

Whose land is it, really? And whose story? Hosting human and non-human refugees in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

Patrycja Austin

University of Rzeszów, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0002-6410-2829

Abstract: The word hospitality includes the sense of hostility and a reciprocal exchange among equals. The accelerating human and non-human migrations caused by climate change call for a reclaiming of that complexity. Historically, the stranger, the barbarian, was the one deprived of the *logos*, the one not operating the language of the political centre. If, however, following Merleau-Ponty, the *logos* becomes the property of the living world, then it is not the human who can offer hospitality to other human and non-human strangers, but they all become guests in the living world with varying degrees of agency. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* explores the complexity of the notion of the host and the barbarian, questioning the Western belief in the primacy of human *logos*. It is shown both in the plot line and in the form of the novel which re-enacts the interplay between two modes: *logos* and *mythos*.

Key words: hospitality, non-human, refugees, Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island*, *mythos*, *logos*

Czyja to tak naprawdę ziemia? I czyja opowieść? O ludzkich i nie-ludzkich uchodźcach w powieści Amitava Ghosha *Gun Island*

Abstrakt: Znaczenie słowa „gościnność” obejmuje jednocześnie poczucie wrogości, a zarazem równości pomiędzy gospodarzem i gościem. Migracje spowodowane zmianami klimatu wymagają zbadania złożoności tego terminu. Z punktu widzenia historii przybysze, czyli barbarzyńcy, byli pozbawieni logosu, jako że nie operowali językiem centrum politycznego. Jeśli jednak, zgodnie z Merleau-Ponty, przyjmujemy, że *logos* jest obecny w świecie przyrody, wtedy będziemy mogli zacząć postrzegać samych ludzi jako gości w świecie przyrody. Amitav Ghosh bada złożoność pojęć: gospodarz i barbarzyńca, kwestionując zachodnie przekonanie o pierwszeństwie ludzkiego logosu. Jest to widoczne zarówno w fabule, jak i w formie powieści, która odzwierciedla współdziałanie dwóch trybów: logosu i mythosu.

Słowa kluczowe: gościnność, nie-ludzki, uchodźcy, Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island*, *mythos*, *logos*

*No one knows where they belong any more,
neither humans nor animals.*
(Amitav Ghosh)

*Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any
determination, before any anticipation, before
any identification, whether or not it has to do with
a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an
unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is
the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or
divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female.*
(Jacques Derrida)

Nearly one billion people in the world today are displaced, for political, social, or economic reasons and, more and more urgently, because of the changing climate. Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* responds to the accelerating human and non-human migrations caused by climate change by exploring the complexity of the act of hospitality. Rather than showing it as an act of goodwill, the novel reclaims the sense of hospitality as a reciprocal exchange among equals, whether human or non-human. The paper first looks at the political and social aspects of the current migration crisis and retrieves the etymology of the word hospitality as explored by Émile Benveniste and Jacques Derrida. Then it follows Thomas Nail's distinction between different kinds of migrants and, following Merleau-Ponty, extends the meaning of the word *logos* to include the non-human world. Finally, it analyzes the portrayal of various levels of hospitality in the novel and shows how, by introducing the mythical mode, it undermines the Western belief in the primacy of human *logos*.

The new millennium witnessed the highest number of migrants in history and the number is predicted to rise (Nail, 1). According to The UN International Organization for Migration, in just the second decade of the 21st century, the number of migrants increased by 51 million to reach 272 million in 2019 (un.org). The reasons for moving may be as varied as the very trajectories of movement. In fact, historically, the lack of a settled lifestyle may have been a defining feature of human civilization, both among the travelling populations and in the forever changing and expanding human settlements. What is more, this is not exclusively a human phenomenon. Displacement due to climate change, war, or a search for sustenance is what we share with the non-human world. More likely than not, even when it is not us who are on the move, we will find ourselves at the receiving end of human, animal, vegetal or microbial migrations. While, in some instances, the response is overwhelmingly welcoming and infused with care, in others it can bring out the worst fears and aversion. This paper looks at the way the vicissitudes of movement, and the subsequent dual phenomenon of hospitality and hostility are explored in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*.

