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Humans and Nonhumans in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*:
An Ecocritical Analysis

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Table of Contents

Introduction 4

- **Background** 5
- **Aims and Approach** 7
- **Previous Research and Material** 10

Analysis 12

- **Nature** 12
- **Animals** 17
- **Humans** 18
- **Nonhumans and Humans** 21

Conclusion 22

Works cited: 23

Introduction

Pope Francis illustrates in the *Encyclical Letter Laudato Si'* (2015) that when considering the impact of climate change, the interconnectedness of all living entities on the planet becomes evident (points 25, 240). The consequences of human behaviour have long been a factor in natural disasters. Humankind sees itself as the highest power in the world, and it exerts control over both animate and inanimate elements. This peculiar position places humanity at the intersection of dominion and coexistence. The actions or inactions of humanity resonate globally, like the destructive force of a powerful storm. The consequences of human impact on geological processes affect the planet, as well as humanity itself. The unique dualistic role of humans, as both members of the world and as an entity that alters it, has given the name to the current geological era, the Anthropocene. Furthermore, Pope Francis argues that "a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*" (point 49). This is the concept at the core of Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019).

The novel includes a narrative that connects the movement of nature's forces, and the behaviour of humanity to the displacement of humans and many other species. The protagonist, Deen Datta's journey from Southeast Asia is driven by the desire to solve a myth and leads him across continents to North America and eventually Europe. Simultaneously, other characters embark on journeys in pursuit of different realities that they have only seen on social media (Ghosh 66). Meanwhile, sea snakes, spiders and dolphins navigate their changing habitats, and are forced to seek new territories due to the adverse effects of global warming. Climate change-induced phenomena, such as rising sea levels and intense winds, force people and animals to abandon their homes in favour of higher grounds. The Bengal tiger and many deadly species of snakes share the land left with humans in the Sundarbans in India. Rahman states in his article "Threats to the Bengal Tiger (Panthera Tigris) in Bangladesh" that this leads to a diminishing number of both snakes and tigers, since humans tend to use elimination as a precaution. The world is changing, and all animate entities need to adjust to it. Life stories must be edited, and stories, as well as observations, are significant in *Gun Island*. They are used to describe the world. Humanity has a long tradition of describing and explaining flora and fauna, as well as presenting themselves through stories. These accounts constitute the core of how humans view what surrounds them, but in a world where everyone - animal and human alike - must adapt to survive, the narratives must be modified as well. In this project I will argue that *Gun Island* illustrates the interdependent relationship between nature and humanity and demonstrate that this balance is not a passive one, but one where nature exerts agency, reacting to human behaviour, which influences nature's actions.

Background

To understand this project, it is important to know a little about the author, the plot of *Gun Island*, and the various places in the novel, as well as the human and nonhuman characters.

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh considers the modern novel to be born contemporaneously with the new bourgeois way of life in which nature is just the setting for the story. Nature has no other purpose than to create the right atmosphere. It becomes a filler and is to be described by what is seen by the eye, therefore assuming that there is an order to it, but no agency (19). The modern novel concentrates on everyday life and leaves the unknown in the background:

> … the novel as a form would seem to be a natural home for the uncanny. … But the environmental uncanny is not the same as the supernatural uncanniness: it is different precisely because it pertains to nonhuman forces and beings. The ghosts of literary fiction are not human either … [but] represented as projections of humans that were once alive. (32)

This worldview has unintentionally made society progressively oblivious to the uncanny forces of nature, one of the main themes explored in *Gun Island*. Amitav Ghosh is an Indian anthropologist living in New York, similarly to the novel's central character, Dinanath Datta, or Deen. Having actively worked in the field as a journalist, Ghosh witnessed the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, and he survived the cyclone Bhola in 1978 in Delhi by pure luck (11-13). In *The Great Derangement Climate Change and the Unthinkable,* he narrates how his ancestors had to leave the shores of the Padma River and move to higher grounds as the water rose and the river changed its course. They were ecological refugees in the 1850s, which is more than a hundred years before such a thought would be considered reasonable cause for being forced to leave one's home. (11-15, 3-4). The human characters in *Gun Island* have connections to multiple places. These characters belong to diverse cultures through birth or migration and represent the human being of today - someone who has a story, a time, but is an entity of the world rather than a person belonging to a specific geographical area. This phenomenon is emblematic of the effects of postcolonialism as well as of modern transport, which has made distances much faster and easier to cross - in exchange for money, and with the right travel documents.

In *Gun Island* a Bengal myth narrates about a gun merchant, Bonduki Sadagar, who must leave his home because he does not want to be a worshipper of Manasa Devi, the Hindu goddess of snakes. She sends him famine, drought, storms, and other disasters so he sets sail and leaves. He eventually ends up on an island within an island – the ghetto in Venice (Ghosh 2019, 150). The

novel's narrative is the search for the gun merchant's island. The key to unravel the story lies in the name Bonduki. Venice, in the time of the gun merchant, was famous for its hazelnuts, bullets, and guns. The byzantine name for Venice was Banadiq which became al-Bunduqeyya in Arabic. From Arabia and then to Persia, the word travelled to India and became bundook, meaning guns or – Venice (150-151). Another character in the novel, who might belong to the supernatural world, is the Ethiopian woman and she will save the refugees towards the end of the story (307).

