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Engaging with Religion, "*dharma*" and Ecological Consciousness in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh in Gun Island (2019) redraws the borders between science and religion, myth and religion, dreams and reality and between faith and practice and returns to the basic Vedantic idea of 'ekam' or oneness of all creatures. In fact he erases the borders altogether and attempts to create a religion of trans-continental humanity through the use of the concept of "dharma". Ghosh, does not intend to demystify the tale of the snake goddess Manasa but relates it to events in recorded history and tries to delve into the interconnectedness of myths that connect Bengal to Italy. His characters embark on a journey for the forgotten /non-existent spaces in chronological history and uses memory (collective and individual) to unravel the myth of the "banduki saudagar". Ghosh's endeavour is to write a climate fiction that engages with myth, history and ecological consciousness.

KEYWORDS

Myth, Climate fiction, Bhuta, dharma, Religion

RESEARCH PAPER

Mythology has always had to undergo the burden of being proven true. Either scholars have attempted to validate the myths using tools of historiography or have turned to science to prove that myths are grounded in realism- rather distorted realism. In India myth and religion conflate to keep the latter functional. Myths never die in India. They pass through generations and vary with almost every retelling. Amitav Ghosh, in *Gun Island* writes a climate fiction that intertwines mythology, religion and ecological consciousness to demonstrate the journey of the myth of the 'Banduki Saudagar' and in its wake tries to preach the lesson of peaceful co-existence of all life on earth. The borders of space and time are erased skillfully and myth and reality converge to create a culminating moment of euphoric crescendo that preaches the peaceful and concerted co-existence of all living beings on this earth.

Amitav Ghosh chooses the myth of Goddess Manasa, an Indian snake goddess and consciously avoids the mainstream Hindu pantheon. He tries to draw attention to those spaces of myth-making where memory takes a greater place than history. Ghosh (much like what Loyal Rue does in *Religion is not About God*) attempts to prophesize on the future of religion which would possibly be a conglomerate of legends, folk lores, biological science and environmental care and that can only be brought into existence if human beings follow the ways of nature and of fellow animals. This new religion is mythological, '*dharmic*' and ecological. Making use of the *upanishadiya* doctrine of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world as a family) Ghosh searches for commonality in the quasi- religious spaces like folk lores and mythic symbols to validate the existence of a universal belief system that may be given the name of 'religion'- albeit a religion without 'god' and composed of presences or the '*bhutas*'. In trying to do so Ghosh creates a mythical concept of religion that survives on memories, dreams and stories and is devoid of preaching and rituals. This religion is more akin to the idea of '*dharma*' or the path of the just and thrives on the idea that every creature on this earth must perform their own duty - *swadharma* - in order to maintain the balance of the eco-system and to co-survive the climatic exigencies.

Indian mythology cannot be viewed in consonance with classical mythology. (Pattnaik 2) There have been various reformist movements in Hinduism that have aimed to deconstruct the myths and have even succeeded. For example in the nineteenth century Raja Rammohun Roy attempted a rewriting of the Upanisads.

> He used the principles in the *Vedas*, especially in the *Upanishads*, to critique Hindu mythology and pointed out that myth was not literally true but only pointed to something higher than itself. Myth was never more than a symbol of truth. Thus, the myths and the gods were metaphors of truths, and if believed literally myths became idols. He did not mean idol in the Purânic sense of *mûrti*—physical forms that help the worshipper to conceive of the formless divine. Rammohan Roy meant that mythic thought and idols led to "idolatry"—worshipping something that was both false and dehumanizing. He thought it led to deceiving oneself and others.
> (Williams 14)

Ghosh does not deconstruct the myth of the merchant but in his quest for historical and geographical truth behind that myth arrives at a comparative study of worship of two female divinities who granted protection against natural calamities and diseases - Manasa and Mary- in Bengal and in Italy.