The word hospitality, as Émile Benveniste explains, comes from Latin *hospes*, and *hostis* which form the compound *hosti-pet-s*, the first part

of which means guest or enemy, while second indicates a “master” (Benveniste 64). The word combines thus multiple, at first glance conflicting, meanings. *Hospes* signifies both “guest” and “enemy” – both deriving their meaning from “stranger”. The good stranger evolved into a guest while the hostile one, to an enemy (65-6). When placed in the historical context of Indo-European societies, the word *hostis* means not so much a stranger or an enemy but is connected with the act of reciprocity, as in “repay in kindness”, “compensation of a benefit”, and “equalization” (67). As for the second part of the compound, there are two verbs derived from it: *potior*- “to have power over something, have something at one’s disposal” and *possidere* – “possess” (65). It also carries the notion of “power” in the predicative expression *pote est*, shortened to *potest* – “I am capable, I can” (65). Historically, then, a compensatory relationship based on equality is a foundation for the institution of hospitality. There is thus an underlying reciprocity and duality in the notion of hospitality inspiring questions, like, for example: Who is the one in charge? Who gives? Who receives? Who has agency? Who is the enemy?

Today, it seems, the idea of equality and reciprocity has been lost, and the migrant is typically seen as a human being defined by a lack – of place, fixity, social membership, or political representation, and so, as being deprived of history, agency, and social force. This is because their social and political status is traditionally determined by those who are bound to a place - the primary perspective to which the position of the migrant is secondary or derivative. What would happen to this definition, however, if we changed the perspective? Thomas Nail proposes to view the migrant from his or her own defining feature – movement - rather than stasis. He moreover points out that it is not only migrants, but also entire societies, that are not static entities but dynamic processes, not least due to the influx of people and their labour, often valued and paid less than citizen labour and yet being essential for the functioning and growth of a society. The figure of the migrant becomes, from this angle, not an unwelcome visitor but “a socially constitutive power” (Nail 13), and hospitality once again might be recognized as a reciprocal exchange based on compensation among equals. Societies, however, holding on to the illusion of stasis, often react negatively to the arrival of migrants by changing their status, making them apolitical, seeing them as criminal, unemployable or, when the society’s predominant goal is expansion, they simply take advantage of the migrants’ labour force.

Nail distinguishes different kinds of migrants across human history. For this paper, the most interesting ones will be the figure of the nomad and the barbarian. The nomad is a person expelled from a territory (51), or left out from society as it expands, even if his or her status in the community is relatively equal. Alternatively, he or she is a person who has actively left a territorial society (for example, early hunter-gatherers) and invented a different form of social motion. Nail says, “[t]he **nomads** were not only chased out; they deserted” (130). The figure of the **barbarian**, in turn, is

politically inferior. Aristotle understood this inferiority as the lack of *logos* - proper speech and reason necessary for political life which is seen even in the etymology of the word: the Greek word βάρβαρος, *barbaros*, was an onomatopoeic imitation of the babbling of the foreigner.

Therefore, those who do not have a city-state, and do not belong to the *polis*, tend to be seen as naturally inferior and deprived of political rationality. Thus understood, the figure of the migrant is situated politically between the human and the animal. They are unable to speak the language of the political center, to use the reason of the political center, and are excessively mobile in relation to the political center (Nail 53). Jacques Derrida, likewise, places weight on the language of the visitor but in his elaboration, language may lend itself to deconstructing the figure of the barbarian. The French word *l'étranger*, which means both a stranger and a foreigner, is closely connected to the language he or she uses (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 133). And yet, Derrida understands language in a broader way, as encompassing culture, values, norms and the meanings that inhabit it. A person may communicate in a different way but if their norms and values are shared, he or she is less foreign to us. He proposes, however, that one way to study human-human hospitality is by analyzing our relationship with animals, the ultimate barbarians who do not speak the human tongue (Still, 220). Human-animal relationships easily lend themselves to all sides of the hospitality-hostility spectrum and in various ways breach the human-non-human boundary. Derrida notices it is easier to talk about hospitality among humans as a virtue but then he also says: "Hospitality, therefore – if there is any – must, would have to, open itself to an other that is not mine, my hôte, my other, not even my neighbor or my brother, perhaps an 'animal'" (quoted in Anidjar 363). Hospitality cannot be limited in range to our own species. If we, Derrida says, do not offer hospitality to animals then we are also excluding gods (Derrida and Dufourmantelle, 126). An exploration of our attitude towards animals which is closely connected to the way we perceive the boundaries of the human may then allow us to better understand the sources of inequality in our treatment of other humans.

