

## Reimagining the Legend of Manasa Devi in Gun Island: Literature as Environmental Education and Liberation

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**Abstract:** Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* reinterprets the traditional legend of Manasa Devi, the snake goddess of South Asian folklore, to address urgent ecological concerns and the interconnected crises of climate change, migration, and cultural displacement. By reimagining the myth of Manasa Devi within a contemporary global narrative, Ghosh transforms folklore into a powerful medium of environmental education and socio-cultural liberation. The novel bridges myth and modernity, demonstrating how indigenous ecological wisdom embedded in traditional narratives offers alternative ways of understanding humanity's relationship with nature. Through the protagonist's journey across India, Bangladesh, and Europe, the text reveals how environmental disasters disrupt human lives, forcing migrations that mirror the ancient movements encoded in mythic memory.

The legend of Manasa Devi functions not merely as a religious or cultural artifact but as an ecological metaphor that foregrounds the agency of non-human forces and challenges anthropocentric worldviews. Ghosh employs magical realism and intertextual storytelling to show that myths possess pedagogical potential, educating readers about ecological balance, environmental justice, and ethical coexistence with the natural world. The novel reframes environmental catastrophe as both a material and spiritual crisis, suggesting that liberation lies in rediscovering interconnectedness among humans, animals, landscapes, and belief systems.

As literature becomes a space for ecological consciousness, *Gun Island* operates as an instrument of environmental humanities, promoting awareness, empathy, and responsibility toward planetary survival. The reimagined Manasa Devi legend symbolizes resistance against ecological exploitation and colonial modes of knowledge that separate culture from nature. Ultimately, the novel proposes that storytelling itself can act as environmental education—awakening ecological sensitivity while enabling intellectual and spiritual liberation in the age of climate crisis.

**Keywords:** *Environmental Education; Ecocriticism; Climate Change Literature; Myth and Modernity; Environmental Humanities; Ecological Consciousness; Migration and Ecology; Myth Reinterpretation; Literature and Liberation.*

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### Introduction

The paper examines Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* as a novel which brings together folklore, climate change, and transnational migration through the reimagining of the legend of the serpent goddess Manasa Devi. By connecting myth with environmental memory, ecological disruptions, and patterns of migration, the novel portrays environmental crises as historically rooted phenomena that continue to shape contemporary global realities.

Set across multiple geographical locations and involving diverse characters, the narrative presents climate change not as an abstract scientific concept but as a lived experience marked by displacement, environmental instability, and shifting ecological patterns. Through this transnational narrative, the novel demonstrates how literature can move beyond aesthetic storytelling to function as a space for ecological reflection and learning, encouraging readers to reconsider anthropocentric perspectives and recognize the deep interconnectedness between human life and the natural environment.

This paper therefore examines how *Gun Island* transforms myth into a vehicle for environmental awareness and ecological

education, highlighting the continuing relevance of traditional folklore in addressing contemporary environmental crises and emphasizing the potential of literature to cultivate ecological consciousness. Also, the study makes sure that humans are liberated from destructive ecological practices by fostering environmental sustainability.

### Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in literary analysis to examine how Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* reimagines the legend of Manasa Devi to address contemporary environmental crises. The research relies primarily on secondary textual data. The research investigates the ways in which narrative fiction can function as a form of environmental pedagogy by raising awareness of climate change and liberating human consciousness from destructive ecological patterns.

## Result

- The study reinterprets the legend of Manasa Devi to connect myth with ecological memory and contemporary climate realities.
- The narrative reveals that myths can preserve historical experiences of environmental crises and climate disruptions.
- The study demonstrates climate change, ecological imbalance, and climate-induced migration affecting both humans and wildlife.
- Through narratives, the paper highlights the interconnectedness between human and non-human worlds.
- The study shows how literature functions as environmental education, guiding readers toward ecological awareness and responsibility, eventually liberating them from harmful environmental practices.