Theoreticians from the genre of religious studies have long debated about the ontology of religion. From the idea of it being a social construction to the idea of it being an ideological vehicle and /or colonial tool religion has been constantly defined throughout the ages by the critics. (Shrilbrack 2012)

> The first and central aspect of Fitzgerald's position is his claim that the concept of "religion" is a social construction. Other cultures lack the concept: as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has shown, there is no word in classical Sanskrit for the concept and so "religion" does not appear in Hindu scriptures. There is also no word in Pali and so it also does not appear in Buddhist scriptures. There is no term for religion in Chinese or Japanese or Egyptian or in Native American languages (Smith 1962: ch. 2). There is not even a word

> for religion in the Hebrew Bible or in the Greek New Testament. One may speculate about whether Europeans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries developed the concept of "religion" because of the fragmentation of the Christian church in wake of the Reformation or because of the explosion of information about non-European cultures, but in any event it is only modern European Christians who generalized or abstracted from their own practices and developed the word "religion" as a term for sorting a certain kind of activity. (Shrilback 98)

The ontological journey of religion is wrought with the idea of faith or trust in a divinity that is all knowing and that requires the regimented parading of a social group in its favor. The rituals and the myths surrounding each religion reinstate its supremacy as the ultimate vehicle of spiritual or metaphysical thought and commands unquestioning subservience to its basic tenets and practices. Performance is important and even in negation there lies a counter performance that in turn validates its presence. Religions die and are reborn. In the history of mankind and also beyond that reverence to a power greater than the human body and mind has existed. From nature worship to secret cults, religion has indeed inebriated the masses and redrawn borders of existence apart. This social organization called religion uses/used the vehicle of narratives to inseminate the belief systems of the human beings that it desired to bring under its tutelage. Religions, whether spoken or written, have strict borders. Indian mythology cannot be viewed in consonance with classical mythology. (Pattnaik 2) There have been various reformist movements in Hinduism that have aimed to deconstruct the myths and have even succeeded. For example in the nineteenth century Raja Rammohun Roy attempted a rewriting of the Upanisads.

> Rammohan Roy, the great Hindu reformer, believed that the mythic frame of reference had to be outgrown for Indians to "progress" from "superstition" to scientific and rational thinking and living. He foreshadowed modern movements in philosophy and theology to "demythologize" religion. He used the principles in the *Vedas,* especially in the *Upanishads,* to critique Hindu mythology and pointed out that myth was not literally true but only pointed to something higher than itself. Myth was never more than a symbol of truth. Thus, the myths and the gods were metaphors of truths, and if believed literally myths became idols. He did not mean idol in the Purânic sense of *mûrti*—physical forms

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However '*dharma*' as differentiated from religion, does not need to heed sectarian borders unless it is circumscribed by the organized religion popularly known as called Hinduism. Hinduism or Hindooism as a social order of spirituality was also a colonial construct (Pattnaik 2003).

> The Persians and later the Arabs had used the word *Hind* or *Hindostan* to describe the land around and beyond the river that was known to the Greeks as the Indus and to the local populations the Sindhu. In the sixteenth century, Sanskrit and Bengali texts used the word *Hindu* to refer to locals who were not *Yavana*, or Muslim. When the British came to India, they used the word *Hindoo* or *Hindu* rather loosely, applying it to all who spoke the Hindi language in North India. Later the word was used specifically for that segment of Indian population who did not identify themselves as Muslim, Sikh, Jain, or Christian. In the early part of the nineteenth century *Hinduism* became an umbrella term for a number of distinct South Asian sects and regional religions that shared certain fundamental beliefs, ritual practices, and cultural symbols. More specifically, in 1830 scholars used the term for the religion of high-caste brahmanas, which in academic circles is now termed *Brahmanism* and is viewed as a dominantly pervasive subset of Hinduism. (Pattnaik 3)

According to Hindu mythology or to be specific, in accordance to the mythic time the contemporary time frame is the worst among all the "yugas" or time sects and is known as the the *"Kali–yuga'* that must end in a "*pralaya*" (complete dissolution of the creation). This has to correspond to the final restoration of the "*dharma"* and the birth of the *Kalki avatar*. (Olson 37) *Gun Island* does not end in an all dissolving *pralay* but in a concerted performance of the creatures of the three *lokas* (spaces/premises) - *swarga* (heavens/sky), *marta* (earth) and *patal*

(the under lands) as if a superior force (god or not) directs their performance and shows that the ultimate salvation lies in co-existence of all creatures- all "*bhutas*"(beings) .