Language and its connection with culture and rationality have then been of paramount significance to being perceived as being human. But, more recently, less and less so in the way it was understood from Aristotle through Descartes to Heidegger, as the property distinguishing us from other beings. Already in 1945, at the time Heidegger was still separating plants and animals from those beings who have a world, Merleau-Ponty argued that "The only *Logos* that pre-exists is the world itself" *Phenomenology of Perception* (lxxxiv). Humans are a part of the world which is teeming with meaning and language. "Language is a life, is our life, and the life of the things" (VI 125). Understood in this way, *logos*, similarly to the way Derrida later writes about language, encompasses not only language but also cultural creations and these, according to Merleau-Ponty, can be

both human and non-human (Westling 136). Human language and cultural creations are thus not things that separate us from the rest of the world but that emerge from it, they are evolutions of our animality (Westling 3).

This understanding of *logos* poses serious questions for the conditions of hospitality. It makes invalid the notion of the barbarian as elaborated by Aristotle. Even more radically, if humans, as Merleau-Ponty argues, are a part of *the flesh of the world*, then instead of “the animal being the uninvited guest – the one who breaches the human subject, the host as master of self and home” (Still 220), it is humans that may be seen as guests rather than hosts in the natural world, impinging on other beings’ space, be it a snake, a lynx, a redwood tree, fungi or bacteria. Bringing this, with Derrida, back to the question of human-human hospitality, I would propose that such deconstruction of the host-guest relationship questions the status of human migrants and refugees. They are given a common denominator with their human host as all sides are now but guests in the natural world with various degrees of exchange and agency.

Amitav Ghosh’s characters find themselves to be, variously, hosts and guests in the fictional world which sweeps across continents and centuries, as well as mythological and real-life spaces. The novel’s very first sentence opens up multiple avenues the story will take: “The strangest thing about this strange journey was that it was launched by a word (...)” (Ghosh, 2019 3). Its inclination is thus towards strangeness, and not commonplace, a journey rather than stasis, and on human and non-human communication. The main character is a Brooklyn-based dealer in rare books from Kolkata, Dino, who undergoes a change from priding himself in being a rationally-minded person to one who believes himself to be a reincarnation of a legendary hero from Bengali folklore, Chand Sadagar, or the eponymous Gun Merchant. His metamorphosis is mirrored in the style of the novel. It begins in a realist way and then slowly its contours become blurred and fantasy elements and supernatural occurrences of the legend seep into the plot, challenging the *logos*-centred worldview of the character and the reader alike. The overlaying leitmotifs are movement and change: human and non-human travel and relocation, cultural and social transformation, and the migration and evolution of language. In the background and interconnected with those, there is another change – of climate. And yet, in neither case does change happen in the linear manner, as in the narratives of progress. It is a recurrent, cyclical phenomenon. In my analysis, I will first focus on human and non-human migrations that constitute the core of the story. Then, I will explore the way the novelistic form departs from the realist mode and how it helps challenge some of the assumptions about the human-set boundaries.

The main character, Dino, lives in Brooklyn, but he regularly visits Kolkata as a part of the “great flocks of ‘foreign-settled’ Calcuttans” (4) who in winter escape the Northern climates of their Western homes and,

like birds, make annual migrations to India. It is the movement of the middle class who can afford to enjoy the benefits of the places between which they travel. Then, there are political refugees from East Pakistan, like Dino's family, who had escaped to India during the Partition. Finally, young men constituting a part of the current refugee crisis in Europe are given the most extensive portrayal. The novel looks closely at their reasons for leaving home, the technicalities of the trip, the risks involved and, finally, political response at the receiving end. The novel follows the journey of two boys from the Sundarbans, Tipu and Rafi, which could not be more unlike Dino's airborne travel. They represent the movement of a mostly young population in the Sundarbans who leave home in search of a better place as their homeland is changing and becoming less hospitable. In fact, the novel portrays the way the Sundarbans' region has been harshly exposed to the effects of climate change:

now the fish catch is down, the land's turning salty, and you can't go to the jungle without bribing the forest guards. The landscape is so altered that the younger generation no longer learns traditional knowledge about the forest, rivers and animals from their parents. On top of that every other year you get hit by a storm that blows everything to pieces. ... If you're young, you can't just sit on your butt till you starve to death. Even the animals are moving. ... If you've got any sense you'll move. (65)