## Analysis

### Myth and Ecological Memory in *Gun Island*

- The narrative structure of *Gun Island* presents a complex intersection of myth, ecology, and human experience. Through a close reading of the text, the reimagined legend of Manasa Devi functions as a symbolic framework that links folklore with contemporary environmental realities. The novel suggests that myths are not merely relics of the past but repositories of ecological memory that preserve traces of historical environmental disruptions.
- In traditional Bengali folklore, Manasa Devi is associated with serpents, and the forces of nature, often demanding recognition from humans who attempt to resist or ignore natural power. In the novel, the protagonist Deen first hears the legend from Nilima Bose, who encourages him to visit the shrine in the Sundarbans. Deen looks at the walls of the shrine and remarks that, “I stared hard at each panel, trying to imprint them on my mind” (p.71), symbolizing the attempt to preserve fragments of myth and history. There he learns about Bonduki Sadagar, the “Gun Merchant,” who attempts to escape the wrath of the goddess. The narrative situates the legend between 1605 and 1690, aligning it with the climatic upheavals of the Little Ice Age. The novel notes that it was “a seventeenth-century period of severe climatic disruption. Temperature dropped sharply across the globe. Many parts of the world had been struck by famines, droughts and epidemics” (p.122). Through this reference, the text suggests that the legend may encode memories of real ecological crises.
- The novel also reframes the myth in historical terms. It states that “Bonduki Sadagar was not The Gun Merchant but rather The Merchant who went to Venice” (p.137), describing the legend as “an apocryphal record of a real journey to Venice” (p.138). Initially approaching the story with skepticism, Deen gradually finds his life intersecting with the events of the narrative. Gradually, the legend begins to intersect with the lives of the characters. After Tipu is bitten by a cobra and suffers

seizures, Deen and Rafi become involuntarily drawn into the unfolding myth. Financial pressures also compel him to accept work as a translator in Venice, further aligning his personal journey with the legendary path of Bonduki Sadagar. Deen along with Cinta attempts to retrace the merchant’s path and “see Venice as it was when he was here” (p.217). Through this act of historical retracing, the narrative collapses temporal boundaries, connecting the seventeenth-century legend with contemporary global mobility and migration.

- Environmental disturbances in the novel mirror both the myth and historical climate events. Contemporary disasters such as wildfires are described vividly: “wildfire created tsunami of smoke” (p.125), followed by the ominous suggestion that “Little Ice Age is rising from its grave and reaching out to us” (p.125). The novel repeatedly emphasizes the power of storytelling. “You mustn’t underestimate the power of stories. There is something in them that is elemental and inexplicable. Maybe they believed the story wasn’t over—that it would reach out into the future?” (p.127). This metaphor suggests that unresolved ecological disturbances of the past continue to shape present realities.
- Simultaneously, extreme weather events—including a sudden hailstorm and tornado (p.246–250)—disrupt the narrative setting. Rafi and Cinta decipher the final rebus of the legend, suggesting that the “miracle repeats” (p.247). The climax reinforces this convergence of myth and reality.
- Thus, *Gun Island* transforms the myth of Manasa Devi into a powerful narrative device that bridges folklore, history, and climate reality. The legend becomes a reminder that ecological crises are not modern events but part of a long continuum of interactions between humans and the natural world. Through this blending of myth and ecological awareness, the novel highlights the persistence and inevitability of natural forces in the face of human attempts to evade them.

### Climate Change and Climate-Induced Migration in *Gun Island*

- The novel illustrates how environmental injustice causes livelihoods, forcing individuals to migrate across regions and continents in search of survival. One of the most significant events referenced in the narrative is the Cyclone Aila, whose impact continues to shape the lives of local residents. The long-term consequences of the cyclone are captured when Moyna remarks that, “it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans” (p.49). This statement reflects the growing sense of vulnerability felt by communities whose environment is rapidly changing.
- The ecological transformation of the Sundarbans is also evident through generational perspectives. Rafi’s grandfather warns him that learning about animals, rivers, and forests became meaningless because the ecosystem is changing so rapidly that one day he will have no choice but to leave. This prediction is reflected in the dangerous migration journeys undertaken by many characters. Rafi describes how he and Tipu crossed the Raimangal River and traveled through multiple

regions—Dhaka, Kolkata, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. Tipu and Rafi got separated, and Rafi with no way left joined groups of refugees who walked through Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria on their way to Europe and finally Venice as Tipu instructed (p.236-241). Similarly, Bilal, for instance, leaves Bangladesh at the age of eighteen with his friend Kabir, embarking on a perilous route in which Kabir does not survive (p.194). These journeys reveal migration as a desperate survival strategy shaped by environmental and economic pressures.