The choice of the Sundarbans and Venice as places for parts of the novel has its clear purpose, as they are so similar geographically, though on opposite sides of the world. They both consist of numerous islands surrounded by water and both face problems regarding rising sea levels. The Bengal Sundarbans has been divided between two countries ever since the creation of Bangladesh after the civil war in Pakistan in 1971 (Ghosh 2016, 13). Little more than a third of the Sundarbans belongs to India, and that – a part of the West Bengal region – is where the characters travel in their search for the gun merchant's shrine. Both the Sundarbans and Venice might eventually have their native populations reduced to a minimum if the flooding problem is not solved. According to Ghosh et al in *Living on the Edge: Climate Change and Uncertainty in the Indian Sundarbans* farmers in the Sundarbans cannot grow their crop and are forced to leave to survive and there are options circulating regarding 'planned exits' (19, 45). Meanwhile, Poggioli reports that the Venetian merchants transfer their business elsewhere because their merchandise is repeatedly damaged by the water and therefore unsaleable, and many Venetians are leaving the city moving to the mainland (Poggioli). In both places one of the main reasons is rising sea levels. It is also important to note that the disasters in the book are real – the timeline might not be though, which could be the reason why some catastrophes are dated in the novel whereas others are not.

The diverse species mentioned in this book have not been chosen by chance. Snakes represent wisdom according to Hinduism. Dolphins represent salvation, and the spider can veil, or unveil reality. Kanaujia et al informs that the spider also has two opposite characteristics, as it is the defender and rescuer of human beings, but at the same time it is connected to evil and greed (146). In the novel, the abovementioned species are displaced and forced to leave their natural habitat, or in some cases facilitated, by the rising temperatures of the sea, to move towards new grounds, and the shipworm that threatens the very foundations of Venice is a fine example of such a change in habitat (Ghosh 2019, 251).

Aims and Approach

The aim of this essay is to analyse the characters' stories, as well as their accounts for and reflections on what they are witnessing in their surroundings, in relation to three interrelated themes: natural phenomena, animals, and humans. The natural phenomena in this essay are a few of those that derive from climate change – storms, rising sea levels and the loss of land, and the species of animals are snakes dolphins, and spiders. This thematic analysis will be ecocritical within the Anthropocene framework, which will highlight the interconnectedness of humanity and nature, emphasizing the interdependent relationships among them.

The reason why the character's stories and what they witness will guide the analysis is twofold. Firstly, "to think like a forest is to think in images" argues the anthropologist Kohn, and it is necessary to realise that language is not the only means of expression (41) and the stories and observations become the illustrations of a world that is changing. Secondly, in 2016, Ghosh expands this concept regarding language, thoughts, and images and he uses it to explain why the Anthropocene is widely present in visual art, in films and on television, but largely absent from literature. He ponders on the possibility that "to think about the Anthropocene will be to think in images, that it will require a departure from our accustomed logocentrism" (Ghosh 2016, 83). Stories and testimonies in the novel will picture the consequences of a changing reality due to a changing climate. The characters whose stories and observations will be used are the main character Dinanath 'Deen' Datta's, a rare books dealer based in New York, who spends the winter in Kolkata, and his long-time friend Giacinta 'Cinta' Schiavon's, a history professor and expert on the Inquisition. Another character with interesting stories and accounts regarding the nonhuman is Piyali 'Piya' Roy. She is a marine biologist, and an expert on dolphins and whales. She is connected to Monya and her son Tipu, an Indian adolescent who has spent some years studying in the USA and has remarkable computer skills, and Rafi, a young fisherman from Sundarbans. Rafi and Tipu share a story of hope, and desperation. Horen's story is about the fear of barely surviving in the middle of a storm. He is a former fisherman, so traumatised by storms that he has started to count time using them, and of course, the gun merchant himself. The stories of and reflections on the different species of animals in the novel must be narrated by the human characters in the book, since only humans communicate through speech or writing (Ghosh 2016, 82).

It is necessary to consider how humans view nature, from an Anthropocene standpoint, before making an analysis which regards its features. Humanity has, through the industrialisation and the realisation of new products that swiftly become a necessity out of commodity or habit risked altering

a fine balance that must be respected on this planet for its well-being (Ghosh 2019, 234-235, Garrard, 21). This lack of equilibrium has made the planet use its natural forces, and disasters happen (Ghosh 13, 52, 127-128, 270-273). In *Gun Island* nature is alive. Cinta Schiavon, one of the protagonists in *Gun Island* comments on human inactivity regarding climate change and sighs "Everybody knows what must be done if the world is to continue to be a liveable place … and yet … we go about our daily business … as though we were in the grip of forces that have overwhelmed our will" (237). In other words, humanity knows what must be done to save the planet, but they behave as if they are paralysed by something stronger than themselves. In contrast to this inertia, nature has agency. Ecocriticism, that once merely focused on the visible aspects of nature, must now consider the broader impact on the entire 'life-world,' as our familiar surroundings must become transitory in the face of environmental challenges (Garrard 3; Kerridge 39). Just as the objects around us may be part of, or a reason for climate change, human habits and commodities too will have to be modified to save the environment. Put simply, humanity must reduce extensive travelling and the craving for the newest models of goods. Barry illustrates the relation between nature and culture as "a series of adjoining and overlapping areas which move gradually from nature to culture" (255), whereas in *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* Horn et al describes the Anthropocene as the end of the time in which nature is what can be observed visually, and that culture is the man-made means through which nature is seen - a window or a book. Being man-made, those items used to belong to culture but, "if humankind has itself become a force of nature and is changing the earth system in its entirety, then the distinction between nature and culture no longer makes sense" (51). Storms, floods, drought, and wildfires are merely nature reacting to human behaviour. Furthermore, the concept of nature is vast. I will limit it to include water, land, and extreme weather and the effect this type of weather has on living entities like animals and humans, as well as on nature itself.

