Unmasking the Uncanny: Making Colonial Injustices of Slow Violence Visible in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

Roman Hughes

This project analyzes the representation of colonial migration and imperial negligence, while shedding light on the rarely acknowledged issue of environmental migration and the long-term implications of environmentally displaced migrants. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon describes the concept of slow violence and how this violence disproportionately affects impoverished populations. This paper builds on Nixon's work by grappling with neocolonialism's impact and the resulting environmental migration of "undesirable" peoples to colonizing nations. An examination of the stories in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* shows how these topics can be brought to the present in literature. The paper aims to show how colonialism is directly tied to the presence of slow violence in underdeveloped areas and the increasing need for environmental migration. Colonial negligence in the "postcolonial" ignores the fact that conditions for environmental displacement were created by the powers that now deny environmental immigrants asylum.

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Introduction

In 2025, humanity saw a slew of unusual and catastrophic climate disasters across the globe. Wildfires in California from June to August took 173 victims, injured over 500 others, and resulted in the evacuation of over 30,000 residents, as well as air quality alerts throughout the United States. In East Africa, January through April brought abnormal rainfall that led to a devastating locust outbreak, destroying crops and causing widespread hunger and malnutrition, impacting over seven million people. The Middle East saw record temperatures exceeding 131°F in July, resulting in massive infrastructure failures, power outages, and over 3,000 heat-related deaths. Deliberate deforestation and heatwaves triggered fires in the Amazon Rainforest in July, affecting many indigenous communities and causing major losses in biodiversity. In May, a category five super cyclone made contact with the eastern coast of India and Bangladesh, carrying wind speeds of over 167 mph and storm surges that left over 1,200 dead and thousands injured (Kumar).

These events are just a fraction of the irregular patterns of environmental devastation from the past year, and the human causes of these environmental disasters call to mind Edward Soja's concept of spatial (in)justice: "In the broadest sense, spatial (in)justice refers to an intentional and focused emphasis on the spatial or geographical aspects of justice and injustice" (2). Increasingly, our planet is being heavily impacted by climate change, largely due to human action as we continue our head-first dive into the Anthropocene Age.

While the Anthropocene Age, which refers to the era in which humanity has a planetary impact on geophysical and biochemical changes, may have begun some time ago (experts debate its exact start), the effects have never been more visible than they are today. However, even that new visibility has not yet extended to those underdeveloped and underrepresented regions wherein environmental devastation has reached the point of pushing inhabitants out of their homes. Rob Nixon explains this phenomenon in his 2011 book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor.*

Colonialism is directly tied to the overwhelming presence of this slow violence in underdeveloped areas and the increasing need for environmental migration. Furthermore, colonial negligence in the "postcolonial" age exemplifies the hypocrisy of colonial patterns and ignores the conditions for environmental displacement that were created by the powers that now deny environmental immigrants asylum. Amitav Ghosh's 2019 novel *Gun Island* is a literary narrative that highlights and "make[s] visible" (Nixon) how colonial and neocolonial injustices engender(ed) vicious cycles of "slow violence" over time. Through this unmasking of injustices, the importance of fiction as a tool for awareness and multispecies activism is brought to the global stage.

In his landmark theoretical text, Nixon explains the pervasiveness of human pollution on the environment through lengthy, invisible damage, defining slow violence as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). He discusses how the relative invisibility of this violence on the environment and the beings inhabiting it is why limited action has been taken to mitigate these effects. Nixon also calls attention to the overwhelming impact slow violence has on the poor communities who face the greatest runoff of human pollution. I'd like to place even greater emphasis on this reality of environmentalism of the poor and draw attention to the continued negligence of colonial powers, which worsens the impact of slow violence on these communities. Even without the ongoing physical presence of colonial powers in these regions,

neocolonialism still holds strong and continues dripping fuel on the fire that threatens to burn these regions to extinction.