Myth and religion have a common storehouse of belief systems that have been handed down from one generation to other mostly as memories of performance. Hinduism is replete with the conventions of performing the pseudo-religious acts like 'Vrats' and 'Kathas' that have a strong transgenerational memory line.

> In contrast to the revealed literature of the Vedas in ancient India, the people accept a body of literature called *smriti* (that which is remembered), which is a humanly derived and constructed literary tradition grounded in the collective memory of the culture. Even the revealed Vedas are preserved for centuries by an oral tradition of memorizing these sacred text. (Olson 137)

The journey undertaken by the mythical Banduki Saudagar is evidentially proven by Deen who witnesses the movement of the illegal immigrants to Italy who follow the same route. Cinta helps him identify actual spaces in Venice that the Saudagar must have visited in the ancient past- that past which has still now been hidden in cryptic riddles, symbols and the religious myth of Manasa. Hence on the lines of 'mnemohistory' (Assman 1997) Ghosh posits the hypothesis that myths and memories are equally important for the re-construction of the history of the period in which the relic had been constructed.

> "Unlike history, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as remembered. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertexuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of the reading of the past. Mnemohistory is not the opposite of history, but one of its subdisciplines." (Bernstein 2009).

Dinanath is a *bricoleur* who takes upon (or is circumstantially forced upon) the task of joining the *mythemes* of the Manasa lore. The mythemes range from nonsense verse to symbols and from snakes to dolphins. He salvages the broken pieces that were hidden in the poem and undertakes the task of untangling the threads of the mythical story that links a shrine in the

Sundarbans to the chapel of Santa Maria Della Salute or 'the black Madonna of La salute" (Ghosh 223) or " the Panaghia Mesopanditissa, Madonna the Mediator: it is she who stands between us the incarnate earth, with all its blessings and furies." (Ghosh 223) in Italy. His profession as the seller of rare books sets the theme of the story and he relies on instincts, dreams and linguistic traces to re-weave the tale of the 'Banduki Saudagar.'

Beginning with Dinanath's meeting with Kanai Dutta the narrative focuses on the central myth of Manasha, the snake Goddess. Manasha is still worshipped in mostly the rural parts of Bengal and is supposed to protect the worshipper from snake –bites. Her tussle with Chand Saudagar and her quest for a position in the royal pantheon based on the procurement of devotion from him is a common folk lore. Dinanath/Deen is shown to have penned a thesis on the lore of Manasa. This goddess is the symbol of strife and turbulence in the life of humans as they desire to achieve their goals in life. Inspite of having found mention in Atharva Veda and Mahabharata, Manasha's appeal as the savior establishes her more as the 'popular 'goddess – like a member of the family and less as the as the highhanded Goddesses of Hinduism who need more elaborate rituals and temples for worship. She has an entire *'mangalkavya'* in her name, titled *Manasa Mangal Kavya* that is basically a long religious poem eulogizing gods and goddesses and are sung (mostly by women) in groups."They tell of the power and magnificence of a particular divinity, how man prospers by the worship of that divinity and suffers by denying it." (Dimock 307) This relegation of goddesses to the less modernized places such as suburbs and villages is also symbolic of the change in societal structure. In the urban areas of Bengal the legend/myth of Manasa is almost absent. The gradual decline of worship of these lesser known goddesses who exist in the periphery of organized religion is coterminous with the increase in modernization. However in the snake-infested areas like Sundarbans Manasa is still seen as the protector.

The myth of the Banduki Saudagar is also a mythical record of natural disasters. Deen finds out that just like with any oral tradition this myth also has its variants. One is that of Nilima Bose who heard and remembered it because she liked the "nonsense" riddle associated with it (which in fact was the key to geographical translocations of the merchant). Nilima wanted Deen to visit the shrine because she thought that the shrine needed to go down in recorded history.

According to this version of the mythical story, Saudagar had to flee his native land in fear of the wrath of Manasa. Nilima Bose's version of the story is very similar to the *mangalkavya* version of the Manasa myth and shows Saudagar as a victim of the anger of the goddess. However Horen Naskar was autochthonous to the place and his trysts with the natural disasters such as storms and the details of the calamities described in the myth was very prominent.

