

Incorporating Ecocritical Vocabularies in the English Literature Classrooms

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

The Faculty Journal of Arts
Rajshahi University
Special Volume-6
ISSN: 1813-0402 (Print)

Received : 02 March 2025
Received in revised: 20 April 2025
Accepted: 16 March 2025
Published: 25 October 2025

Keywords:
Ecocriticism, Anthropocentrism,
Interdisciplinary Approach,
Environmental Activism, Climate
Derangement

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary era, there still remains an unfortunate effect of the all-pervading discourse centred around an anthropocentric worldview that has overshadowed the age-old understanding of the symbiotic relationships between humans and other living beings with nature. Even at present, especially within the context of a so called third world country like ours, issues of global warming and other ecological crises have led to mass migrations of marginalised communities who are forced out of their homes into an uncertain, miserable life. Moreover, environmental disasters and climate derangements are issues of vital concern that ultimately indicate an imminent, overwhelming crisis for all humanity. Ecocritical discourses, in this regard, offer important interpretive frameworks that invite careful critical attention to the dynamics of socio-environmental changes and a close reinspection of the relationships between nature and humanity. In our teaching-learning strategies of English literature then, it is imperative to incorporate vocabularies of ecocritical discourses that may hope to address, not only the gap between humans and nature but also between the academic practices and the tangible reality outside. Reading Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* through an ecocritical lens, this paper seeks to take an interdisciplinary approach in our interpretations of literary texts that addresses viable causes and consequences of contemporary ecological crises; while also hoping to share in Ghosh's emphatic commitment to a literary praxis that borders on environmental activism.

Literature, as an all-encompassing discipline, should not be restricted to the material dimensions of human existence. In the contemporary era, environmental degradation has become a pressing concern, largely driven by human selfishness, unchecked greed, and a pervasive profit-oriented mentality. These anthropocentric tendencies have significantly contributed to the destabilization of the global climate, endangering forests and the wildlife that inhabit them. The consequences of such ecological disruptions extend beyond the physical environment, severely impacting the socio-economic structures of nations—particularly those in the Global South—thereby intensifying patterns of human displacement and migration. Amitav Ghosh, an Indian-born author and climate activist, emerges as a prominent literary voice addressing the multifaceted crises induced by climate change. In his novel *Gun Island*,¹ Ghosh explores contemporary environmental issues and the human sufferings associated with ecological imbalance. Within the context of modern literary studies, there is an urgent need to shift from anthropocentric approaches to ecocritical perspectives. This shift is essential not only for fostering environmental awareness but also for redefining pedagogical practices. Integrating Ghosh's eco-activism into the study and teaching of literature can serve as a transformative tool to engage with environmental concerns in academic discourse.

Modern pedagogy can meaningfully incorporate ecocritical vocabulary in the literature classroom by embedding key ecological concepts into textual interpretation, thereby enabling students to read and analyze literature through an environmentally conscious lens. As Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the foundational figures in ecocriticism, asserts, "ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature".² By adopting ecocritical terms such as anthropocentrism, environmental derangement, climate crisis, environmental justice, species extinction, and non-human agency, educators empower students to challenge traditional human-centered readings and instead explore how literature interrogates humanity's relationship with the natural world. Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* serves as an ideal text through which this pedagogical approach can be

enacted. Ghosh's work exemplifies what Lawrence Buell describes as the "environmental imagination"³—a literary sensibility that foregrounds ecological consciousness and the entanglements of human and non-human life. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh addresses critical issues such as climate-induced migration, rising sea levels, species extinction, and the collapse of ecological stability. Through characters who grapple with the direct consequences of environmental change, Ghosh gives voice to the silenced victims of the climate crisis, especially in the Third World countries, thereby aligning literature with climate activism. His insistence that climate change is not only a scientific or political issue but also a narrative failure reinforces the urgency of integrating ecological thought into literary studies.

