprecedented

emergence of forest fires, and the presence of shipworms near the sea in Venice .The *Gun Island* is a reminder of the argument that the deep ecologists have always maintained: both the human and non-human life on Earth have intrinsic value . Ghosh creates a world where animals are part of the human existence and the cultural experience. Additionally, through the narrative on climate change, Ghosh portrays the refugee crisis and the environmentalism of the poor.