Gun Island: An Experiment with Fictional Time

Khadijatul Kaminy*

Abstract

This paper examines the treatment of time in the novel *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh, and scrutinises how its particular temporal perspective explores the connection between humans and nature. Ghosh deploys his own techniques to make readers conscious about the temporal scope of his story, and these techniques can be analysed through the distinctive ways of time measurement, theories of 'deep time' or ecological time, the idea of the 'Anthropocene', various modes of temporal distortion, and the concepts of public and private memory. Understanding the timeframe of any literary work is crucial to grasp its essence, and it is only within a temporal structure that it can be located. In *Gun Island*, the author challenges readers by using unique measurement of time, fragmentation of traditional clock time, and juxtaposition of collective with individual memory. I argue in my paper that through these challenges, which definitely make the reading a complicated one, the author is able to offer a new perception of time to the readers. The unique approach of temporality that Ghosh adopts points out how the general human perception of time hinders our capacity to perceive the crucial signs of climate change in the present world. At the same time, this new temporal perspective helps readers to be aware of environmental changes and its consequences.

Keywords: Temporality, time measurement, temporal distortion, individual memory, collective memory.

Should we accuse 'time' for the damage that has been done to the climate? Or should we be held accountable for the climate crisis that we are facing at present? Natural changes over a natural course of time have never been particularly perilous for the existence of humankind, rather those are the man-made changes that should be blamed. It is a given that the climate has always been changing throughout the history of human civilisation. However, the shift is faster than ever right now. The drastic changes we are experiencing now, and the speed at which these are unfolding compel us to examine the temporal aspect associated with nature and climate. This paper explores how temporal perception works in *Gun Island* (2019) in order to make readers ecologically perceptive. Modern literature represents time and consciousness together, which allows the writer to leave the temporal structure of the traditional plot with the help of stream of consciousness and nonlinearity, as Virginia Woolf stated, "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (161). In postmodern writing, it is extremely difficult to pin down any particular notion of temporality which reigns over others except one constant feature, that is, perpetual experimentation on the temporal aspect of any literary work. In his latest novel, *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh stitches together past, present and future in such a manner as to

* Lecturer, Department of English, East West University

make the whole dynamism of time intricately complex and thought-provoking, and this can be connected to environmental consciousness. The aim of this paper is to analyse the way fictional nonlinearity signifies climate nonlinearity. This article outlines Ghosh's treatment of time in *Gun Island* by investigating the means of time measurement, the methods employed to distort the traditional concept of time, and the ways of distinguishing between personal and collective memory.

Amitav Ghosh's latest novel, *Gun Island*, revolves around a seemingly boring and aged antique book dealer as well as folklorist Dinnath, aka Deen, as the protagonist who finds himself entangled in an ancient legend of the Sundarbans and eventually gets involved in incredibly exciting events. The legend deals with a gun merchant who by denying the love of the snake goddess, incurred her fury and as a result, had to take on many adventures throughout his life to escape the wrath of the goddess. At last, he had to yield and build a shrine to pay tribute to the goddess, which is in the Sundarbans. During Deen's course of his thrilling intellectual pursuit, we meet the brilliant Venetian historian Cinta, the marine biologist Piya, and the two teenage friends Tipu and Rafi who eventually become distressed migrants. While the protagonist embarks on his journey to find the missing parts of the folklore, the author takes the readers through an extensive geographical and temporal expanse. The setting of this novel is no less important than the characters as is expected from any ecologically aware author. Examining Ghosh's oeuvre, it can be said that his works reflect a multitude of issues from history, myth, love, loss and memory to migration and ecology. This novel particularly focuses on climate change, "stitching together different geographies—and histories—around the world, most notably the Sundarbans and Venice" (Sinha). Ghosh is constantly relevant for his narratives dealing with current issues and themes that impact our existence as a species. Human-environment association is never missing in his writing. Ghosh explicitly expresses his contempt towards the fact that a serious issue like climate change is continually being neglected by authors of serious fiction and stresses that the realities of climate change must be incorporated into fiction in different ways. He says in an interview with *New York Times*, "I feel completely convinced that we have to change our fictional practices in order to deal with the world that we're in" (Ghosh). *Gun Island* in particular deals with ecology and migration. During the tumultuous quest for the origin of the gun merchant's myth, the protagonist gets involved with the aggressive but clever teenage boy Tipu and his friend Rafi—a local of the Sundarbans. Their story of enchantment with European countries, involvement with human-trafficking, illegal migration to Italy, and the subsequent horrifying experiences are no less important than Deen's actual pursuit which moves him from Kolkata to the Sundarbans, and then to Los Angeles and finally to Venice. In fact, the rescue of immigrants and the simultaneous natural disaster in Italy overwhelm the protagonist's successful mission of solving the puzzle of the gun merchant's myth at the end of the novel. Ghosh deploys his own fictional practice to deal with the themes and characters of his story. His writing is never located in one place or time. The temporal structure always breeds curiosity in his fiction. Here, Ghosh plays with his temporal approach with a view to mirror the consequence of climate crisis through the lack of linearity in his fiction.