With the aim of giving a structure to the human/nonhuman relationship, Bruno Latour made an interesting point in his book *The Politics of Nature*. He created a model containing two houses, the assembly of humans and the assembly of things, explaining the separation as "on the one hand, we have the chattering of fictions and on the other, the silence of reality" (14). Humans are the group with language, but who live within the limits of their fictions and representations. Outside of these fictions there is a world of nonhumans that can decide what is real and what is not but lack speech (14). Furthermore, Latour argues that it is absurd to call what is happening to the climate a 'crisis' - it is a mutation (Latour 2017, 8). A crisis is a situation that happened suddenly and can be quickly adjusted. The mistake made when climate change was diminished to a mere crisis makes the world witness a current alteration to the climate that might have been solved if dealt with thirty years ago (8-9). In addition, I must add that although animals and nature are both part of the nonhuman category,

I have chosen to divide them in my analysis subsections to give the animals the same attention given to humans. One might argue that on a biological level humans and animals should belong to the same group, but since Latour makes the distinction between speakers and speechless, animals belong to the nonhuman group in this essay.

If nature has thoughts, it has agency. Kohn argues in *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* that all living beings have thoughts, and thoughts have life. He calls it 'the living thought' and develops the idea:

> …if that which lives thinks, … the world beyond the human is not a meaningless one made meaningful by humans. … intentions, functions and significance – emerge in a world of living thoughts beyond the human …. If thoughts exist beyond the human, then we humans are not the only selves in this world. We in short are not the only kinds of *we.* (72)

The step from having thoughts and perhaps acting on them is not impossible, in fact in this perspective nature would possess agency.

The myth that serves as a starting point for the novel is set in a period like the present, with extreme weather and consequential catastrophes. The Gun Merchant blames Manasa Devi, a Hindu semi goddess, for the famine, death, and destruction that afflicted him. In the novel, the Gun Merchant is considered to have lived around 1650 AD. This period connects him to the Little Ice Age (LIA) - an age dense with suffering due to climate change and peculiarly similar to ours - albeit for the opposite reasons (Ghosh 2019, 135-137). The Anthropocene era - the time when human actions started to leave an indelible imprint on the planet - sparks debate about its origin, whether it was with the invention of agriculture eight thousand years ago, the industrial revolution, (Palacio et al. 160-161) or the colonisation of America (Dull et al 758). In this novel, the LIA and the industrial revolution are considered to happen contemporaneously (Ghosh 137). The novel attributes the cause of the LIA to the drastic population decline following the discovery of the Americas and the following colonisation of that area (Ghosh 135). However, climate researchers have considered the decreasing number of inhabitants of the Americas as well, although they see the LIA starting before the industrial revolution:

> The fifteenth and sixteenth-century arrivals of Europeans in the Americas set into motion an unprecedented anthropogenic carbon sequestration event and contributed to the LIA climate anomaly. This event represents perhaps the best example of anthropogenic

> influence on Earth's climate system during the pre-industrial period. (Robert A Dull et al 758)

As the number of inhabitants declined, there was not enough workforce to work the fields. When the cultivated fields turned into forests, the trees retained too much carbon dioxide. This was the first man-made influence on the climate of the planet, and the decrease in carbon dioxide led to lower temperatures, which in turn led to extreme weather, but colder, not warmer (comparison LIA Dull et al 758 and global warming Latour, 2017, 25).

Ghosh highlights this consequence of climate change in the story of Tipu and Rafi. They are two characters in the novel who endeavour on a journey that will take them from Bangladesh all the way to Italy. Tipu used to work as an inventor of stories in India. He made up the perfect life stories for the people that were leaving due to natural disasters, but who would be sent back if they presented that reason for leaving their homes (Ghosh 67). Unless conventions and laws change, the ecological migrant is not considered a refugee, because it is not mentioned as a reason to be granted asylum in the Refugee Convention from 1951 (UNHCR). Changes in climate have forced people to leave the places they called home centuries ago as well as today. The Little Ice Age had its own ecological refugees, but still ecological refugees have no legal status or protection.