The Sundarbans' region experiences recurrent cyclones, with grave consequences: e.g. the 1970 Bhola cyclone was, in terms of casualties, the greatest natural disaster of the 20th century (300,000 lives lost, but according to some estimates, half a million). Each cyclone brings a significant change to the region. In 2009, the cyclone Aila swept away hundreds of miles of embankment, letting the sea inland and ruining once cultivable land. Some of the evacuated population never returned, "knowing that their lives, always hard, would be even more precarious now. Communities had been destroyed, and families dispersed; the young had drifted to cities, swelling already-swollen slums ..." (53). The effects of the unsteady climate have spring-boarded the human trafficking business. This "people-moving industry" is "already one of the world's biggest and still growing fast. Turnover last year was in the billions" (Ghosh, 2019, 65). The traffickers or, in Bangla, *dalals*, are the connecting men who arrange the subsequent stages of the trip. Tipu is a boy from the Sundarbans who had lost his father in a cyclone and, unlike other boys in the area, had spent a few years in the US and had been exposed to state-of-the-art technology. He now cooperates with the *dalals* and writes fake biographies for boys who set off on their journeys to help them receive refugee status. Climate change, which is making the Sundarbans uninhabitable, and the resultant poverty are not sufficient causes for them to be granted asylum. Tipu explains:

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; or suppose he was being beat up by his landlord because he couldn't pay off his debts – none of that shit matters to the Swedes.." (67)

Tipu elucidates the slowness of international policy in catching up with the lived reality of entire populations today. The status of a refugee was defined in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees as a person who left their home country "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion" (emergency.unhcr.org). The 1984 Cartagena Declaration OAU Convention expanded the definition as people fleeing "events seriously disturbing public order" (unhcr.org). The UNHCR has been reluctant, however, to grant this status to persons experiencing the effects of climate change even though, since 2008, more than 318 million people have been displaced by the effects of increasing climate disturbance – floods, droughts, earthquakes, or storms, which means that while there are roughly 4.5 births every second, at the same time 1 person loses their home, and this number is set to rise (European Parliament Briefing, 2). There has been a certain change since 2020, with the UN Human Rights Committee ruling that if a state sends "persons displaced in the context of disasters and climate change" back home where their life is in danger, it breaches its human rights obligations (Vince). This is not an internationally binding ruling, though. The response and aid have thus been inadequate partly due to this lack of legal obligation to do so and the lack of a clear definition of a climate refugee. Legally unrecognized, these persons become informal workers, without legal recognition or benefits of social support systems. Thomas Nail elucidates, "[u]ndocumented migrants, in addition to being subject to racism and other forms of social discrimination, are subject to multiple and complex forms of social expulsion (territorial, political, legal, and economic) to a greater degree than legal migrants" (181). When they make it to the job market, they are taken advantage of because of their lack of status. They work in some of the hardest jobs and still live below poverty. "The true effect of criminalizing the migrant's right to work is not 'self-deportation' (as US enforcement hopes) but rather that migrants will work illegally for cheaper wages, under more dangerous conditions, without benefits or collective bargaining" (209) as they are not protected by law. The same can be seen in the case of the undocumented migrants in Venice presented in the novel.

Dino is offered a job as a translator for a documentary on the recent wave of *rifugiati* - refugees heading for Italy from the Middle East and Africa, who cross the Adriatic and the Mediterranean. Some boats manage to reach the shore, others are less fortunate. This is how Lubna, a Bangladeshi woman who runs a support centre for refugees in Venice, describes their situation: "most of them work all day long, doing several different jobs. They barely get any sleep. On top of that, some of them haven't yet had their *incontro* – that's the meeting with the committee that decides

on their status” (Ghosh 2019, 176). Bengalis in Italy “do everything - they make the pizzas for the tourists, they clean the hotels, they even play the accordion at street corners” (161). Despite slavish work, they live in a state of extreme precarity and need to be always wary of both gangs that take advantage of their vulnerability, and of the authorities: “an untoward word to the authorities could lead to the unravelling of their lives” (169). The climactic moment is the arrival of the so-called Blue Boat, spotted in the eastern Mediterranean and heading for the Italian shore carrying men from Eritrea, Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Bengal. The case of the boat becomes a battlefield between opposing political camps. On the one hand, right-wing politicians and activists pledge to turn it back, on the other, a group of civilian activists come to the rescue of the travellers.