Ecocriticism, which emerged in the 1990s in response to increasing global environmental concerns, positions literature as a vital medium for shaping ecological consciousness. Scholars such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell emphasized the role of literary texts in engaging with environmental issues. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment,"⁴ while Buell expanded this definition by insisting that environmental literature should not merely depict nature, but actively confront ecological realities. On the contrary, anthropocentrism is the notion that human beings are the most significant entities in the world—a perspective that has historically justified the exploitation of nature for human benefit. In contrast, ecocriticism advocates for an ecocentric worldview that recognizes the intrinsic value of non-human life and promotes an ethical awareness of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural world.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* intricately weaves together myth, migration, and climate change through the journey of Dinanath Datta, a rare book dealer based in Brooklyn. Reconnecting with his Bengali heritage, Dinanath—known as Deen—becomes entangled in the legend of the Gun Merchant (Bonduki Sadagar), a figure whose story uncannily mirrors contemporary environmental and human crises. A visit to a shrine dedicated to this merchant in the Sundarbans ignites a chain of events: Deen witnesses the unsettling impact of climate change, encounters venomous marine life, and uncovers deep-seated local myths that seem to foretell ecological catastrophe. His path intersects with Cinta, an Italian historian, and displaced migrants such as Tipu and Rafi, who reflect the global consequences of environmental degradation. As Deen travels from India to Los Angeles and Venice, he confronts the interconnectedness of human displacement, non-human agency, and collapsing ecosystems. Throughout, Ghosh blurs the boundaries between the real and the mythical, highlighting humanity's failure to recognize the signs of a transforming planet. *Gun Island* ultimately presents a haunting, urgent narrative that challenges anthropocentric worldviews, revealing how history, myth, and environmental crisis are inextricably linked in the Anthropocene era.

Amitav Ghosh in his novel *Gun Island* has presented several issues related to environmental changes in which, he has depicted that the greatest trauma of human life lies in the heading of global warming, the root cause of such disasters as cyclones, floods, wildfires and also the movement of animals and humans. He also highlights how powerful countries play a major role in environmental degradation, being more responsible for carbon emissions than the Third World nations. Their developmental progress significantly contributes to global warming, resulting in both human and animal migration. Animals are moving whenever there's anything wrong in their dwelling but human movement is not easy as there are boundaries over the world where passports and visas are imposed on human movement for which people like Tipu and Rafi are bound to move in illegal ways taking risk of their life. The powerful countries are not ready to accept refugees although it's their duty to give shelter to the helpless migrants. Instead of supporting the refugees in the border they issue the slogans against the refugees like "No room here; go home", "climate migration=invasion". (Ghosh, 275)

In *Gun Island* the devastating effects of cyclones like Bhola cyclone and the cyclone of Aila serve as a strong example of human greed and its cost on environmental change. This reveals how human greed drives deforestation in the Sundarbans and water pollution from motorboat chemicals. The novel subtly points out human actions as a catalyst for disasters like cyclones,

floods and wildfires. Climate change also occurs with the misconception of development. For example, during summer the temperature increases to 43 degrees and people being developed now buy air conditioners instead of planting trees. They get the idea from the nations who invented these electronics. This seemingly advanced technology offers little real benefit. While air conditioners cool homes, offices, and public spaces, they release CFC gases that contribute to global warming. The construction of high rise and fancy buildings modeled after those in the First World countries harms the environment by consuming large amounts of natural resources like gas, oil, and water—worsening economic and class disparities in the Third World nations. Additionally, industrialization has led to factories that generate significant air and water pollution through waste products. All these developments are nothing but myths portrayed by the developed nations which Sachs asserts in his book, *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, “What development means depends on how the rich nations feel”.⁵

