

The Uncanny Anthropocene: Myth, Animals and Climate Anxiety in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract

This article examines Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) as a literary response to the cultural condition of the Anthropocene, arguing that the novel stages climate change as an experience of the uncanny: the return of what modern rationality had repressed, in the form of myth, animal agency and bodily dread. Drawing on Freud's account of the *unheimlich*, postcolonial ecocriticism and recent research on climate anxiety, the study shows how the legend of the Gun Merchant, the anomalous behaviour of snakes, spiders and dolphins, and the despairing journeys of migrants together unsettle the boundary between the familiar and the strange, the human and the nonhuman, the past and the present. The article contends that Ghosh converts climate anxiety from a private affect into a shared narrative problem, and that the novel's mythic structure offers a provisional, if unsettled, way of imagining planetary dwelling.

Keywords: Anthropocene; uncanny; myth; animal studies; climate anxiety; postcolonial ecocriticism

1. Introduction

Few contemporary novelists have pursued the cultural meaning of climate change as persistently as Amitav Ghosh. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), he charged modern literature, and the realist novel in particular, with failing to register the scale and improbability of the planetary crisis, and he called on writers to find forms capable of acknowledging the agency of the nonhuman world. *Gun Island* (2019) can be read as his most direct fictional answer to that challenge. The novel follows Dinanath "Deen" Datta, a Brooklyn-based dealer in rare books who is drawn from a settled, sceptical life into a chain of events that begins with a Bengali legend about a merchant who defies a snake goddess and ends in the Mediterranean, where refugees and rescuers share a precarious sea. Along the way Deen encounters wildfires, floods, dying coastlines, bewildered dolphins and unseasonable creatures, all of which refuse to behave as the rational, modern world expects.

This article proposes that the governing mode of that refusal is the uncanny. Sigmund Freud (2003) defined the uncanny, or *unheimlich*, as that species of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar, the return of something repressed that should have remained hidden. The Anthropocene, understood as a geological epoch in which human activity has become a planetary force (Crutzen, 2002), produces exactly such a return. The climate that humans assumed to be a stable backdrop turns out to be an active participant in history; animals that were relegated to the margins of moral concern

re-enter the human story as messengers and victims; and the myths that secular modernity dismissed as superstition begin to carry empirical weight. Ghosh's novel dramatises this return, and in doing so it renders the Anthropocene both a scientific fact and an affective atmosphere of unease.

The article proceeds in five steps. It first outlines a framework that brings together Anthropocene theory, the Freudian uncanny and the psychology of climate anxiety. It then analyses the novel's use of the myth of the Gun Merchant and the snake goddess Manasa as a repository of environmental memory, before turning to the role of animals as uncanny witnesses of ecological disruption. A fourth section considers how climate anxiety and migration shape the emotional register of the narrative, and a fifth reflects on the formal strategies by which Ghosh makes the improbable credible. Throughout, the study argues that the uncanny is not merely a theme of *Gun Island* but the novel's epistemology: a way of knowing that the climate crisis demands and that conventional realism cannot supply.

2. Theoretical Framework: Anthropocene, Uncanny and Anxiety

The term Anthropocene entered scientific and then cultural discourse through the work of Crutzen and Stoermer (2000), who proposed that the effects of human activity were now significant enough to mark a new geological epoch. Humanities scholars have since treated the concept less as a stratigraphic claim than as a provocation. Chakrabarty (2009) argues that

the climate crisis collapses the old distinction between natural history and human history, so that humans must now be understood simultaneously as biological agents and as a geological force. This double identity is difficult to inhabit, because it asks people to think at scales, from deep time to planetary space, that exceed ordinary experience. Morton (2013) calls phenomena of this kind hyperobjects, entities so massively distributed in time and space that they can be thought but never directly perceived. Nixon (2011), writing from a postcolonial perspective, adds that environmental harm often takes the form of slow violence, a gradual and dispersed destruction that is neither spectacular nor easily attributed, and that falls disproportionately on the poor of the global South.

Against this background the Freudian uncanny acquires fresh critical value. Freud (2003) observed that the *unheimlich* is not simply the unfamiliar but the familiar made strange, the homely (*heimlich*) that turns out to harbour its own opposite. Bhabha (1994) extended this logic to the postcolonial condition, describing the unhomely as the moment when the borders between home and world become confused. In an age of climate disruption, the ordinary domestic environment (the weather, the shoreline, the garden, the animals at the edge of the village) becomes uncanny precisely because it no longer behaves as it did. Ghosh's own writing signals this affinity. In *The Great Derangement* he repeatedly returns to the unsettling quality of climate events, which strike people as improbable and yet are also strangely old, as though the nonhuman world were reasserting a presence that modern thought had banished (Ghosh, 2016).