- Importantly, the novel shows that climate change affects not only humans but also wildlife. Piya explains how an Irrawaddy dolphin named Rani and her pod have abandoned their traditional hunting grounds because environmental changes have made their learned behaviors ineffective. She reflects that Rani must have felt “everything she knew... the water, the currents, the earth itself—was rising up against her” (p.97). Rising global temperatures and greenhouse gases further intensify these ecological disruptions. The warming waters of the Venetian lagoon have even allowed shipworms to invade the wooden foundations of Venice, threatening the city’s infrastructure (p.230). Unusual occurrences such as infestations also appear: “I saw a venomous spider there yesterday. A friend told me that there might be an infestation” (p.210). These incidents suggest that the balance between humans and nature has been disturbed again.
- The novel also depicts unusual ecological changes that signal the wider effects of climate disruption. For instance, the sudden appearance of yellow-bellied sea snakes in unfamiliar regions indicates shifting oceanic patterns. A guard remarks: “What you’ve got over there is a yellow-bellied sea snake; its venom’s lethal.” When asked whether such snakes are common, he replies, “Didn’t used to be... but we’ve had a bunch of yellow-bellies washing up here in the last few months. Wish I knew where the hell they’re coming from” (p.131). These unexpected ecological occurrences symbolize how climate change alters natural habitats and redistributes species.
- Personal narratives within the novel further highlight the human dimension of climate vulnerability. Lubna Khala’s recollection of surviving a devastating storm in Bangladesh reveals the constant fear experienced by those living in disaster-prone regions. She recalls: “Can you imagine what it was like? Being in that tree, with the wind howling and the flood raging below, not knowing whether you would be killed by the storm or a snake?” (p.160). Such traumatic experiences eventually compel her family to leave their homeland and later she migrated to Venice with her husband, illustrating how environmental crises often lead to displacement.
- Through these interconnected stories of environmental change, ecological displacement, and perilous migration, *Gun Island* reveals the profound human and ecological consequences of climate change. The novel demonstrates that environmental crises are not isolated natural events but forces that reshape societies, livelihoods, and patterns of global migration.

### Human and Non-Human Interconnectedness in *Gun Island*

- One of the central ecological ideas in *Gun Island* is the interconnected relationship between humans and the non-human world. The novel challenges the anthropocentric belief that humans exist separately from nature and instead presents the environment as an active force that shapes human lives. Through mythological narratives, ecological observations, and symbolic events, the text emphasizes that human survival is deeply linked with the wellbeing of other species and natural systems.
- This idea is first introduced through the legend associated with Manasa Devi. In the story of the merchant Bonduki Sadagar, the goddess ultimately frees him by orchestrating a miracle involving animals of the sea and sky: “So she set him free and wrought a miracle: the ship was besieged by all manner of creatures, of the sea and sky, and while the pirates were fighting them off, the captives managed to take over the ship and seize their captors’ riches” (p.17). This moment illustrates the cooperation between human and non-human forces, suggesting that nature can intervene in human affairs. The miracle signifies the interconnectedness of living beings and emphasizes that humans are never entirely independent of the natural world.
- A parallel event occurs later in the novel when the Blue Boat of refugees stranded in the ocean witness a similar phenomenon. In the middle of the sea, an Ethiopian woman stands up in the boat, and an extraordinary sight unfolds: “And then there they were, millions of birds, circling about us, while below, in the waters around the Blue Boat, schools of dolphins somersaulted and whales slapped their tails on the waves” (p.281). This moment echoes the earlier mythic miracle and symbolically reinforces the relationship between humans and non-humans. The presence of birds, dolphins, and whales surrounding the refugee boat suggests a shared ecological existence in which the lives of humans and animals intersect.
- The role of Manasa Devi further highlights this interconnectedness. In the narrative, the goddess functions as a mediator or translator between humans and the non-human world, particularly serpents. She negotiates with natural forces, reminding humans that they must respect other living beings. In contrast, the merchant initially represents human greed and exploitation, refusing to recognize limits in his relationship with nature. His punishment in the legend symbolizes the consequences of ignoring ecological balance.
- The novel also emphasizes that animals often possess a deeper awareness of environmental changes. Such observations challenge human assumptions of superiority and highlight the sensitivity of non-human species to environmental transformation. Recurrent references to serpents, dolphins, birds, and other creatures blur the boundary between myth and ecological reality, suggesting that nature possesses its own agency.
- Through these symbolic moments and ecological reflections, *Gun Island* presents the world as a dynamic