There are different species of animals that face climate change as well in the novel, although their stories must be narrated by humans. For instance, Piya, a marine biologist, has followed a pod of dolphins for research purposes. She becomes a first-hand witness to the whole pod beaching themselves. Tipu is bitten by a king cobra at the gun merchant's shrine and Deen finds a spider in Venice that should not be so far up north. Dolphins, snakes, and spiders, as well as shipworms are the main nonhuman characters in the novel, and many members of these groups of animals have changed their habitats or their way of living, in one way or the other in the novel (Ghosh 2019, 106, 145, 223, 251). I will analyse why they leave their natural habitats and sometimes even commit collective suicides. In the human anthropocentric way of seeing and measuring the world it is simple to neglect the impact climate change has on animals and insects as well. It is so serious that Rahul et al argue that many species face extinction (3).

Previous Research and Material

The John Murray 2019 edition of *Gun Island* will be used in this essay as the primary source. Despite its recent publication, the novel has been examined in numerous studies that have regarded both natural disasters and migration. Three years prior to *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh published the non-

fiction book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable.* In my analysis of *Gun Island,* I have relied heavily on this book. *Gun Island* is the fictional response to a non-fiction book both written by the same author. Ghosh denounces the absence of cli-fi literature in bookshops where nature is given an active role. Therefore, the role of nature in Gun Island is active - although some time is needed for the characters in the novel to realise its power and how everything on the planet is connected.

Two important authors that have made me reconsider what defines nature, human and nonhuman as well as what defines a living entity are Eduardo Kohn and Bruno Latour. Bruno Latour was a philosopher, sociologist, and anthropologist who researched on, among other things, reality - what it is and how it is expressed. I have referred to his *Politics of Nature: How to Bring Science into Democracy,* in which the broken link between human and nonhuman is illustrated, as this dysfunctional relationship is depicted in the stories of the novel. Eduardo Kohn did anthropological research in Amazonia which resulted in the book *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, which explained how all living entities - flora included – fit into the weave that forms the world and thus dethroning humanity from its self-declared top position in the hierarchy of all things living (23-24). To put it simply, because of this position in the hierarchy of all things living, as well as the fact that humanity has the power of speech, mankind owns a narrative they consider unavoidably - the only one,

Ursula Kluwick claims in her article "The Global Deluge: Floods, Diluvian Imagery, and Aquatic Language in Amitav Ghosh's '*The Hungry Tide'* and *'Gun Island"* (2020) that Amitav Ghosh is wrong when he asserts that in modern literature the nonhuman has not been given agency. She argues that there are many less obvious ways in which nonhuman agency has been featured in literature, although it has probably been given a greater role in more recently written literature due to the current climate change (67). Furthermore, she argues that *Gun Island* manages to tie the local destruction to its global repercussions, which is important, because people have an ability to ignore what they cannot see (72), something that Deen will eventually understand as the search in the novel evolves.

In their study on migrants and refugees, "The Crisis of Climate and Immigration in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*," Trina Bose et al report that there is a correlation between natural disasters and the increase of traffickers and trafficking, a fact that directly points to an increase in refugees. It explains why Tipu and Rafi's story is important in the novel and it helps understand the difference between the slave trade and their journey.

In "Ecocide: A Study of Climate Change in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island"* Shaveta Gupta, addresses the consequences of climate change on animals, nature, and people. The article also analyses the myth of the Gun Merchant. which has been useful for my analysis of the novel.

Analysis

The analysis section is divided into four subsections, "Natural Phenomena," "Animals," "Humans," and "Nonhumans and Humans." I found that dividing the analysis merely into human and nonhuman would have made the nonhuman section too broad. The species described in the analysis will be tigers, dolphins, snakes, spiders, and shipworms. Regarding humans I will analyse the phenomenon of migration, especially from the perspective of illegal immigration as depicted in *Gun Island.* The last subsection, "Nonhumans and Humans," will illustrate how powerful humans and nonhumans can be if they join forces. Some stories can belong to different subsections, but they will only be mentioned in one if they do not add new information in other subsections.

Nature

Nature impacts the lives and living spaces of animals, humans, and itself, and sometimes it can be disastrous, as when intense winds are combined with water. To illustrate a similar disaster Horen tells Deen about how he used to be a fisherman and owned a fleet of vessels. After the 2009 storm Aila, he left the fishing industry, because the fish had disappeared, and he started working in the tourist sector. He almost lost his life in the great cyclone in 1970, before cyclones and tornados were given names, and ever since that traumatic experience, he measures time in storms (Ghosh 2019, 59). Fewer humans died because of Aila than in the cyclone in 1970, thanks to an alarm system in place. However, in the novel the consequences of Aila on the land were worse. Salt water made the fertile land useless, and people had to be evacuated. Many of them moved to the towns and never came back. Those who stayed and moved to higher grounds dug new wells, but arsenic was found in the water. Tipu's mother describes life in the Sundarbans to Deen, who wants to understand the feeling of resignation among the people living there: "Sometimes, said Monya, it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans" (53). During the Anthropocene era human activity has led to geological shifts. (Palacio, 155), and according to the EU Department for the Climate, these changes have in turn created a spiral of melting ice at the poles, higher sea levels and extreme weather (CLIMA). Nature forces animals and

people away from the place they thought was the area in which they would have spent the rest of their lives. Bose et al suggest that this chain reaction, when food and water supplies change, leads to mass poverty which in turn develops into a situation where inhabitants must leave the places they called home (477). In other words, the relationship between nature and humans has become something different. It is not a quiet co-existence side by side anymore. Therefore, many families that Monya, Tipu's mother is acquainted to, have been dispersed and the young people have left to go to the cities and the elders have started begging on the streets, abandoning the Sundarbans (Ghosh 2019, 53).