The affective consequences of this estrangement have become the subject of a growing psychological literature. Albrecht et al. (2007) coined the term *solastalgia* to describe the distress caused by environmental change when one is still at home, a form of homesickness without leaving. Clayton et al. (2017) document a range of mental health responses to climate change, from acute trauma after disasters to chronic fear, and Pihkala (2020) has shown that climate anxiety is a complex cluster of emotions, including worry, grief, guilt and a sense of helplessness, rather than a single pathological state. Literary critics such as Weik von Mossner (2017) argue that narratives are especially suited to such affects because they invite readers to feel with characters, making abstract risk emotionally legible. This is the point at which the uncanny and climate

anxiety meet: both name the experience of a known world becoming unreliable.

Finally, postcolonial ecocriticism insists that this experience is unevenly distributed and historically produced. Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that colonialism, extractive economies and ecological degradation are inseparable, while Mukherjee (2010) shows how the Indian novel in English has registered environmental change as a legacy of empire and capital. Ghosh's fiction, including *The Hungry Tide* (2004), belongs to this tradition. *Gun Island* extends it by placing the Sundarbans, Venice and California in a single field of vision, so that the uncanny becomes a planetary rather than a merely local condition.

3. Myth as Environmental Archive: The Gun Merchant and the Snake Goddess

The narrative engine of *Gun Island* is a legend that Deen first encounters as a scholar of Bengali folklore. It concerns the Bonduki Sadagar, the Gun Merchant, who flees the wrath of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes, and wanders far beyond Bengal. The legend belongs to the family of Manasamangal narratives, in which the merchant Chand Sadagar defies the goddess and suffers for it. Deen initially treats the story as a cultural curiosity, a puzzle of textual history to be solved with the detachment of a rationalist. The novel's irony lies in the gradual collapse of that detachment. As he travels to the Sundarbans shrine and then to Venice, where the scholar Cinta helps him trace the legend's European echoes, Deen discovers that the myth is not an ornamental survival from a pre-scientific age but a map of real ecological and historical connections.

Ghosh's treatment of myth thus departs from the way modern fiction has typically handled folklore, as local colour or psychological symbol. Here the legend operates as an archive of environmental knowledge. Cinta's research connects the story to the upheavals of the seventeenth century, a period of climatic disturbance that historians have linked to famine, revolt and migration across the world (Parker, 2013). The merchant's flight, in this light, is not simply a punishment tale but a memory of displacement under environmental stress. The novel suggests that earlier societies encoded their experience of natural catastrophe in stories about angry deities, and that the secular present, having dismissed those stories, now lacks the narrative resources to understand its own predicament. The uncanny effect is one of

recognition: what seemed archaic turns out to describe the contemporary.

This is also where Ghosh's critique of modern rationality becomes sharpest. Freud (2003) noted that the uncanny arises when beliefs that civilisation has surmounted appear to be confirmed by experience. Deen embodies the surmounting subject, and the novel repeatedly confronts him with coincidences that his scepticism cannot absorb. Manasa, whose power is over serpents and venom, becomes a figure for a nature that cannot be commanded and that returns, in unexpected shapes, to claim attention. The goddess is not presented as a literal supernatural agent whose existence the novel asks readers to affirm. Rather, she names a relation of fear and respect between humans and the nonhuman world, a relation that industrial modernity has tried to replace with management and control. The myth therefore performs the function that Latour (2017) assigns to Gaia in his political thought: it reintroduces an agent that is neither a passive resource nor a distant abstraction.

The geographic movement of the legend enacts a further critique, this time of the isolating borders of national and regional literature. By tracing the story from the Bengal delta to the Venetian lagoon, Ghosh reveals a history of commercial, cultural and ecological exchange that predates and exceeds the nation-state. Venice, itself a city threatened by rising water, becomes the mirror of the Sundarbans, a vulnerable delta of a different civilisation. The novel thus implies that myth is an effective carrier of planetary consciousness because it is already travelling, translated and recombined across oceans. In an epoch when the climate system ignores political boundaries, the mobility of story is itself an ecological lesson.