The story Ghosh presents is set in the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world, which is vital for our biodiversity. However, driven by greed, people do not even fear tiger attacks in order to serve their purposes. The Sundarbans is well known for its natural resources, such as precious trees and plants, timber, birds, rivers inhabited by crocodiles, fish, and dolphins. Due to its commercial importance, this area is frequently subjected to human intervention. Violating national laws, people enter the forest and exploit its resources without considering the grave consequences. It is also due to human greed that people build “refinery” (Ghosh, 99) beside the Sundarbans, causing harm to the wild animals and people living there. The Sundarbans suffers from both natural and man-made disasters, leaving people homeless and destitute. Its proximity to borders facilitates smuggling and illegal migration—activities closely linked to climate change. These contribute to economic collapse, poverty, inequality, and global chaos, as Ghosh narrates: “The Sundarbans had always attracted traffickers, because of its poverty, but never in such numbers as after Aila; they had descended in swarms, spiriting women off to distant brothels and transporting able-bodied men to work sites in faraway cites or even abroad. Many of those who left were never heard from again.” (Ghosh, 53)

However, Ghosh’s *Gun Island* offers a reality check, emphasizing that our biodiversity is at risk as the world’s ecology undergoes drastic changes. With these changes, both marine and terrestrial animals are migrating, and some face the threat of extinction. Through Piya’s research, Ghosh shows that due to water pollution the number of Irrawaddy dolphins of the Sundarbans are decreasing because “sea levels rose, and the flow of fresh water diminished, salt water had begun to intrude deeper upstream, making certain stretches too saline for the dolphins... Inevitably some had been hit by motorboats and steamers. Over the last few year the pod had lost so many members” (Ghosh, 96). Apart from dolphins and other aquatic species, even poisonous creatures like the “yellow-bellied snakes” (Ghosh, 135) are relocating and endangering humans. Ghosh’s protagonist, Deen, unexpectedly encounters a rare species of spider, “*Loxosceles reclusa*” (Ghosh, 206), in Venice—an area where it is not naturally found. Ghosh warns his readers of wildfires, citing examples such as the devastating wildfires in Los Angeles and Canada, the root cause of which is clearly environmental pollution. In recent times, Los Angeles has experienced a wildfire that caused widespread destruction to living beings. The Sundarbans has also recently faced a wildfire. Through these events, Ghosh’s fiction foreshadows the impending environmental crisis and its brutal consequences for both human and animal life. War is also one of the causes of environmental destruction. The effects of climate change became more visible after the Cold War, and historical wars have left permanent ecological damage. In a conversation with Deen, Cinta recalls a devastating battle in the Alps during the Thirty Years’ War, drawing a parallel to current conflicts in the Mediterranean. Following that war, the weather changed dramatically, resulting in floods and poverty. Today, wars such as the ongoing conflict between Palestine and Israel continue to harm the environment. Bombings and gunfire destroy large numbers of trees, significantly contributing to global warming. Scientists estimate that the carbon dioxide released by Israel’s aerial bombardment and ground invasion of Gaza in the first two months of the war exceeds the annual carbon footprint of some of the world’s most climate-

vulnerable nations. People's suffering increases due to water shortages, as seawater becomes contaminated by waste produced during the conflict.