In *Gun Island*, fictional time has been measured in various ways so that readers' consciousness can be awakened to the temporal aspect as well as to the dominating theme

of the novel—climate change. Ghosh employs several means to convey this interesting dimension of time, which eventually echo the changing dimension of the environment surrounding us. It would be a disputable fact whether time is a concrete or an illusory thing; nevertheless, there is no scope for doubt that time is measured. This measurement of time became glaringly visible after the 15th century in Europe, especially after the rise of capitalism and the subsequent rise of the industrial revolution. Time had to be measured when it became inevitable to calculate human labour according to working hours, and this is the moment when notion of modern time severed its relationship with religious time, as Osborne informs us: "Unlike the Christian temporalities of eternity and eschatology, the secular time of modernity was understood as measurable, rational, and progressive" (Osborne 19). When it comes to a novel, though, the clock cannot be the single method of measuring time since novels deal with the real complexities of human life, and the novelist must expose the unique ways in which we measure time in our life. These individual methods can be radically different from each other. More interestingly, people experiencing the same timeline can measure or recall it in incongruent ways. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh has shown how disparate time measurement can be. One noticeable fact is that the narrator is hardly exactly accurate about time, for instance, phrases like "roundabout a little before five" (Ghosh 47) or "a little after 10 a.m." (Ghosh 94) can be found the novel. This ambiguity revolving around time throughout the novel reminds the readers of the uncertainty of climate change since such changes are happening at an incredible speed, turning the traditional time measuring procedure into an uncertain one. In addition to this, it is worth noticing the unique ways the seasoned fisherman of the Sundarbans, Horen Naskar, employs to measure time. While talking about various past events, he refers to different storms that occurred in the Sundarbans at different times, like the storm of 1970 or the cyclone 'Aila' of 2009. Deen remarks, "Storms, I soon discovered, were Horen's measure of time" (Ghosh54). As a local of the Sundarbans and being close to nature all his life, Horen Naskar cannot think of anything but natural disasters as his means to measure time. Instead of counting months or years, he counts the cataclysms that created upheaval in the lives of the locals. This also points to the frequency at which we are experiencing natural calamities in our age.

Distortion of traditional timeframe is another important method that Ghosh employs to explore the temporal approach of this novel. This distortion has been done intentionally on the author's part with a view to startle the readers so that they can think beyond their familiar timeline and space. The present crisis of climate change faced by the whole world must be measured on both the traditional human timescale and the ecological one. The concept of deep time or ecological time emerged in the 19th century. Earlier, historians assumed that there was no temporal facet of climate. "For a long time", writes Braudel, "all the books and studies were agreed on the immutability of the climate" (268) whereas earth's climate encountered variation because of so many reasons which were both man made and nature made. James Hutton's *Theory of the Earth* (1788) and Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1835) are two major works that paved the way to develop the idea of ecological time. At the heart of this concept is the proposition that earth has been formed through geological processes which took hundreds of millions of years, and in geologic time, a century is nothing more than an eye blink. Interestingly, the question whether "public discussion should focus on a time frame within which we live our lives, rather than

concern ourselves with climate impacts tens of thousands of years in the future" (Archer 5) becomes prominent in the consideration of ecological time. In the context of ecological time, the present time does not even exist. No doubt, it is beyond human perception. However, the present climate change has made it ever more important to contemplate on deep time. Without knowledge of deep time, "it would be difficult to arrive at a secular understanding of why climate change constitutes a crisis for humans" (Chakrabarty 213). Ghosh makes readers contemplate on both traditional and ecological time in *Gun Island*, and thereby brings the issue of unusual environmental changes to the forefront.

