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Myth as Epistemology and Historical Memory in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: A Comparative Literary Analysis

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Abstract: This paper explores how Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* reclaims myth as an epistemological tool and historical archive in the context of climate change, migration, and colonial memory. By examining the legend of Bonduki Sadagar, the novel reinvents myth not as fantasy but as a vital mode of understanding ecological and historical crises. Drawing on Ernesto de Martino's ethnographic theories, Ghosh challenges Enlightenment rationalism, validating myth as a lived, phenomenological reality, particularly for marginalized and colonized communities. Using comparative literary analysis, the chapter situates *Gun Island* alongside works by T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Toni Morrison, and W.B. Yeats, showing how Ghosh's mythopoetic method departs from Eurocentric traditions. Unlike modernist uses of myth to critique spiritual or cultural decay, Ghosh deploys myth for ethical urgency and planetary survival. Through philological decoding and cross-cultural narrative mapping, the Gun Merchant's story is revealed as a record of climate migration and historical trauma during the Little Ice Age. Ultimately, the paper argues that Ghosh restores the mythic imagination as a cosmopolitan grammar of survival, turning myth into a medium of historical recovery and ecological consciousness in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Myth and epistemology; climate fiction; postcolonial memory; comparative literature; Amitav Ghosh

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, literary narratives that grapple with the interconnected crises of climate change, colonial memory, and human migration face an acute representational challenge. These crises are expansive, transcending temporal and spatial boundaries, and frequently elude the grasp of conventional narrative strategies rooted in realism or empiricism. In *Gun Island* (2019), Amitav Ghosh addresses this narrative impasse by reclaiming myth, a form historically relegated to the margins of superstition and folklore as a vital epistemological and historiographical tool. Ghosh reanimates myth as a form of knowledge that captures what linear history cannot: the entangled experiences of planetary crisis, diasporic trauma, and human-nonhuman interrelations.

The novel pivots around the legend of Bonduki Sadagar, the "Gun Merchant," a story that Deen, the skeptical protagonist, initially dismisses as fantastical lore. However, as the narrative unfolds across continents from Kolkata to Los Angeles, from the Sundarbans to Venice, the mythic gradually reveals its layers as a record of ecological upheaval, maritime trade, colonial entanglement, and spiritual continuity. Myth in *Gun Island* becomes a trans historical archive, a metaphysical map, and a narrative of resistance.

This paper explores how Ghosh constructs myth not merely as metaphor but as a severe epistemic form that allows for a holistic understanding of the world, a world in which past, present, and future converge. It examines the way myth recovers forgotten or silenced histories and offers an ethical alternative to the extractive logic of Western rationalism. Further, the chapter situates *Gun Island* within a broader literary genealogy, tracing parallels with writers such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, William Blake, and Toni Morrison. Through comparative analysis, it argues that while all these writers employ myth to engage with rupture and regeneration, Ghosh distinguishes himself through his ecological, postcolonial, and planetary emphasis.

Deconstructing Rationalism: Ernesto de Martino and the Re-Enchantment of the World

A key philosophical intervention in *Gun Island* comes through Cinta, a Venetian scholar and survivor of Fascist persecution, who introduces Deen to the ideas of Ernesto de Martino. De Martino, a mid-twentieth-century Italian anthropologist, studied "tarantism" in southern Italy, which is a ritual involving music and dance to expel the spiritual effects of a spider's bite. Rather than dismissing these rituals as superstition or hysteria, de Martino treated them as legitimate responses to suffering and disorder, deeply embedded in collective memory and cultural experience.

Cinta explains:

"He did not assume that these poor peasant women – and they were mainly women – were deluded. He did not rule out the possibility that they experienced something that falls outside our usual range of explanations" (*Gun Island* 36).

Through this invocation, Ghosh mounts a critique of Enlightenment rationality and its insistence on measurable, observable knowledge. Deen, as a product of Western-style education, initially subscribes to this paradigm. He scoffs at the idea that the legend of Bonduki Sadagar could have any bearing on real events, however, as mythic events begin to intersect with his empirical life, from animal strandings to uncanny coincidences, he is forced to revise his understanding.

Ghosh thus proposes a broader epistemology, one that accommodates the metaphysical, the symbolic, and the affective. In this framework, myths are not relics of ignorance but forms of cultural resilience and cognitive adaptation, especially for those on the margins of dominant systems such as migrants, colonized peoples, and people with low incomes. Myth re-enchants the world by restoring dimensions of meaning and connection effaced by scientific abstraction. Ghosh does not discard rationality but insists on its insufficiency for comprehending the full complexity of the human and ecological condition.

Myth as Historical Archive: Reinterpreting the Gun Merchant's Journey

The legend of Bonduki Sadagar is central to the novel's narrative and epistemic arc. Initially perceived as a tale filled with demons and magical lands, the story is gradually revealed to be a metaphorical recounting of a historical journey. With Cinta's help, Deen begins to decode the mythic geographies embedded in the tale: "Taal-misri-desh" refers to Egypt; "Rumaali-desh" aligns with Rumelia or the Ottoman Empire. This decoding reveals that the Gun Merchant's travels align with maritime routes during the Little Ice Age, a time of significant climate disruption that parallels contemporary crises.