Yet Ghosh does not romanticise myth. Deen's encounters with the legend are marked by uncertainty, and the novel is careful to show that interpretation remains partial and contested. The myth does not solve the climate crisis; it re-sensitises its characters to the possibility that the crisis has a meaning, a history and a claim on their conduct. This distinction is important, because it keeps the novel from sliding into either mysticism or nostalgia. Myth is valuable here not as a refuge from science but as a complement to it, a way of making scientific knowledge emotionally and morally intelligible.

4. Animals as Uncanny Witnesses

If myth supplies the novel's memory, animals supply its eyes and nerves. Ghosh has long been attentive to nonhuman life; *The Hungry Tide* (2004) gave the Irrawaddy dolphin and the Bengal tiger a distinctive presence in the Sundarbans. In *Gun Island*, animals take on a more disturbing role. Snakes appear where they should not, spiders emerge in abnormal numbers, marine creatures behave in ways that baffle experts, and dolphins strand or travel in unfamiliar waters. These events are never simply background. They are the first signs, felt before they are understood, that the habitual order of the world is failing.

The uncanniness of these creatures derives from their ambivalent status. Animals are the most intimate of the nonhuman others, living in houses, fields and rivers alongside people, and yet they are routinely excluded from the sphere of moral and political concern. Derrida (2008) argues that the philosophical tradition has defined the human by denying the animal a capacity to respond, and that the animal's gaze therefore carries a disturbing power to unsettle that definition. Wolfe (2010) similarly reads the animal as the figure through which humanism's boundaries are exposed. In Ghosh's novel the animal gaze is exactly such a disruptive force. The creatures that cross Deen's path do not behave as symbols he can decode at will; they return his attention with a kind of insistence, as if demanding to be recognised as participants in the crisis.

The treatment of the marine biologist Piya Roy, a cetologist familiar from *The Hungry Tide*, is central to this dimension. Piya brings to the novel a scientific vocabulary for the strange behaviour of cetaceans, relating it to warming waters, pollution, noise and changes in food supply. Yet the novel's innovation lies in refusing to let science and wonder be opposites. The dolphins that appear at moments of crisis, including in the Mediterranean crossing that dominates the closing movement, are both biological subjects of research and quasi-mythic presences that accompany the human drama. They exemplify what Haraway (2016) calls companion species, creatures with whom humans are bound in relations of mutual vulnerability, and they remind the reader that the human story of displacement is entangled with the nonhuman story of habitat loss and disorientation.

Heise (2016) has argued that stories about endangered species often serve as vehicles for cultural anxieties about loss, belonging and the future. *Gun Island* follows this pattern but complicates it by showing animals not only as victims of climate change but also

as migrants in their own right. Species moving into new territories, whether as invaders or as refugees, parallel the human migrants who are the novel's other great subject. This parallel is potent because it denaturalises the political language of borders. If snakes, spiders and marine creatures cross frontiers in search of survivable conditions, the line between the movements of people and the movements of other life forms becomes thinner, and the xenophobia directed at human newcomers begins to look like a symptom of a larger failure to accept ecological interdependence.

5. Climate Anxiety, Displacement and the Affective Register

The emotional climate of Gun Island is one of persistent unease. Deen is not a conventional victim of catastrophe; he is a relatively comfortable cosmopolitan whose sense of security erodes as events accumulate. His responses, which move from irritation to puzzlement to dread, mirror the stages through which many readers experience climate awareness. The novel sets this unease against the backdrop of tangible disasters, including wildfires in California, flooding in Venice and the vulnerability of the Sundarbans coast, and the effect is to show how global environmental change is registered in diverse places as a shared, if differently weighted, anxiety.

Pihkala (2020) emphasises that climate anxiety is not simply irrational fear but a reasonable emotional response to genuine threat, and that it often combines with grief and a sense of moral conflict. Ghosh's novel is attuned to this complexity. Deen's anxiety is intertwined with guilt about complicity, bewilderment at the failure of institutions and an uneasy intuition that his own rationalism has been part of the problem. The solastalgic dimension described by Albrecht et al. (2007) is also visible: places that should offer a sense of rootedness, the delta, the old city, the home town, are experienced as altered and unreliable even before they are physically lost. The uncanny is thus the aesthetic form of solastalgia, the shape that environmental homesickness takes when it is expressed in narrative. The novel's most urgent affective centre, however, is the experience of migration. The young men from Bengal, among them Tipu and Rafi, who undertake dangerous journeys across Asia, North Africa and the Mediterranean, embody the human cost of an economy that has made some places unliveable and others fortress-like. Their stories are told without sentimentality, with attention to the criminal

networks, bureaucratic obstacles and sheer physical hazard that define the passage. Here the anxiety of the privileged observer is contrasted with the lived precarity of those who bear the brunt of environmental and economic disruption, a contrast that follows Nixon's (2011) insistence that the poor are the primary casualties of slow violence. Deen's encounter with these migrants forces him to recognise that his own uncanny disquiet is a mild version of a far more brutal dislocation.