Water is changing the surroundings so quickly that maps as well as experience become useless. In an environment that is constantly shifting it is not difficult to get lost or feel lost. Horen and Rafi live on and by the rivers and narrate that the rivers change their directions, as they eat pieces of land and make mudbanks shift places (Ghosh 2019, 5, 71). For this reason, orientation becomes difficult for the animals as well as for humans. What was present a month ago might be gone today. Rafi tells Deen that even for him the mobile phone is indispensable in the Sundarbans for weather alerts and GPS signals. There are places in the Sundarbans without reception where the knowledge passed down from one generation to the other is vital. Deen asks Rafi whether his grandfather taught him everything he knew, but Rafi shrugs and answers:

> There was much he didn't want to teach me … things about animals, and fish, and the water – he'd tell me that I didn't need to learn what he knew because the rivers and the forest and the animals are no longer as they were. He used to say that things were changing so much, and so fast that I wouldn't be able to get by here – he told me that one day I would have no choice but to leave. (95)

In a context as the one where Rafi grew up, where tradition holds a significant role and experience is passed down from one generation to the other, a resignation like the one revealed by his grandfather shows the end of an era (Latour 2017, 212). In the meantime, Horen experiences the changing rivers as well. In 1970 he went to look for the gun merchant's shrine and it was far inland, but now the river has changed its course so much that the shrine is on the water's edge (Ghosh 2019, 71).

Water changes the outlook of the land but there are changes in the water itself as well, and the victims of changes in the water are not only human. Piya, a cetologist, illustrates to Deen what she

has experienced through her research. The dolphins studied by Piya express discomfort through a change in behaviour. Piya asks Deen if he knows what oceanic dead zones are. She explains to him that they are growing parts of the ocean with a too low oxygen content for fish to survive. This is due to farming fertilizers leaking into the water and out in the ocean. These areas are growing and have spread into rivers as well (104-106). She knows that the pod she is studying is affected by this phenomenon:

> … my guess is that this is why Rani and her pod has abandoned their old hunting grounds. And it must be hardest on Rani, knowing that the young ones depend on her. There she is, perfectly adapted to her environment, perfectly at home in it – and then things begin to change, so that all those years of learning become useless, the places you know best can't sustain you anymore and you've got to find new hunting grounds. Rani must have felt that everything she knew, everything she was familiar with – the water, the currents, the earth itself – was rising up against her. (Ghosh 2019, 106)

Piya is talking about a dolphin and its pod, but she could just as easily have been talking about a person and their family. The consequences are similar for both humans and animals. The reason a place can be considered home is because it is known to whoever dwells there, there are no difficulties to find one's way back and forth. If this knowledge is lost - for external reasons such as a river changing its course and therefore the food supply changes its location - the feeling of disorientation is hard to overcome, as experienced by Rani (107- 108).

When nature reacts to human behaviour there are consequences, and these reactions have been witnessed before, but they have been forgotten. Deen Datta is following the myth of the greedy Bonduki Sadagar, the gun merchant, all over the world. This myth creates the link between the LIA, in which the climate change led to disaster, and the climate change facing the world today. It describes the gun merchant's escape from the catastrophes that the snake goddess, Manasa, cursed him with. Escaping from the goddess he is captured by pirates and sold as a slave, and eventually bought and freed by a Jewish captain, Ilyas. In his search for a place without snakes where the goddess cannot find him, he eventually ends up on an island within an island – the ghetto in Venice. He returns to the Sundarbans a rich man, and he builds a shrine for the goddess. The novel is the search for the gun merchant's island, and the myth describes the way humanity tends to regard the world:

> Humans have an insatiable appetite for which they recognize no restrain, no selfrestriction or bondage. The legend teaches the concept of control, restrain and introspection to human beings. The snake goddess becomes the cultural artifact that binds together culture and conservation. (Gupta, 123)

Humanity needs to see the world as the miracle it is and safeguard it, change the desire for profit with the need for preservation, whether humanity wants it or not, something the gun merchant learns at the end of his adventure and therefore returns to the Sundarbans to build a shrine in the honour of Manasa Devi.

Similarly, just as the disasters of the LIA were blamed on Manasa then, climate change causes extreme weather today, as it did three hundred years ago. This is something Deen and Cinta become aware of in California. They must quickly leave their hotel and the conference they attend there when the wildfire creeps dangerously close (Ghosh, 2019 136). Cinta says to Deen as they evacuate the hotel: "It's though the Little Ice Age is rising from its grave and reaching out to us" (139). The LIA saw famines, wars, floods, drought, and diseases kill many people, but it was also the beginning of the Enlightenment, the birth of a new worldview. It was the moment when reason would win over superstitions, or religion, such as blaming the effects of climate change on a semi goddess as according to the gun merchant's story. Cinta has sensed a connection, although she does not understand it. It is the awareness of something one used to know, and the way to knowledge from ignorance is recognition (Ghosh 2016, 4). Here we have the possibility to change the future and enact a new enlightenment. The new era, the Anthropocene, emerged from the Enlightenment, which in turn developed during the climate changes of the LIA. It would therefore not be impossible for a new geological era to start during this present change in climate, and perhaps this time, to heal the planet and not the opposite.