Furthermore, colonial negligence and neocolonialism have created the conditions that lead to environmental and economic devastation, thus inviting the ever-increasing need for environmental migration. Not only is this sort of migration experienced by human populations throughout the Global South and other underdeveloped nations, but we are also seeing this environmental displacement in animal species. This seems to both parallel the human migratory experience and further add to the disruption of order and deterioration of livable habitats for both humans and non-humans alike. This dynamic is depicted in Amitav Ghosh's 2019 novel *Gun Island*. Told through parallels to Bengali legend, Ghosh's novel presents a fictional account of human and animal migration in the Global South, primarily due to environmental deterioration. The novel tackles issues such as environmental migration, memory, slow violence, and immigration policies, while also considering how the past influences and perhaps holds the salvation of the present.

Environmental migration studies have picked up in prevalence in the past decade as we continue to see more visible effects of this human-centered epoch. However, the term "environmental migration" is not as mainstream, partially because of the difficulties in defining an environmental migrant (Dunn and Gemenne). Trying to define "cause" leads to placing the environment as the one determined reason for migration, but we must consider the realities of "why" the environmental state might be a reason for leaving.

Nature didn't get that way on its own, after all. The International Organization for Migration defines "environmental migrants" as "persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad" ("Environmental Migration"). For this research, the terms "environmental migration" or "environmental displacement" will be used to describe acts of relocation that occur when life becomes unsustainable

and economic growth becomes impossible. Where environmental migration is addressed in current research, emphasis is often placed on the tracking of environmental migrants (Obokata et al.; Black et al.), the use of "nature" as a tool of border enforcement (Schindel), and the connection between effects of climate change and the movements of human migration (Spellman). While it is vital to understand these aspects of the broader issue to grasp what we are dealing with, these studies fail to capture the role humans play in causing environmental displacement. Furthermore, in failing to acknowledge the direct link between human industrialization and climate destruction, these studies also fall short of recognizing how neocolonialism on a global scale causes this environmental devastation.

While studies on the influence of the environment on migration are gaining traction, many of these investigations steer away from the complex relationship between environment and neocolonialism. The direct correlation between colonial powers and environmental displacement cannot be ignored, however invisible the effects may be over time. Continuing to ignore this issue will lead to further irregular immigration and eventual global environmental devastation.

In the face of ignorance or apathy, narrative can help to address the challenge of visibility. The accessible genre of fiction can bring examples of slow violence to the present moment and depict the causes of environmental migration and the planetary destruction that will continue to occur if we do not address them. Ghosh's novel, *Gun Island*, is a powerful example of the potential of fiction to draw attention to slow violence. Scholarship on the novel notes how Ghosh shows the impacts of societal or cultural collapse on both human and non-human species,[1] depicts multispecies justice as the key to planetary survival,[2]

1 See Prateek Upreti. "The Cry of a Delta: A Postcolonial Eco-Critical Study of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*." *London Journal of Research In Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2025, pp. 65-74; Nupar Pancholi, Sanjit Kumar Mishra. "The Era of Environmental Derangement: Witnessing Climate Crisis in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 13.2 (2021): 1-10.

2 See Shaveta Gupta. "Ecocide: A Study of Climate Change in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*." *Language in India*, vol. 20, no. 5, 2020; Khan, Rakibul Hasan. "Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: The Climate Crisis and Planetary Environmentalism." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2025, pp. 423-437.

demonstrates how environmental degradation leads to environmental refugees (Gümüş), and foregrounds the identity and challenges of undocumented migrants from underprivileged areas.[3]

Ghosh's novel has been hailed as a unique example of climate fiction being distinctly effective due to how he frames the indiscriminate nature of climate change and how he presents so-called "improbable" disasters in a way that feels sharp and consequential to readers. Particularly, the use of Los Angeles for a climate event (primarily wildfires) has been discussed across a variety of literature. In Ghosh's case, the use of LA as a key location of a major environmental event is meant to bring this phenomenon to the global sphere and demonstrate that climate change is a planetary issue by placing it in such a universally acknowledged center of modern society (Gilson). Ghosh also chooses to bring what were considered "improbable realities" and "implausible connections" (Asaad 7) at the time of writing into the discussion of realistic fiction. For Ghosh, writing these events is reality: "to treat the 'improbable' occurrences of nature as magical, surreal or allegorical would be to "rob them of precisely that quality that makes them so urgently compelling—which is that they are actually happening on this earth, at this time" (Gill and Ghosh). The expanse of research on this novel demonstrates its strength as a climate text. My research builds upon this body of work to further examine the depiction of colonial and neocolonial injustices that result in the environmental displacement that characterizes the majority of the movement in this narrative. Through parallel and intersecting human and nonhuman stories in *Gun Island*, Ghosh brings slow violence to the present moment and emphasizes the impact these irregular animal migratory patterns have on the deterioration of multispecies habitats.