Tipu is on the boat, having travelled through Pakistan, Iran and Turkey using forged papers. He and Rafi, who had set off on this journey together, were separated at the Turkish border where they had to run for their lives: “The soldiers at the Turkish side shoot if they see anyone trying to cross” (209). The injured Tipu had to go back to Iran. Such separations are not rare. Another Bangladeshi boy in Venice, Bilal, describes the way he and his friend Kabir were kidnapped in Tripoli and, for a year and a half “were beaten, tortured, and sold by one gang to another. They made us work from morning to night, paying us almost nothing and giving us only bread to eat. We were like **slaves**; what we went through was something that should not happen to any **human being**” (211). A reference to slavery is also made in the description of the Sinai Peninsula, a connection point that became popular after migration routes through Turkey, Greece, Morocco and Libya were closed by the European Union. Refugees who arrive there from their various points of origin are unexpectedly charged for the subsequent leg of the journey. Those who cannot afford to pay the fee are charged, for example, by having an organ removed, “like the worst horrors of the slave trade” (189). When asked about cooperation with the documentary about the refugee crisis, Lubna wonders: “it might be good if people knew more about our lives. Perhaps they would learn to see us as ordinary **human beings**” (177).

As can be seen in the above quotes, the text highlights the ontological shifts in the perception of refugees. Those who leave their homes in pursuit of their dream of a better life are first deprived of human dignity by the traffickers and then, if they make it, used as a cheap labour force by the receiving countries. The Blue Boat itself is compared to J.M.W. Turner’s painting “The Slave Ship”, also known as “Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying – Typhoon Coming On”, that portrays the shipment of indentured workers to Jamaica in the late 18th century, indicating the historical continuity of slavery in the form of the current crisis. And yet, the novel makes a clear distinction between these two forms of the migrating workforce. While “the system of indentured labour, like chattel slavery

before it, had always been managed and controlled by European imperial powers” (303), which had detailed knowledge about the workers, and were transported in order to feed the appetites of Western nations, today’s migrants set off to follow their own dreams and desires, created partly by the global digital reach of the images from the more affluent parts of the world. There appears to be a clash in definitions and the status of these men if considered according to Thomas Nail’s elaboration: while the traffickers and the metropolis persist in seeing and treating them as **barbarians**, in fact, they are **nomads** who come of their own choice, fitted with the global language, English, and carrying their own agendas. What is more, today the metropolis has drastically limited knowledge about the men who arrive on its shores. The Blue Boat, thus, stands for “the upending of a centuries-old project that had been essential to the shaping of Europe” (304-5), and the whiteness of Europe which had been guarded throughout centuries of imperial dominance is now threatened and this fear stands in the way of hospitality. The call to grant refugee status to a person deemed to be a criminal can hardly be reconciled in the case of the wave of migration to Europe of people of drastically different cultures, seen as potential terrorists, seeking to storm the so-called ‘Fortress Europe’.

The movement of people from different corners of the world is, however, not the only reason for worry for the Western cities. Because of the changes in climate, entire populations of animals are also on the move in search of favourable conditions. In the novel, a poisonous two-foot-long snake attacks a dog in Venice Beach, Los Angeles, causing much distress. In Venice, Dino encounters a poisonous spider *Loxosceles Reclusa* which, again, is spreading into Europe (223). Then, the wooden pilings on which Venice was built are being ruined by shipworms that are attracted to Venice. Cinta explains: “[t]hey are literally eating the foundations of the city” (251). She says this after she nearly dies as a result of being attacked by them: “And then the worms were swarming over us – our legs, arms, faces, heads. It was as though the earth itself had sent out tentacles to touch us, to feel the texture of our skin and see whether we were real” (252). It is as if the worms were reclaiming what belongs to them, turning humans into visitors.