The Sundarbans and Venice are on opposite sides of the world but face the same critical issues - rising sea levels - which pose threats to both human and nonhuman inhabitants. Deen is about to land at Marco Polo, the Venetian airport, and the inflight is above the city and the lagoon. It amazes him that when seen from above, Venice can easily be mistaken for the Sundarbans (Ghosh 2019, 162). The problem for animals, plants and people in the Sundarbans are the storms, whereas in Venice it is *l'acqua alta*, which is tidal water combined with intense winds and low pressure (Horowitz et al). Venice and the Sundarbans illustrate perfectly that climate change is global. However, climate

change is different from other developments. The richer part of the population of the world is usually the first ones to experiment latest trends and evolutions, but in this case those on the margins of society are the first to succumb and hopefully learn to adapt, as seen in the Sundarbans (Ghosh 2016, 62-63). Similarly, the consequences of climate change are slowly forcing people to leave Venice as well. Giacinta Schiavon introduces herself to Deen in a peculiar manner: "I'm a Venetian. One of the last" (Ghosh 2019, 31). Cinta is referring to the fact that the original inhabitants of Venice are leaving and people from other places are coming to live there. Meanwhile in the Sundarbans the victims are both human and nonhuman. Tigers, snakes, and other land dwellers become forced to live closely with humans, as water invades the land in the Sundarbans making it smaller. Sharing a confined space with tigers has become a severe problem and almost every family has a member that has been attacked or killed by a tiger (Ghosh 2016, 28). While the tigers kill humans, they are hunted and killed in return, and now the tigers risk extinction. Ghosh et al describe how the people of the Sundarbans were marginalised and lived in poverty, side by side with the tigers. They worshipped a goddess that asked all the humans and nonhumans to take care of each other and create a brotherhood. In contrast to this brotherhood, in the present-day tigers and humans kill one another because there is not enough living space for everybody (8-10).

As seen in all the abovementioned stories and accounts, nature has created a rough awakening for both the nonhuman and human world in *Gun Island*. In the Anthropocene era humanity has a responsibility, not only to reduce the damage, but to completely change course, as Kohn points out:

> We humans are not the only ones who do things for the sake of a future by re-presenting in the present. …. Representation, purpose, and future are in the world – and not just in that part of the world that we delimit as human mind. This is why it is appropriate to say that there is agency in the living world that extends beyond the human (72).

As the storms, wildfires, and rising sea levels in *Gun Island* are reactions to human geological interference, it may be a mistake to consider the world as merely something meaningful to humans and not in itself. The nonhuman and the human parts of the world are both equally important, something Latour discusses, illustrating the difference between speech and speaking facts (2004, 68). The nonhuman world has no spoken language but that does not mean that it cannot speak through its reactions. In other words, extreme weather and its consequences for animals, humans, and the planet

itself are demonstrations of nature's agency in the novel. Maybe this thought should be transferred from the realm of literature to reality when discussing the future of the planet.

Animals

Animal migration has consequences for the local flora, and fauna, but for many species, relocation is the only option. The spider that Deen finds in Venice is supposed to live in a much warmer climate, but it has followed the rising temperatures and moved north. There are of course worrying aspects in this for humans – the spider found by Deen is poisonous, but when new arrivals threaten the whole foundations of cities, the migration becomes even more troublesome. This is the case of the shipworm. Deen and Cinta are walking on a pier at Fondamente Nove when suddenly the pier breaks. Shipworms pour out from the rotten wood and Deen and Cinta fall into the water (Ghosh 2019, 250-252). The shipworms arrived in Venice from places with warmer sea temperature. As the water temperature rises in the northern parts of the Mediterranean Sea they move north, and they feed on wood (251). The problem is that the whole city of Venice is built on small man-made islands in a swamp, and to create a solid base to build on, wooden pilings were used (251). Furthermore, there is much wood used to line out waterways, as the lagoon is quite shallow (Carniello et al). Therefore, one reason for the sinking of the city is that the very foundations on which Venice stands are slowly eaten by shipworms.

Another animal that is migrating, following the warmer currents of water towards north just like the shipworms, is the yellow-bellied water snake. It is leaving Mexico and is moving along the coast of California. Deen witnesses when Gisa, Cinta's niece who lives between Rome and Los Angeles, takes her children, the dog, Cinta, and Deen himself for a walk along Venice Beach in California. Suddenly the dog jumps into the water to fetch a stick but instead receives a bite from a yellow-bellied sea snake. The snake has reached a place they did not inhabit in the past (Ghosh 2019, 144-145). Rahul et al points out that when animals change their habitat, they bring their venom and diseases to parts of the world where those were unknown, and the species that arrive often have a destructive impact on the original ecosystem as well (2-3).