Unnatural Nature and Environmental Migration in *Gun Island*

Ghosh's novel is awash in what seems like magical realism, but is, in fact, an unexpected rendering of real-world events that can be generally explained by science. This novel has come to

3 See Trina Bose and Amrita Satapathy. "The Crisis of Climate and Immigration in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*." *Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2 2021, pp. 473-489.

prophesize unusual animal patterns and environmental disasters, such as the wildfires in California that occurred six months after Ghosh wrote about such a thing in *Gun Island*. Additionally, Ghosh's own experience with the first tornado to hit Delhi in recorded history influenced him to include an unnatural tornado in his work, though he delayed writing it for many years due to the probability of such an event (Gill and Ghosh). From the beginning of the novel, however, we see hints of these unnatural events being more possible than we think, and we get an insight into the possible environmental destruction that can lead to environmental displacement. One character, Moyna, says, "it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans. When people tried to dig wells, an arsenic-laced brew gushed out of the soil" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 53). These observations about the environmental and economic state of the Sundarbans demonstrate not only the prevalence of Nixon's slow violence when it comes to the deterioration of things like soil richness and water purity, but also the reality that these issues are largely ignored due to the relative wealth and development of the region.

While arsenic in soil can be a natural occurrence, the volume and potency of such a mineral is increased exponentially by human factors, including agricultural runoff and unregulated waste. We can assume that the arsenic-quality of the water was not always obvious: many toxic substances can have effects on those who come in contact with them, even at low doses and especially over long periods of time, and the harm can increase with prolonged exposure and as the substance gets increasingly more potent (Davies). When a community lacks access to potable water, there arises an urgent need for relocation. Here is a connection to Nixon's proposal:

> a more radical notion of displacement, one that, instead of referring solely to the movement of people from their places of belonging, refers rather to the loss of the land and resources beneath them, a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable. (19)

This sort of situation is what we might also refer to as spatial injustice (Soja). Additionally, the

sudden disappearance of fish due to polluted water or unnaturally warm water disproportionately affects communities such as the Sundarbans, where fish are a main source of nutrition and income.

In Ghosh's novel, an unusual species, the shipworm, is shown to be invading Venice with the warming of the lagoon in less visual but more consequential ways: "They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities. It has become a big problem because Venice is built on wooden pilings. They are literally eating the foundations of the city" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 251). Here we see an example of unnatural animal migration having an unintended impact on the human environment as well. What is ironic about this situation is that it is ultimately the humans' fault that these species have been forced to make Venice their new home. The novel's narrator, Deen, attempts to find an explanation for these strange occurrences, one that is not automatically attributed to human responsibility. Cinta, a Venetian history professor and longtime friend of Deen, is quick to correct Deen's ignorance: "you cannot say that this spider's presence here is 'natural' or 'scientific.' It is here because of our history; because of things human beings have done" (234-235). Her point is this: forced animal migration is *always* unnatural.

Irregular Immigration and Denial of Asylum by Accountable Powers

Ghosh's novel spends a good amount of time detailing the obstacles and challenges migrants face when attempting to leave their homes. In this story, inhabitants of the deteriorating Sundarbans make their way from Bangladesh through Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey to Europe, specifically Venice. Through the characters of Tipu and Rafi, the migrant experience of those trying to leave environmental devastation in the Global South is painted with attention to not only the perilous journey across borders with exploitive guides, but also the struggle of having a "worthy" reason for migrating that will be accepted by arrival countries. Tipu, who works as a guide for migrants in the Sundarbans and Bangladesh, explains to Deen why he has to help travelers create stories for themselves:

> Suppose a guy's applying for asylum in Sweden – he'll need a story to back him up, and it