The sense of security in European cities is thus being challenged by both human and non-human visitors, whose movement is conditioned by the growing temperatures. And yet, even though in Italy and the US the incremental relocation of animal habitats seems threatening, when the novel moves its focus towards displaced dolphins in the Sundarbans, their migration is portrayed with sympathy and their lot is met with empathy. They are displaced by the increase of salt water in rivers caused by rising sea levels, and by pollution. Piya, a marine biologist specializing in the Irrawaddy dolphins, says about her favourite dolphin, Rani:

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 any more 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. (106)

There are obvious echoes here of the description of the human displacement in the Sundarbans quoted earlier: both humans and dolphins find their home uninhabitable and the knowledge and skills passed down from generation to generation are no longer of any use for the younger generation. Piya forms a close intimate relationship with the dolphins she has been studying over the years (100). There is especially one dolphin, Rani, with whom Piya seems to have crossed the interspecies divide: “it was clear that her relationship with Rani was strong enough, and durable enough, to qualify as what humans might regard as an old friendship. [...] the dolphin had begun to make eye contact with her, in [...] a manner that suggested something more than mere recognition” (101). The clearly mutual bond is reminiscent of what Donna Hawaray postulates as “making kin” that is what “we most need to be doing in a world that rips us apart from each other” (Paulson interview). She defines kin beyond species boundaries as “those who have an enduring mutual, obligatory, non-optional, you-can't-just-cast-that-away-when-it-gets-inconvenient, enduring relatedness that carries consequences. I have a cousin, the cousin has me; I have a dog, a dog has me” (Paulson interview). Having kin, whether human or not, carries consequences, accountabilities and obligations, it brings out the need to care for one another. And care, in this understanding, “cannot be just a humanist affair” (Paulson). An important aspect of any relationship is the possibility of mutual communication. Being a scientist, Piya, however, will not admit the possibility of communicating with her dolphins, even if she can recognize emotions such as gratitude in their eyes. Dino starts with a similar mindset. As the story progresses, however, he becomes increasingly more attuned to the voices and aliveness of the world around him. When he first travels to visit Manasa Devi's temple hidden within the Sundarban forest, “every element of the landscape – forest, water, earth – seemed to be seething with life ... to those who knew what to look for, the forest teemed with signs that could, in fact, be deciphered and read, like some antediluvian script” (71). Likewise, when in Venice, “somewhere in the apartment there was a creak and a groan, the sound of centuries-old wood slowly settling into the mud of the lagoon. ... everything around me seemed to be alive, even the air that was brushing against my face (231). Whether in a jungle or in the city, there is a prevailing sense of aliveness and ongoing vivid conversation. Also, while in Venice, during his visit to the Querini Stampalia Library, Dino finds a rare copy of *Hypnerotomachia* in which a man gets lost in the forest and dreams a dream within a dream in which “**voices and messages** emanate from beings of all sorts – animals, trees, flowers, spirits” (227). While perusing the book, Dino experiences a reversal in the roles typically ascribed to humans and their non-human oth-

ers: “it wasn’t so much that I was dreaming, but that I was being dreamed. By creatures whose very existence was fantastical to me – spiders, cobras, sea snakes – and yet they and I had somehow become a part of each other’s dreams” (227). The language of the non-human, or what Merleau-Ponty names *the logos of the living world*, is fully present and active and the characters are learning to recognize its presence. It remains, however, opaque and non-transparent, calling for a translator. Dino and Tipu consider Shamans as possible mediators that can communicate with animals, trees, mountains, or ice (116), but the figure that eventually takes this role in the novel is the goddess from the legend, Manasa Devi, to whom the shrine is built. Dino understands her to be “a negotiator, a translator – or better still a *portavoce* – ... ‘a voice carrier’ between two species that had no **language in common** and no shared means of communication” (166).

The legend of Manasa Devi and her Merchant is explored for its potential to portray the human-environment dynamic. Manasa Devi demands that the Merchant build a temple to show his respect and devotion, which he refuses to do, with dire consequences for him and his family. The goddess sends upon him calamities – droughts, fires, floods, and employs snakes and spiders to chase and haunt him wherever he tries to escape. In his waking sensitivity, however, Dino learns to see it not as acts of wrath, but desperation. While the word “Goddess’ conjures up an image of an all-powerful deity whose every command is obeyed by her subjects, for Manasa “snakes were not so much her subjects as her constituents; to get them to do her bidding she had to plead, cajole, persuade” (167). As an intermediary, she needs to maintain her authority. If the snakes, spiders, or rivers see that the Gun Merchant is ignoring her voice, they would not believe she can stop humans from their pursuit of profit at the expense of the living world. Her mission was thus to cajole the Merchant, at all costs, into obedience (167).