Apart from extreme weather, which is a direct response *to* human intervention in this geological era, dolphins suffer the direct consequences *of* human actions as well. Piya is alerted to a crisis within a pod of Irrawaddy dolphins. In the company of a journalist and a photographer she finds them and witnesses them swimming directly up on the shore beaching themselves, as if they were trying to commit collective suicide. Piya suspects it has to do with the refinery in the vicinity that has been leaking toxic waste into the water. (Ghosh 2019, 193-195). Piya explains that dolphins and

whales that beach themselves have become more common than before, and another reason may be man-made sounds. She argues that the sonar signals from submarines disturb whales and dolphins' own signals and as a result cause disorientation (108). More precisely, as seen in the novel, humans create difficulties for the nonhuman world through their usage of technology.

In the accounts based on the observations regarding the different animals, it is shown that their respective migrations due to climate change create effects on the local ecosystems and their arrival can destroy the whole foundations of cities, or, at the very least, impact negatively on human living conditions. The tragedy in this situation is the risk of extinction for many species, who have done nothing wrong, something humans have according to Ghosh: "every human being who has ever lived … has contributed to the present cycle of climate change." (2016, 155). In other words, the Anthropocene is the result of all human history.

Humans

When a refugee arrives to Europe the difference between being accepted or denied asylum depends on their story, and it must be perfect. Tipu, a boy from the Sundarbans is invited to America to study for a couple of years. He becomes particularly good at computers and upon his return to India he puts his good English and computer skills to work – in a call centre he claims (55-56). However, he reveals his real occupation to Deen:

> Suppose a guy is 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 … - 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 … And then there's sexual orientation and gender identity. They love those kinds of stories over there. (67-68)

Tipu's job is to match the right person to the right story. It is not easy to hold up a lie and the storytellers must be convincing to achieve permission to stay, so Tipu provides a "point-to-point service" as he calls it (68). The potential emigrants find him on social media, and then, equipped with the perfect story, Tipu connects his clients to the *dalals,* the traffickers, who will smuggle them out

of the country (67-68). Rafi and Tipu leave the Sundarbans due to climate change, just as most of Tipu's clients. However, refugees cannot be given refugee status based on the climactic and geological conditions of the geographical area they originate from, because climate change is not a valid reason for asylum (UNHCR). As a result, climate refugees have no rights and that is why Tipu's source of income in the novel is important.

Similar phenomena to Rafi and Tupi's accounts of their journey are the emigrations taking place from Europe to America in the past. To leave a faraway place like Bangladesh and to arrive in Venice on foot, and trucks, is not easy (Ghosh 2019, 211-213). It is dangerous and many people die trying to cross borders or water. Rafi was luckier than many others, as he confesses to Deen remembering the endeavour. He set off with Tupi on a bus, and later a truck. They must pay a new *dalal*, for every part of the journey. Tupi and Rafi crossed the border to Pakistan on foot and went on a truck to Iran. Eventually, they entered Turkey, and promised each other that if one of them was stopped at the border the other would continue alone. Tupi was shot, and Rafi continued alone through Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, and Austria where he boarded a train to Trieste, and finally ended up in Venice. Tipu had to take another route and went to Africa where he had to attempt crossing the Mediterranean Sea with other boat refugees on the Blue Boat (Ghosh 2019, 258-263). The Blue Boat is the vessel that bring refugees to a new life in Europe crossing the Mediterranean Sea in the novel (264). Tupi ends up in Sinai and according to Bose et al there is a reason for that. Sinai derives from the word *sin-ah* which means hatred (482), and that clearly illustrates the feeling many European citizens have regarding the arrival of migrants and the sharing of wealth. Bose argues that the world will see more refugees arriving due to anthropogenic climate change in the future and the "social conflicts in Italy centered on the Blue Boat become symbolic" (487). The refugees are arriving due to economic reasons, but despite that fact they possess mobile phones. Tipu says, "the internet is the migrant's magic carpet, it's their conveyor belt" (Ghosh 2019, 66). When crossing a vast deserted area, whether a forest or a desert, the GPS signal on that mobile phone is as essential for finding the right direction as a water bottle to stay hydrated. Both are necessities for survival. On the other hand, Deen and Cinta reflect on the parallels between the boat refugees and the slave trade. (Ghosh 2019, 303), but where slaves rarely left their origins voluntarily to start a life somewhere else, the mass emigration towards America seems to be a better fit when compared to Tipu and Rafi's journeys. People left Europe because the land did not give them enough to eat, the same reason why people are leaving places like the Sundarbans today, and according to Bose et al, the main difference between the slave trade and the modern refugee is the latter's personal determination to migrate (484).

The transcontinental migrations depicted in the novel symbolise a shift in historical norms, where once traversing oceans was rare and reserved for specific circumstances. Today, many people cross oceans, not out of necessity, but for pleasure. Some of the characters of the novel exhibit this behaviour as they travel, not out of desperation, but for the pursuit of personal and professional fulfilment or to just spend the winter in a warmer place (Ghosh 2019, 3, 12). Deen and Piya are highly educated legal immigrants who work in the country of arrival and often return to their origins. They belong to more than one place and they represent how the western part of the world wishes to identify itself – world citizens - who can come and go as they please. Therefore today, among people with financial means and the right documents, journeys for leisure occur with unprecedented frequency. In contrast to Deen and Piya there are the boat refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, who "cross the seas, just like all those great Venetian travellers of the past" (240), and like many of those, never to return.