> " He remembered vividly, for example, the disaster that had forced the gun Merchant to flee his homeland; a drought so terrible that the streams, rivers, and ponds ad dried up and the stench of rotting fish and dead livestock had hung heavy in the air. Half the people had died of starvation; parents had sold their children and people had been reduced to eating carcass and cadavers." (Ghosh 55)

Horen's measure of time rested on his memory of the various cyclones. This is a very primitive mode of time keeping as with the earlier civilizations that relied on seasons and on events of nature to keep a record of time. Cinta explains to Deen while on a walk to the chapel of Madonna that the time frame in which the merchant had visited the city was around the mid seventeenth century – just after the plague of 1630 had subsided. Nature was unstable at that time and the period was known as the little ice age. Madonna had been worshipped as the savior goddess during the time of the plague and her chapel was built in the town. This parallelism of historical presences of two female deities in two different parts of the world is an interesting historical coincidence. Furthering this train of coincidence Cinta explains "the icon of a dark-skinned Madonna and child" (Ghosh 223) which had been brought from Heraklion in Crete – the city "that is famously associated with A-sa-sa-ra-me … the Minoan goddess of snakes."(Ghosh 223) The two religious stories are interconnected and the *mytheme* here is the snake.

Speaking of presences, Ghosh relies on the Indian philosophical concept of the '*bhuta'*- "which simultaneously means 'being' and 'becoming' and much else as well". (Ghosh 156) Thus the past and the present co-exist in the idea of the *bhuta*. The religious myth finds life in the happenings of the present day when Deen has a hallucination of the snake from the plane and sees spiders in the apartment of Cinta. After having heard the tale of the boatman Deen had been disturbed and could not sleep. After having returned to Brooklyn after his visit he had the strange

feeling of "some living thing" had entered his body. He had the feel of carrying the burden of someone else's memory.

> "…it was memory itself , except that it was not my own: it was much older than me, some submerged aspect of time that had been brought suddenly to life when I entered that shrine- something fearsome, venomous and overwhelmingly powerful, something that would not allow e to be rid of it."(Ghosh 103)

In his seminal work *The Great Derangement* he has dealt with this idea of knowledge as awakening or responding to the "presence" that is already there around oneself and yet one is unable to comprehend it in its totality. He takes the example of the water bodies that cause floods to make their presence felt because human beings have a tendency to ignore nature. It is a passage from "ignorance" to "knowledge" (Ghosh 2016). In *Gun Island* he speaks of other kinds of presences that are not to be judged by rationality or science but can only be felt and experienced. Deen was able to see and hear things that did not exist in the same spatiotemporal bracket in which he was physically living. He was experiencing a diachronic presencing of beings that others could not see. Cinta relates this unrest to the "awakening "of his subtler powers. To Cinta the past is a presence as she did not believe in the temporal boundaries or in the idea of time as modernity knows it. Cinta tells Deen that myths have the ability to "reach out to the future" (Ghosh 127). Drawing the example of seventeenth century belief system, the era of the Banduki Saudagar, Cinta speaks about the importance of stories/myths/legends that are the portals to enter a premise of belief that is not bound by the strictures of institutionalized religious mechanism.

> In the seventeenth century no one would ever have said of something that it was "just a story" as we moderns do. At that time people recognized that stories could tap into dimensions that were beyond the ordinary, beyond the human even. They knew that only through stories was it possible to enter the most inward mysteries of our existence where nothing that is really important can be proven to exist- like love, or loyalty, or even the faculty that makes us turn around when we feel the gaze of a stranger or an animal. Only

through stories can invisible or inarticulate or silent beings speak to us ; it is they who allow the past to reach out to us.(Ghosh 127)

Ghosh links this work to *The Hungry Tide* and he balances the thematic load of the earlier novel with this work. *The Hungry Tide* is elemental in approach. The sea, the river, the sundari trees and the weather reduce the role of the humans to a minimal and Fokir dies in a storm establishing the dominance of nature. However in *Gun Island* the wrath of nature is seen in all its variants- forest fires, tornadoes, floods and the presence of the venomous spiders and snakes at unusual places. Displacement is the only constant in this novel. From displaced stories to symbols, from displaced humans to migrating dolphins, *Gun Island* is a storehouse of unrest. This unrest culminates in the grand show at the end of the novel where rationality needs to fail and belief in the universalism of human compassion and camaraderie must emerge as the new mythical and religious premise of sustenance of the human nature and the nature around us.