The legend turns out to be based on real-life events. Dino and Cinta research the history of the temple and manage to reconstruct the journey of the historical figure who had built it. In 17th-century India the area was struggling with the effects of climate change due to the Little Ice Age. The Merchant was forced to flee his homeland because of a severe drought that caused mass starvation. Depending on who recollects the story, the Gun Merchant is seen as a victim, if told to Dino by an upper-class lady, or, when told by the guardian of the temple, a man of lower status - as an arrogant person certain that his wealth and intellect will protect him from the goddess. During his journey, the Merchant is afflicted by a series of misfortunes: his family and riches drown in the river, the Merchant himself is captured by Portuguese pirates and sold as a slave. Bought and set free by Captain Ilyas, a well-travelled trader and sailor, he travels to the Maldives, then Egypt, Turkey, and finally Italy. During this journey he trades and amasses wealth but is chased by snakes and nearly dies in a fire caused by severe drought. Around 1660, he arrives in the Venetian ghetto

supposedly free of venomous creatures. And yet, even here, the Merchant barely escapes an attack by a poisonous spider. After he leaves Venice, he is again taken captive by pirates to be sold as a slave, the boat is headed for Sicily, just like the Blue Boat, and there a miracle happens – “he is set free by the creatures of the sky and the sea” (269). He comes back to the Sundarbans to build the *dhaam*, or temple. Its construction brings an end to the goddess’s wrath, which can be read as a metaphorical deterrent to the kind of thinking centered on profit, and to human arrogance.

We can easily spot parallels between the reasons for the Merchant’s departure from India and present-day refugees heading for Europe, including the fact that their homes are no longer liveable due to climate disturbances, the trajectory of their journeys, and the experience of slavery. At the same time, the legend acquires a personal dimension for Dino. His visit to the *dhaam* is a turning point in his perception of reality. This self-proclaimed pragmatist who once prided himself “on being a rational, secular, scientifically minded person” that did not believe in the supernatural (36) begins to unravel: “It was as if some living thing had entered my body, something ancient that had long lain dormant in the mud” (113). Dino begins to identify more and more with the Gun Merchant. He believes himself to be retrieving the Merchant’s memories of the place and slowly fuses with him. Unlike the refugees, then, who literally make a similar physical journey, his is an exploratory internal journey retracing the Merchant’s change in perception. It is portrayed almost literally by his relationship with his glasses. Heuristically, the glasses stand for Western enlightenment rationalism. During his first visit at the temple, the glasses are the only object tethering him to reality as he had known it and he is literally losing his foothold and repeatedly falling down in the mud: “it was as if my body were being reclaimed by the primeval ooze. It seemed to me that my eyeglasses were my last connection with civilization” (73). Later, when he recovered the glasses, “it was as though I had woken from a nightmare” (73). The glasses thus stand for seeing one version, one aspect of the world which he is desperately trying to cling to and which is being challenged by the events that follow.

Incidentally, Dino finds himself travelling to Italy which in the 17th century, during the Merchant’s time – was at the same time the centre of rationalism and a site of serious climatic disruption, the Little Ice Age. More importantly, it was the beginning of human dependence on coal. “Couldn’t it be said that it was in the 17th c that we started down the path that has brought us to where we are now?” (137). The novel names men standing at the forefront of the Enlightenment: Hobbes, Leibniz, Newton, Spinoza, and Descartes and accuses them of being oblivious to the processes that would eventually lead to what we today call the Anthropocene epoch. The seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries are thus connected in the story by the cause-and-effect process at the core of which lies the human belief in full grasp and control over the natural world which, at the personal level,