system in which humans and non-humans are inseparably connected. Human societies have to liberate themselves from practices that damage ecosystems, as the narrative ultimately conveys an ethical message: humans must recognize their responsibility toward nature and other living beings. By illustrating the mutual dependence between species, the novel encourages readers to reconsider their relationship with the environment and acknowledge that the wellbeing of humanity is inseparable from the wellbeing of the natural world.

## Discussion

- The findings of this study demonstrate that *Gun Island* contributes significantly to the growing body of environmental literature by integrating mythological narratives with contemporary ecological discourse. By reinterpreting the legend of Manasa Devi, the novel illustrates how traditional narratives can be revitalized to address modern environmental challenges.
- From an eco-critical perspective, the novel reinforces the idea that literature plays an important role in shaping ecological consciousness.
- The reinterpretation of myth within the novel also demonstrates how cultural traditions can serve as powerful tools for environmental awareness. By connecting ancient folklore with contemporary crises, the text bridges the gap between past and present knowledge systems. This process not only revitalizes myth but also encourages readers to reconsider the ethical relationship between humans and the natural world.
- Another important aspect of the discussion is the transnational dimension of the narrative. The movement of characters across different countries and cultural contexts reflects the global nature of environmental problems. Climate change is depicted as an issue that transcends political and geographical boundaries, highlighting the need for collective awareness and global cooperation.
- Moreover, the novel challenges anthropocentric perspectives that prioritize human dominance over nature. By emphasizing the agency of natural forces and non-human entities, the narrative encourages a more balanced and respectful understanding of ecological relationships.
- Overall, the study shows how *Gun Island* being a literary work, functions as a powerful instrument in educating about the environment. Through its fusion of myth, narrative, and ecological themes, the novel not only raises awareness about climate change but also inspires readers to reflect on their responsibilities toward the environment. Humans liberating themselves from ecologically destructive practices represents a crucial step towards sustainable human-environment relationship.

## Conclusion

This study has examined how *Gun Island* reimagines the legend of Manasa Devi to engage with contemporary

environmental concerns and to position literature as a form of environmental education. Through the reinterpretation of myth, the novel bridges the gap between traditional folklore and modern ecological realities, demonstrating how narrative can be revitalized to address urgent global crises such as climate change, migration, and ecological instability.

The analysis reveals that the novel transforms myth into a symbolic framework that highlights the interconnected relationship between humans and the natural world. By weaving together mythological references, environmental imagery, and transnational narratives, the text presents climate change as a lived experience rather than a distant scientific abstraction. The recurring motifs of serpents, storms, and shifting landscapes reinforce the idea that environmental forces possess agency and cannot be separated from human existence.

Furthermore, the study illustrates how the narrative challenges anthropocentric perspectives by emphasizing ecological interdependence and the ethical responsibilities of human societies toward the environment. The reimagining of the legend of Manasa Devi serves not only as a cultural revival of myth but also as a critical commentary on humanity's disregard for ecological balance.

Ultimately, the novel demonstrates the transformative potential of literature in shaping ecological awareness and liberating human societies from environmentally harmful patterns. By engaging readers emotionally and intellectually, *Gun Island* functions as an alternative pedagogical space that encourages reflection on environmental stewardship. In doing so, the text highlights the enduring relevance of myth and storytelling in confronting the environmental challenges of the present and inspiring a more sustainable and ethical relationship with the natural world.

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