To understand the depth of the climate crisis, ecological time is a vital aspect to be examined in the novel. The current rapid change in climate indicates that mass industrialisation and fossil fuel economy have led to changes in climate as a whole. *Gun Island* is proliferated with examples of the swift and dangerous changes in environment and climate. These changes are so quick that they make the readers contemplate on the relationship between time and climate since we no longer live in a world where climate change is a slow, gradual process in keeping with natural time. Climate change is leaving the traditional notion of time behind, and continues to jolt human civilisation. This is evident when Piya faces difficulty to track her dolphins: "As 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" (Ghosh 92) or when she mentions about the increasing number of oceanic dead zones. Different characters throughout the novel keep mentioning how frequent natural disasters have become and how mightier they are getting with time. More examples from the novel include the unlikely presence of dangerous yellow-bellied snakes on California beach, rare spiders on Deen's apartment window, dolphins beached in the Sundarbans, a sudden devastating wildfire in Los Angeles among others. With all these catastrophes, a new geological epoch has started, namely, the 'Anthropocene'. The Anthropocene denotes the geological era beginning roughly at the end of the 18th century when human action began to change the geological developments of the planet. The term was widely popularised by the atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen. At present, according to Kate Marshall, "It has become difficult to take up the topic of temporality in contemporary fiction without reference to the geological concept of the Anthropocene" (523). This new timeframe has emerged as a result of human action. In *Gun Island*, the renowned academic and historian Cinta, who has been a mentor to the protagonist Deen, time and again points out the folly of humankind which has brought this epoch of the Anthropocene. During such a conversation, Cinta asks Deen, "But why is the world warming? Is that natural too?" and adds, "And where do these gases come from? Do they not come from cars, and planes and factories, whistling kettles and electric toasters and espresso machines?" (Ghosh 214). Cinta's rant forces readers to think of those deliberate huge changes in our way of life that we did not need even a hundred years ago. In order to keep up with the new standard of living and conform to the typical idea of development, we have done irreversible damage to ourselves and the earth. Ghosh makes the readers see the difference between geological time and human time and also shows how the differentiating line is blurred now due to the unnatural pace of climate change. In so doing, he presents Cinta as a spokesperson who points out the radical change in human lifestyle in the span of hundred years that has made a drastic alteration in our climate.

In *Gun Island*, time has to be severed to make sense of how environmental issues are prevalent in the novel. Order and frequency are two modes that Ghosh employs in distorting fictional time. The formalist critic Gerard Genette has laid down three notable means of temporal distortion, which are, order, duration and frequency in his master work *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (32). Order denotes the relation between the order of events in a story and the alternative order through which those same events are given in a narrative. Narrative order can be twisted by bringing anachrony in time through prolepsis and analepsis, which refer to flash forward and flashbacks respectively. The novel presents examples of prolepsis, especially natural disasters hinted at beforehand proleptically give an uncanny sense in the novel. The episode of the Los Angeles conference in the novel, where Cinta joins as a keynote speaker, works as a prolepsis in a twofold way. Firstly, this gives a future hint of disaster when the participants are engaged in a debate regarding the authenticity of the threats posed by climate change. In the middle of that conference, ironically, the news of a terrible wildfire comes. Secondly, this fictitious episode proleptically outpaces a real wildfire that happened after Ghosh finished his chapter on this fictional wildfire in Los Angeles. This connection must be felt as a strange one by readers. Ghosh talks about it in an interview with *Huff Post India*: "One example I have cited several times is the scene in the book set in a Los Angeles museum as a wildfire is advancing towards it. That actually happened last year during the California Fires but I had already written the scene long before. It's eerie because fact outpaces fiction and we no longer know which is which" (Ghosh). This ambiguous temporal feature of climate change intensifies the sense of insecurity that the earth is facing.