Deen and Piya- both migrants for the sake of livelihood – have two people in their lives who guide them through the maze of events. Deen has his old friend Cinta and Piya has Tipu, as their spiritual guides, son of Fokir whom she has tried to 'father' in the absence of Fokir who had died saving her in *The Hungry Tide*. Cinta's dreams and Tipu's clairvoyance act as the magical backdrop to the otherwise eco- political treatise on the migration of animals and humans. Deen meets Piya at the residence of Nilima Bose who recounts the tale of the shrine of Manasa in the Sundarbans. Ghosh has always been interested in the Sundarbans and just like the ever "shifting mud-flats of the Bengal delta" (Ghosh 5), he never fails to highlight the derangements of our contemporary lives. Nilima had come across this shrine of Manasha shortly after a devastating cyclone that had caused devastation in the coastal belt of Bangladesh and India and many villages had been swept away. During one of her relief operations along with her boatman Horen Naskar, Nilima had come upon this village that had survived the cyclone pretty well with no bodily harm to the inhabitants. Surprised at this Nilima was informed about the shrine of Manasa who the villagers informed her had saved them from death. Myths and religion are entwined in the Indian cultural system. Myths grow with religion and can even be trans-religious. This myth of the Bonduki Saudagar that is related to the temple of Manasa Devi connects three religions. The Muslim caretaker had informed Nilima about the shrine being worshipped by the Hindus

and Muslims both- with the Muslims connecting it to the "Muslim pir or saint named Ilyas". (Ghosh 15).

As the tale progresses Cinta enters the scene and so does telepathy. Alternative spaces of belonging and connections seem to rule this novel of Ghosh. Cinta, the historian friend of Deen calls him to say that she had a dream or maybe a memory- " I don't know whether it was a dream or a memory .That happens you know, as you grow older – you can't tell the dreams from the memories." (Ghosh 25) Cinta tells Deen about her visit to a' *jatra* ' – a folk theater performance of Bengal – that Deen remembered was based on the legend of Manasa. In a conversation between Deen and Cinta, Ghosh tries to establish how a westernized scholar like Deen could not find interest in the performance of the folk theater because it was too common or too ordinary for him. Cinta argues that hidden in the spaces that Deen criticizes as "supernatural" and "superstitious mumbo-jumbo" could be found the presences of human capacities that could not be explained by a cause-effect relation. She deconstructs the idea of religion as she speaks of the subtly underrated spaces of religious behavior such as *tarantism*. Drawing upon the work of De Martino Cinta, tries to argue that religion has taken its turn towards rationalism that has become its support for sustenance in contemporary times when narratives of miracles need to be justified by the scientific explanations. Cinta cites history of the ancient Aztec civilization that had seemingly had *a priori* knowledge or "precognition" or "foreknowledge" (Ghosh 37) of the arrival of the Spanish even before they had seen them. She voices her trust in the parallel, irrational, intuitive world of the mind that is ignored by institutionalized religion and to prove this point she cites the examples of the church inquisitions that took place in the seventeenth century when the church decided what was religious and what was superstitious. Ghosh presents his central thought in the chapter titled 'Cinta' (the second chapter of the novel) and prepares the reader for the rest of the book that will be an internet of myth, history, foreknowledge and environmental awareness.

Mythology and religion collate and confer to endow the text with the aura of prophesy- a distinctive feature of the texts of the anthropocene. The migration of dolphins, their suicides (beaching), the appearance of the spider in the apartment of Cinta, the appearance of yellow belly snakes on the beaches of New York are placed side by side with the presence of

Bangladeshi migrants in Venice. The tale is all about the idea of flight- the intense desire to leave the place of origin in search of better life or to escape an othering- be it the migrants of the Sundarbans who braved the oceans to escape unemployment or that of the Banduki Saudagar who wanted to flee the wrath of Manasha. Ghosh also takes a flight from the established notions of religion and myth and aims to preach the idea of a "dharma" that celebrates the life of things.

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