Ghosh also reminds us that ecocide and migration is nothing new; people have been migrating since ancient times. Ghosh illustrates this through the myth of the Gun Merchant which according to Ashwarya Samkaria is “an example of ecologically conscious warning to the current age of Anthropocene”⁶ and his migration—a story that suggests that the wrath of Manasa Devi was triggered by the Gun Merchant’s disturbance, for which she punished him. Ghosh connects climate change with migration even in historical contexts. Though we see mass migration occurring in recent times, he writes in *The Great Derangement*: “My ancestors were ecological refugees long before the term was invented.”⁷ Amitav Ghosh’s text highlights how climate change forces people, especially from the Third World countries, to migrate—often illegally—to the First World countries in search of a better life. These wealthier nations, having first exploited nature, create conditions that drive such migration. Ghosh refers to the growing “people-moving industry,” (Ghosh,64) which Tipu describes as one of the world’s largest and fastest-growing industries. This industry has increased the number of “connection men” (Ghosh, 65), who assist in illegal border crossings. As life in the climate vulnerable regions becomes unbearable, thousands of climate refugees risk their lives crossing oceans. Ghosh’s characters reflect the harsh realities of migration: even after relocating, they continue to suffer. Characters like Tipu, Rafi, Bilal, and Kabir travel without legal documents, taking dangerous sea routes. Once abroad, they face exploitation and racism. Ghosh vividly recounts their journey—encounters with traffickers, separation, and violence—bringing to life the daily struggles of real-world migrants. He also gives reference of Bangladeshi migration, particularly from Madaripur district, through Lubna Khala’s character, who moves abroad after being a flood victim. These narratives, though fictionalized, are rooted in reality. By centering such marginalized voices, Ghosh brings attention to those often excluded from mainstream environmental discourse and aligns literature with environmental justice, highlighting the unequal burden of ecological harm.

Ghosh’s *Gun Island* portrays a syncretic view of climate change, the exploitation of nature and animals, and human migration, suggesting that the world now presents “all demonic possessions” (Ghosh,219) and that “it is a *risveglio*, a kind of awakening” (Ghosh,220) as it faces greater dangers. However, he leaves his readers with hope—that positive change is possible through awareness of the effects of climate change. The strange appearance of “bioluminescence” (Ghosh,284) also indicates that nature is both beautiful and dangerous when it is disturbed. He also conveys the message that humanity cannot survive if nature responds with its repercussions, which could be catastrophic. Ghosh highlights animal suffering and migration caused by global warming, advocating for eco-justice and raising awareness about animal rights. At the end of the novel, everything is resolved: Piya, Deen, Cinta, and Rafi find Tipu and rescue the “Blue Boat” (Ghosh,202) carrying refugees. This resolution reflects Ghosh’s optimism that the global climate crisis can be overcome. Ghosh also sets Piya and Cinta as role models for environmental activists who have immense contribution to saving nature and human beings.

Ghosh’s *Gun Island*, thus, suggests an interdisciplinary approach to reading literature, as a single novel can involve several other disciplines such as history, geography, anthropology, postcolonialism, and so on. By engaging students with Ghosh’s eco-activist ideas, educators can cultivate ecocritical literacy—an awareness of how language, stories, and culture shape our perceptions of the environment. In my opinion, when students are taught about environmental degradation and its impacts in their literature classrooms, they not only improve their reading skills but also become more environmentally aware and socially responsible. By blending literature with ecology, we can create a new kind of education—one that prepares students to care for the planet and all its life forms. Classroom discussions that revolve around Ghosh’s depiction of climate migration, non-human resilience, and environmental sustainability encourage students to link literary analysis with ecological and ethical imperatives. Nowadays, syllabi for literature students are increasingly designed around postcolonial ecocritical texts, which highlight the prevailing environmental crises around the world and emphasize the

importance of ecological sustainability for the survival of humankind. In order to make ecocritical reading more practical and engaging, international webinars on environmental pollution and activism can be arranged as part of classroom activities. Documentaries and pictures of cyclones, wildfires, and climate refugees can be shown to students through multimedia in the classroom. Besides these, students can be sent to survey the socio-economic conditions in disaster-prone areas after any major disaster as part of their assessment or study tours. Furthermore, the incorporation of ecocritical vocabulary into discussions, assignments, and reflective writing furthers interdisciplinary learning, connecting literature with environmental science, ethics and postcolonial studies. Thus, modern pedagogy, when informed by ecocritical theories and the literary activism of authors like Amitav Ghosh, not only deepens interpretive practices but also responds to the moral imperative of the Anthropocene. It prepares students to become critically aware, environmentally responsible individuals capable of addressing the multifaceted ecological challenges that define the contemporary world and literature classrooms are the ideal place to cultivate and disseminate such contemporary issues.

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