> can't be just any old story. It's gotta be a story like they want to hear over there. Suppose the guy was starving because his land was flooded; or suppose his whole village was sick from the arsenic in their ground water; or suppose he was being beat up by his landlord because he couldn't pay off his debts – none of that shit matters to the Swedes. Politics, religion and sex is what they're looking for – you've gotta have a story of persecution if you want them to listen to you. So that's what I help my clients with; I give them those kinds of stories. (67)

What is interesting about Tipu's observation of the requirements of successful migration is that the true reason for these movements is the environmental devastation of these communities, from the potability of drinking water, to the health of the soil, to the presence of key species that make up a large part of local nutrition and commerce. If it weren't for the actions of more developed nations using easily accessible land and allowing the waste from their operations and material use to seep into the foundations of poor communities, these migrants wouldn't be forced to seek a more viable environment to live in. Through *Gun Island*, we see that human greed has multispecies consequences, as the predatory operations of big corporations leave both human and non-human victims alike in destitution, ultimately leading to a planet with dwindling stable environments for any living being.

The Cyclical Nature of Slow Violence—And How We Can Disrupt That Cycle

Through his climate fiction, Ghosh brings slow violence to the visible present, putting a microscope to the extreme environmental disasters and unusual patterns we can expect to see if we continue on the current path as a global society. Literature has the ability to "engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence" (Nixon 2). Ghosh has spoken on the difficulties of capturing the severity of the climate crisis in politics and literature, but at the same time he asserts that fiction is likely the most effective method of examining other forms of existence outside our realm of individual understanding (*The Great Derangement*). This is an idea that Nixon calls upon, stating,

> In a world permeated by insidious, yet unseen or imperceptible violence, imaginative writing can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses. (15)

The importance of literature to accomplish this task cannot be understated, and Nixon is sure to credit those writer-activists like Ghosh who take this duty seriously and "are enraged by injustices they wish to see redressed, injustices they believe can help expose, silences they can help dismantle through testimonial protest, rhetorical inventiveness, and counterhistories in the face of formidable odds" (6). It is clear that fiction can have a profound impact on readers, as seen with another of Ghosh's novels, *The Hungry Tide*, which he says

> inaugurated something significant. People's attitudes toward the Sundarbans changed completely after that book. People began to think about the place in a different way. People need a way to enter a reality, and narrative can provide that. Stories can give you a way to think about the world around you. (Brady and Ghosh)

Though this effect has been recorded, it is also true that Ghosh and other activist-writers have had some doubts about writing about climate change due to concerns of believability; however, we are seeing that the probability of these environmental events is not as unbelievable as we might have once thought.

Conclusion

Through *Gun Island*, we see the potential of a genre that has otherwise been written off as science fiction or fantasy to counter the real-world pervasiveness of slow violence and spatial injustice. It is in this form of literature that writer-activists find the best platform for discussing climate change and the causes of environmental migration in the present moment. In this text, folkloric legend is paired with seemingly improbable, yet all too real, environmental disasters and unnatural migrations in a way that makes clear the reality of how precarious the global habitat is. Not only does this novel demonstrate how human beings, through neocolonialism and elusive imperial powers, are becoming displaced due to the deterioration of potable water, soil nutrients, and species key to local health and economic

growth, but it also showcases how these instances of deterioration reach into the realm of the non-human inhabitants of affected areas.

With examples like dolphins, spiders, and invasive wood-eating worms, Ghosh's novel makes visible the displacement of animal species and the impact of those displacements on the continuity and the tenantability of human-occupied spaces, as well. What Ghosh manages to do in the pages of this text, and in his commitment to talking about the events of this novel and beyond, is offer a path toward hope in a genre that is inundated with doom and gloom. Ghosh sees climate fiction as an opportunity to break from hegemonic perspectives of the global environmental crisis and instead lift up the unseen and unheard stories of underrepresented climate victims—human and non-human alike. He says:

> When I look at fiction about climate change, it's mostly apocalyptic, dystopian. I think that is a privileged point of view. It's almost a certain kind of American or Western–and even male–perspective, and that's just not my world or my imaginative space at all. (Brady and Ghosh)

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