dissolves through Dino's identification with the Merchant. There is a word in Bangla, *bhuta*, which means both "existing" and "existed" bridging past and present, meaning "the past is present in the present" or "the present haunted by the past" (115), reinforcing the sense of both similarities and continuities. In the process of identifying with the Merchant, Dino lets go of his belief in human control and learns that he inhabits a world filled with voices and agencies. It is explained in terms of possession. The word has changed its meaning with time. For people living in pre-industrial times, Cinta explains, it meant loss of will and freedom: "a feeling that inexplicable forces are acting upon them in such a way that they are no longer in control of what happens to them" (235). It was an existential threat, as back then people depended on the soil, the weather, animals to survive and "[e]verything they depended on for their livelihood could fight back and resist. ... That is why possession – the loss of presence – was a matter of such anxiety for them". Today, however, "we don't have to impose our presence on a cash machine or a cellphone and so, the sense of presence slowly fades." In fact, "The world of today presents all the symptoms of demonic possession" (236). Another meaning of the word possession is highlighted by the Gun Merchant's very occupation, which means providing means for people to acquire things, possessions, as if in a mindless trance, often at the expense of the natural world. Seen in this light, Dino's loss of stable foothold, of his rootedness in the rationalistically explicable world is thus a kind of awakening rather than possession.

Dino's personal transformation is mirrored by the (d)evolution in the novelistic mode – the protagonist of a realist novel slowly metamorphoses into a hero of a mythical tale. This, again, is a reversal in the progression of the literary form. These two genres are traditionally associated with different ways of thinking (Markova 2016). *Mythos* in ancient Greece stood in opposition to *logos*, as it was based on traditional, folk knowledge, it was pictorial, symbolic and became associated with irrationality. In turn, (pre-) scientific thought, had to be systematic, logical and rational (Markova 16), it was associated with *logos*. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh writes that the novel as a genre emerged at the time the Enlightenment ideas were promoting human reason. It was a time of rapidly developing science when Blaise Pascal's 'spirit of geometry', based on the mechanistic principles of Newtonian physics instigated the belief that, on its road towards progress, humanity can now leave behind irrational beliefs and myths and it repressed and tamed the irrational. Likewise, the novel relocated "the unheard-of toward the background" (Ghosh 2016, 23). The everyday took precedent over the improbable. By questioning the everyday, challenging Western epistemologies and re-inserting, in their place, "an animistic agency of the non-human world" (Samkaria 28), *Gun Island* does the opposite. By interweaving the story of Manasa Devi with a contemporary plot, the novel explores the potential and function of myth. Its more fantastical elements allow it to bring together the

material and immaterial, to focus on land, water, air and its non-human sentient beings creating a perspective on inhabiting a world that does not follow to the linearity of progress, and one in which the non-human inhabitants might be seen as hosts, more or less hospitable. Like myth, the story reaches for non-linguistic, pictorial and symbolic expression. Most importantly, the pictorial hieroglyphic symbols at the Dhaam, presented graphically in the novel, constitute the major clue in Dino's pursuit of Chand Sadagar's story which had never been written down in words and published. It was preserved in folk knowledge and "was only meant to be passed down from mouth to mouth" (140). The importance of storytelling as a source of knowledge in the pre-enlightenment era is highlighted by Cinta:

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. [...] 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. (140-1)

In tune with Merleau-Ponty's ideas, Cinta ponders on the possibility that storytelling is not necessarily what separates humans from the non-human world:

'But what if the truth were even stranger? What if it were the other way around? What if the faculty of storytelling were not specifically human but rather the last remnant of our animal selves? A vestige left over from a time before language, when we communicated as other living beings do? Why else is it that only in stories do animals speak? Not to speak of demons, and gods, and indeed God himself? It is only through stories that the universe can speak to us, and if we don't learn to listen you may be sure that we will be punished for it.' (141)

In the novel, thus, *logos* and *mythos* are not opposite, separate ways to approach the world, they check and complement one another. *Mythos* challenges the assumptions that our rational selves have habitually lived by: of our ability to know and control our environments, of the narratives of progress, of the muteness and submission of the non-human world. What is more, the idea of *logos* can be stretched to include non-human means of expression and communication. Recognition of parallel existences, their expression and communication, and their presence within our human worlds questions our role as hosts and turns us into barbarians of the earth who need to learn to speak the language of the surrounding environment. Only then can we more peacefully share our homes with other fellow creatures, both human and non-human.

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