Ghosh uses another important idea of temporal distortion—frequency—as the novel repeatedly comes back to the experience of the fabled character of the gun merchant, and through this return the mystery of the epic of the gun merchant as well as the shrine is unveiled. Frequency refers to either repeatedly going back to a single event throughout a narrative or condensing multiple events into a single narration. This is evident when we see the protagonist, Deen, reaching the solution of the mythical puzzle of the gun merchant's story with help from various people at different points in the novel. All the hints and suggestions bring him to Venice finally, where the city is sinking slowly due to rising sea levels. This vulnerable condition can be compared to that of the Sundarbans. Therefore, the frequency associated with the gun merchant's myth ultimately leads us to the consequence of climate change.

The final temporal aspect important for this discussion is the amalgamation of public and private memory that focuses on cyclical time, rather than progressively linear time. This, eventually, alerts readers to the certainty of climate change. This reality check is important because most of us are not ready to accept that climate change can have a material effect on human civilisation. We are engrossed in the narrative of development, and expect only to move forward with time. This belief is so entrenched in human culture that any other reality seems implausible. The interplay of public and private memory in the novel points out the reality behind this progressive facet of time. The narrator is constantly taken over by memories, and these memories interweave the past, the present, and even the future. We tend to think of individual memory as a subjective, personal and

impressionistic locus. However, it is inevitably linked to public memory which forms a particular culture. Using a bizarre encounter between the protagonist and a king Cobra, Ghosh shows a complicated facet of human-nonhuman relationship through the amalgamation of public and private memory. Understanding human-nonhuman relationships is just as crucial as recognising climate change. If we realise the intrinsic value of nature and nonhuman beings, we will be able to respond to climate change with the right conviction since the earth belongs to other beings just as it belongs to us.

In *Gun Island*, the story of the merchant and Manasa Devi, the origin of which can be "traced back to the very infancy of Bengal's memory", has been used in order to show the importance of human-nonhuman relationships (Ghosh 6). Interestingly, the story is dispersed across Assam, West Bengal and Bangladesh in numerous forms. It is stated by the narrator that in public memory "the legend seems to go through cycles of life, sometimes lying dormant for centuries only to be suddenly rejuvenated by a fresh wave of retellings, in some of which the familiar characters appear under new names, with subtly changed plot lines" (Ghosh 7). This has a huge effect on the narrator's life, especially after he experiences a horrifying encounter with a king Cobra at the shrine in the Sundarbans. It becomes impossible for him to let his memory go, no matter how hard he tries. Here, his individual memory is amalgamated with collective memory, and thus it grows to be so powerful as to engulf his soul completely. This is why he feels, "It was as if some living thing had entered my body, something ancient" (Ghosh 103). The weight of this memory went beyond him in a way that he could not keep pace with it and control it within himself. This memory is not only about the protagonist's direct experience with a king Cobra at the Sundarbans shrine. If this was merely about the fear of a Cobra, it would not have been so persistent. Rather, that meeting instilled in Deen the perplexing truth about human and non-human relationships that has been existent for centuries. During an interview with Nathaniel Rich, Ghosh elaborated the importance this particular legend with a deadly snake in it, "What is so interesting about this legend is that it conceptualizes the central aspect of our climate reality—which is the conflict between the human pursuit of profit and the rights of other beings, animals and so on. It's kind of uncanny to think that people intuitively understood this deep conflict thousands of years ago". In the novel, the story of the Merchant and Manasa Devi works as a catalyst to merge personal and public memory. This makes us see through the seemingly uncomplicated relationship between humans and other beings of the earth.