The role of Cinta and the circle of friends who gather around Deen introduces a counterweight to despair. Weik von Mossner (2017) suggests that fiction can model emotional responses to environmental problems, and the novel does so by showing community, solidarity and collective action as ways of metabolising fear. The rescue at sea, in which strangers risk themselves for the safety of others, does not resolve the crisis, but it indicates that anxiety can be transformed into care. Ghosh avoids a facile optimism: the novel's ending is open, its dangers undiminished. But the movement from isolated unease to shared responsibility is the emotional trajectory that gives the book its moral force.

6. Narrative Form: The Improbable, the Real and the Uncanny

Ghosh's argument in *The Great Derangement* was that the modern novel, shaped by bourgeois realism, privileges the probable and the everyday and is therefore ill equipped to depict events that are statistically extreme and historically unprecedented (Ghosh, 2016). Gun Island responds with a hybrid form that combines the conventions of the literary thriller, the travelogue, the scholarly quest and the folk tale. Coincidence, which realism usually treats with suspicion, becomes a structural principle. Events that Deen initially explains as accidents begin to form patterns that exceed individual explanation, and the reader is invited to experience the same disorientation.

This formal strategy has attracted criticism as well as praise. Some readers find the reliance on coincidence and the didactic exchanges among the characters to be schematic. Yet these features can also be understood as deliberate responses to the problem of representation. Trexler (2015) observes that fiction about the Anthropocene often struggles to reconcile scientific accuracy with narrative engagement, and Gun Island resolves the tension by allowing scientific discourse, historical research and mythic storytelling to coexist in the same space. The conversational

scenes in which characters debate evidence and interpretation are part of the novel's method; they stage the work of sense-making that the climate crisis demands of all citizens.

The uncanny, finally, operates at the level of reading. The novel gives its audience the impression of recognising something both new and ancient, of seeing familiar landscapes and creatures in a disturbing light. This is not an incidental literary effect but a political one. It dislodges the complacency with which the climate crisis is often treated as a distant technical matter and replaces it with an intimate sense of implication. In this respect *Gun Island* exemplifies what Clark (2015) describes as the challenge of scale in environmental criticism: the need for forms of writing that can hold together the personal and the planetary without collapsing one into the other.

7. Conclusion

Gun Island demonstrates that the Anthropocene is not only a scientific category but a cultural and emotional event, one that unsettles the foundations of modern self-understanding. By turning to the uncanny, Ghosh captures the peculiar quality of this unsettlement: the return of myth to a world that thought itself beyond it, the reappearance of animals as agents and witnesses, and the diffuse dread that accompanies life in a destabilised climate. The novel's three principal registers, myth, animal presence and climate anxiety, reinforce one another. Myth supplies a long memory of environmental disruption; animals supply an embodied, nonhuman perspective on the present; and anxiety supplies the affective bridge that makes the crisis personally felt.

The novel's achievement lies not in providing solutions but in reconfiguring the terms of the problem. It suggests that the climate crisis is inseparable from questions of migration, justice and storytelling, and that adequate responses must draw on multiple forms of knowledge, scientific, historical and imaginative. Its postcolonial perspective ensures that the uncanny is not universalised into a general human malaise but is understood as differentially experienced and historically produced. At the same time, the novel's travelling myth proposes that shared vulnerability may be the ground of a new solidarity across species and borders.

For literary studies, *Gun Island* invites further inquiry into the relationship between affect theory and ecocriticism, particularly the ways in which narrative form can translate climate anxiety into collective

imagination. It also underscores the value of reading South Asian fiction as a significant contribution to global Anthropocene thought rather than as a regional footnote. In an age when the familiar world is becoming strange, Ghosh's novel reminds readers that what is strange may also be very old, and that learning to listen to its signals, whether in the voice of a goddess, the stranding of a dolphin or the testimony of a migrant, may be the first step towards inhabiting the planet differently.

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