"Maybe your Sugar Candy Land is just a reference to Egypt?" "The Rumaali of your story is probably just a corruption of some version of 'Rum' – does it not make sense that the Gun Merchant and Captain Ilyas would have gone from Egypt to Turkey?"

The narrative thus evolves into a kind of philological detective story, where myth and history interweave. This re-reading reveals that what appears as divine signs or supernatural events are, in fact, allegorical representations of slavery, colonial trade, and displacement. The tale speaks of Portuguese pirates, Islamic mystics, Jewish refugees, and early capitalistic exploitation. In this way, Ghosh collapses the false binary between fable and fact. Myths, he suggests, encode experiential truths that elude the written archive. They carry the weight of historical trauma, displacement, and resistance in a form that is accessible, mnemonic, and often intergenerational. The Gun Merchant's journey becomes a proto-global narrative, anticipating the diasporic and migratory currents that shape our world today.

Myth and Environmental Memory: A Story of Cyclical Crisis

One of Ghosh's most radical assertions in *Gun Island* is that myth serves as a repository of ecological memory. The novel foregrounds how oral traditions can preserve knowledge of past climate events, such as floods, droughts, and famines, which official historiography tends to erase or underplay. The legend of Bonduki Sadagar, when read eco-critically, emerges as an allegory of the Little Ice Age, when

altered ocean currents, falling temperatures, and rising seas disrupted human settlements and global trade.

Cinta notes:

"The protagonist is a merchant, whose homeland... is struck by drought and floods brought on by the climatic disturbances of the Little Ice Age... and he decides to go overseas." (141)

The story mirrors current climate migrations, as people flee collapsing ecosystems, rising sea levels, and uninhabitable lands. Deen's journey through coastal India, storm-ravaged Venice, and wildfire-ridden California reflects a world in ecological convulsion.

By linking the mythic past to the climate-ravaged present, Ghosh critiques the hubris of modernist, linear history, which imagines nature as a passive background. Instead, he offers a cyclical, interconnected worldview in which human and nonhuman histories are entwined. Myth becomes an ecological chronicle, conveying what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," the gradual, often invisible, destruction wrought by environmental degradation. Thus, the Gun Merchant's tale is not a fantasy, but a survival manual. It instructs communities on how to respond to a crisis, how to adapt, and how to remember. Ghosh suggests that myth, in this sense, is a moral technology of resilience.

Myth as Narrative Structure in English Literature: A Comparative Analysis

Ghosh's mythopoesis in *Gun Island* finds resonance with several canonical English-language writers who deploy myth as a structural and thematic tool. A comparative study reveals both shared strategies and crucial divergences.

a. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: Eliot famously employs the Grail myth and the Fisher King motif to dramatize post-war spiritual desolation. Myth, for Eliot, provides a skeletal framework that can sustain meaning amid cultural collapse. Similarly, Ghosh uses the Gun Merchant myth to explore existential dislocation. However, where Eliot's vision is elegiac and often despairing, Ghosh is oriented toward recovery. His myth is not one of decline but of reconnection—between species, across geographies, and through time.

b. James Joyce's *Ulysses*: Joyce overlays Homer's *Odyssey* onto the mundane life of Leopold Bloom to show that myth is embedded in everyday life. Ghosh also maps an epic onto quotidian reality: Deen's academic inquiries and jet-setting itinerary mirror the Gun Merchant's odyssey. However, unlike Joyce's cerebral and ironic use of myth, Ghosh's deployment is ethical and urgent. His narrative insists on the real-world stakes of storytelling—climate justice, migratory suffering, and planetary survival.

c. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Morrison uses ghosts and African cosmologies to make visible the traumas of slavery. Her mythic mode rejects empirical history's erasures and offers a counter-archive of Black suffering and endurance. Ghosh parallels this strategy in his portrayal of the subaltern past, drawing on Bengali legends, Sufi mysticism, and diasporic memories to narrate colonial violence and environmental collapse. Both authors treat myth as a form of witnessing, a genre of justice.

d. W.B. Yeats and William Blake: Yeats's cyclical view of time and Blake's creation of symbolic mythologies offer alternatives to secular modernity. Ghosh continues this tradition but with a distinct postcolonial inflection. His mythos is plural and syncretic, incorporating Hindu, Islamic, Jewish, and Christian elements. The resulting narrative is not nationalist but planetary—a grammar of survival for a world in crisis.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Mythic Imagination for the Anthropocene

Gun Island is an ambitious literary project that reclaims the mythic imagination not as escapism but as critique, archive, and prophecy. By revisiting myth through the frameworks of environmental studies, migration theory, and postcolonial historiography, Ghosh renders it newly urgent and newly true. The legend of Bonduki Sadagar becomes a vessel for understanding global interdependence, cyclical crisis, and historical erasure. Ghosh joins a tradition of mythic writers, but his distinctiveness lies in his planetary vision and his engagement with the environmental humanities. He does not merely use myth as a symbol; he repositions it as a method. Myth, for Ghosh, is a way of knowing that transcends the limits of scientific rationality and confronts the ecological and political urgencies of our time. In the Anthropocene, where the scale of crisis often defies comprehension, *Gun Island* offers a narrative strategy that is expansive, inclusive, and regenerative. It teaches us that myth, far from being obsolete, might be one of the few tools left that can help us navigate a world on fire.

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