In the novel, a spider serves as the connection between the past and the present on a subconscious level - between demonic possession in the time of the Inquisition and the current inaction regarding the changing climate. A spider is depicted several times close to Deen. Spiders are known in Hindu mythology to veil or unveil truths, and Deen tends to explain the world using science. When Deen explains the presence of the spider in Venice using scientific arguments such as rising temperatures and greenhouse gases (Ghosh 2019, 234). Cinta disagrees and compares the state of humanity today with the demonic possessions the Inquisitors tried during the heresy trials. In the present there is no space for demonic possessions as they were known for the people in the past, because "to get by they had to depend on the soil, the weather, animals, neighbours …. Everything they depended on for their livelihood could fight back" (236). Cinta argues that although humans do not depend on the same factors today, everybody knows what must change for the planet to still be inhabitable "yet we are powerless … we surrender ourselves willingly to whatever it is that has us in its power" (237). This is where the presence of the spider is important. According to Hindu myths, it can unveil the hidden parts of reality. Deen's journey has led to an awareness of the fact that beneath the human fiction there is a layer of reality that is difficult to see, since human fiction is without 'external reality' (Latour 2004,14). He starts to see that there is a connection between human behaviour and the state of the planet today, the uncanny has turned into reality (Ghosh 2019, 237). Ghosh turns toward the supernatural to render Deen aware of the crisis the world is facing, whereas Latour uses Plato's allegory of the cave to explain the human incapacity to see the real world. (2004, 10). The effect is however, the same – humans are unable to take action to save the planet. (Ghosh 2019, 237).

The analysis has shown that humans are forced away from the grounds they are familiar with as were the animals in the previous subsection. The catastrophe is that the people who more than others are forced to leave are the poorest, the ones who already struggle to survive. They are not greeted with joy by the rich and rather greedy part of the world. Humanity must start to regard itself as one with every living entity on the planet, as well as to respect every entity's right to thrive.

Nonhumans and Humans

The nonhuman and human parts of the world find a way to collaborate with each other towards the end of the novel. The supernatural streak present in the novel helps humans and nonhumans collaborate in their quest for universal freedom. In the end of the novel animals, humans, water, and land are tied together through the mysterious Ethiopian woman, that Kluwick argues could represent Mother Earth (74). Sea creatures, birds, and the sea itself unite in the quest to save the refugees held hostages on a ship in the Mediterranean Sea. This scene illustrates the power of all living creatures, nature included, if forces are joined. All life on earth works together to gain freedom (Ghosh 2019, 307). Freedom cannot continue to be an individualistic concept. According to Ghosh, the idea of freedom is one of the most important concepts in modern politics, and nature is a part of the definition of freedom. (Ghosh 2016, 119), but "as for the nonhuman it is almost by definition excluded from a politics that sanctifies subjectivity" (129). Expressed simply, if freedom becomes universal, and not individual, it will include the world in its entirety.

The problem consists in how humans view freedom. Humanity has strived for individual freedom for too long and this has led to an egotistical worldview according to which humanity is at the top and the rest is there for her pleasure. The novel indicates that it is time to start seeing the world and its inhabitants, the animals, the humans, and the plants as living entities who all deserve respect, that there should be a right for all beings to breathe clean air and have fresh water. But then again, maybe humanity is possessed by the need for more, and all they need is to wake up. Therefore, the spider's role in Hindu mythology is important, as it "creates a lovely metaphor for the interconnectedness of all things" (Kanaujia et al, 145). This demonstrates why the human characters in the novel must work together with the nonhuman to save the planet, and in saving the planet they will save themselves.

Conclusion

The relationship among the human and nonhuman entities on the planet is one of interdependence and nature has agency in *Gun Island*. As seen in the different analysis subsections, human and nonhuman act and react to one another, in an ongoing cycle, and eventually it is impossible to grasp who acts and who reacts. Natural phenomena strike hard on both humans and animals, who are often forced to leave their homes. It is of the utmost importance to realise that many of these 'natural phenomena' are not completely natural anymore. In *Gun Island* storms have always existed, but they have become more violent for every year since human influence on a geological level tends to increase, and that has consequences for both humans and nonhumans. Humanity's contribution in the Anthropocene era has worsened the living conditions for many animals as well as humans through an irresponsible exploitation of land and resources, and places like the Sundarbans where humans and wildlife used to live side by side have lost this type of coexistence. Furthermore, considering the argument whether nature has agency in the novel, the answer is yes. It is true that Amitav Ghosh had to use the supernatural to make this point, but that is all in accordance with the discussion he made in *The Great Derangement* about the uncanny. It is easier to accept the supernatural uncanny than an uncanny nature because ghosts were humans once, although now they belong to the supernatural. An uncanny nature refers to nonhuman forces and beings (32), which makes it out of human control and therefore considered scarier. Ghosh also considers recognition to be the journey from ignorance to knowledge (2016, 4), something Cinta realised and explained to Deen in connection to the spider (2019, 237). In *Gun Island* the knowledge regards the interconnectedness between the planet's human and nonhuman inhabitants, and how they can save it if they join forces, which is exactly what Deen Datta's search for the Gun Merchant's island was all about.

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