A story can achieve such powerful impact only when it becomes a part of public memory, and through this particular example Ghosh demonstrates that human memory as well as history can move in a cyclical manner. The legend relating the story of the merchant and Manasa Devi goes through cycles of life, and also connects different generations with the same purpose, that is, to make people conscious regarding the rights of nonhuman beings. Thus, the story brings the past and the present together. We can relate it to the point in the novel when Deen discusses the origin and meaning of the word *Bhuta* with Tipu. Deen states that the particular word *Bhuta* can be mysterious since it means being in the present or the past and even both. This explanation changes the way we commonly think about history. We tend to keep history aside considering it a thing of the past, which should not

be the case. We live both in the past and in our present as Ghosh explains in his interview with Huff Post India:

> As Tipu says in the book, how can it be said of something that it existed and is existing? What the word talks about is the sense of *kaal*, not forward progression but a cyclical one. In Bengali, when you say *kaal*, you have to qualify if it is yesterday or tomorrow. What these words are essentially pointing to is a different idea of temporality. The idea of being inside history has come to the fore in recent years. There are virtual realities in museums that allow you to relive a moment in the past. We are in a strange sort of moment at this point of time. (Ghosh)

In *Gun Island*, Ghosh captures the strangeness associated with the time we are living in. This is a time when our past and present are merged, since it is our past action that defines the present climate crisis. This strange moment of time is overwhelmed by the perils of climate change. Nevertheless, most people disbelieve our vulnerability due to their blind faith in linear progression of time and civilisation. Amitav Ghosh shows in *Gun Island* that human memory, history and civilisation do not move in linear order. Therefore, it is not improbable that climate change might reverse the order of everything we have right now.

During the process of moving between different times and places, *Gun Island* intertwines history and myth with the current issues of migration and most importantly, climate change. The author intentionally mixes up different temporal facets as well as recorded documents, personal memory, social memory, legends, folk tales, symbols and metaphors. All these serve to bring the focus on the environmental crisis originated by human actions that includes ozone layer depletion, fresh water shortage, loss of biodiversity and many others. Also, the author's handling of time in the novel awakens readers to the unique ways time can be experienced. It changes our common perception of measuring time solely with a clock, makes us believe in fragmented time, and shows the way individual and public memory can overlap. This change, ultimately, makes readers prepared to view their familiar time and world in a new light where everything is nonlinear. All these fragmented timelines compel readers to face their prejudices and thus reexamine their assumptions about their surroundings and the world. The author has always kept the readers anxious and uncertain throughout the novel with a purpose to push them into action. Ghosh uses an eclectic temporal approach to show how time does not always advance towards a better future. We must grasp the true needs of our environment as well as our age before the linearity of our civilisation is completely lost.

Works Cited

Archer, David. "Fate of Fossil Fuel CO2 in Geologic Time." *Journal of Geophysical Research*, vol. 110, 2005, pp. 1-6, doi: 10.1029/2004JC002625. Accessed 16 Aug. 2019.

Braudel, Fernand. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. vol. 2, University of California Press, 1995.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no.2, 2009, pp.197-222. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/596640.

Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cornell UP, 1983.

Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. Penguin, 2019.

---. "Amitav Ghosh on Gun Island and How to Make Sense of the World." Interview by Karthik Shankar. *Huff Post India*, 22 June 2019, www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/amitav-ghosh-gun-island-and-how-to-make-sense-of-the-world_in_5d0cdb4fe4b07ae90d9bec1c. Accessed 23 Sept. 2019.

---. "The Era of Climate in Fiction." Interview by Nathaniel Rich. *FSG Work in Progress*, 20 Sept. 2019, fsgworkinprogress.com/2019/09/20/swerving/. Accessed 25 Sept. 2019.

---. "When Climate Change Is Stranger Than Fiction." Interview by Alisha Haridasani Gupta. *The New York Times*, 9 Sept. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/09/07/books/amitav-ghosh-gun-island-climate-change.html. Accessed 23 Oct. 2019.

Marshall, Kate. "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time." *American Literary History*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2015, pp. 523-538.

Osborne, Peter. *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-garde*. Verso Trade, 2011.

Sinha, Arunava. "Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* is fiction for a new world. It cannot be judged by old standards." Review of *Gun Island*, by Amitav Ghosh. Scroll.in Book Review, 08 July 2019, scroll.in/article/929723/amitav-ghoshs-gun-island-is-fiction-for-a-new-world-it-cannot-be-judged-by-old-standards. Accessed 27 Oct 2019.

Woolf, Virginia. "Modern Fiction." *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925 to 1928*, edited by Andrew McNeille, The Hogarth Press, 1984, pp.157-165.