

Interrogating Folklore and Transculturalism in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* remains an exceptional tale where the global and the local continually interact with each other. The writer projects cultural globality with the help of a Bengali myth. The novel examines the contemporary transcultural, transcontinental issues at the backdrop of a grand folktale of Manasa Devi. It rotates around the fourteenth century tale of the Gun Merchant. The transcultural and trans-local pattern of journey is palpable in the legend of the Gun Merchant. I want to examine the discourses of myth and reality proceeding together in *Gun Island*. The novel represents how today's world confronting the challenges of human trafficking, climate change, migration of human and non-human beings gets connected to the world of myth, folklore and Bengali belief of the past century. What the narrator experiences is the repetition of the folktale of the by-gone days in the present age. The novelist encapsulates the lives in Calcutta, Sundarbans, New York, and Venice. The narrator Dinanath Datta becomes a globetrotter discovering and solving the mysteries of the Bengali folklore of Bondugi Sadagar and the snake Goddess in a vast transcultural context of immigration. Under the theoretical frameworks of folk and transculturalism, I propose to analyse how Ghosh's protagonists live in a culturally hybrid world where folktale can pursue one to discover the postmodern realities and global issues on a transcultural and transcontinental space.

Keywords: Folklore, Myth, transculturalism, migration, Trans-local

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.¹ (Ghosh 128)

Their story seems to have struck a chord around the world.² (Ghosh 280)

Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* remains a unique novel encompassing a wide array of global issues like migration, human trafficking, climate change centering

round the mystery of a Bengali myth located in the Sundarbans. The novel attains an unmistakable transcultural appeal as it crosses the barriers of Bengal and transports and transplants the myth on the vast transcultural, transnational, transcontinental canvas of Los Angeles, Brooklyn, and Venice. The adventure story of the mythical past unfurls a new story of the decentered new world. The novelist delimits the scope of a local folklore of Bengal to solve today's trans-local queries of neo-colonialism, immigration, settlement, subversion of imperialism and climate change on a transnational context. The remarkable Chinese-box strategy of telling stories within stories both mythical and real, local and trans-local of the past and the present overlaps the cartographies of nation, state and culture. In a lecture on "Myths, Folklore and Legends: We Still Need Our Fairy Tales", Heidi Shamsuddin says, "The stories combine our world and mythical world...They have evolved through cultures and borders"³. In this novel Amitav Ghosh explores the irresistible and unfailing appeal of the Bengali folktale. Since time immemorial Bengal remains a rich repository of beliefs, faiths and customs. The writer makes use of the folklore motif of travel to discover the "metacultural relationship"⁴ or social, economic, environmental transformations beyond the borders. The readers can experience a sort of resurrection of the folklore of the Gun Merchant in the trans-continental journey undertaken by Tipu and Rafi in Ghosh's novel. This fictitious tale exhibits how the folkloric past interacts and collaborates with the rationalistic present.

Folklores, according to Andriy Nahachewsky are "informal, expressive culture"⁵ expressed in small groups. They are also known as "vernacular culture". In spite of ensuring traditional knowledge folklores deserve a psychological interpretation. In spite of speaking of the by-gone days, beliefs, practices they claim to get connected to the present. This cultural heritage is about community participation and individual engagement. According to Valdimar Hafstein, it's a sort of "rear view mirror"⁶ giving us a view of the past. The expressive art of folktales, myths, legends demands an emotional as well as intellectual response from us. Raymond Williams calls folklore "a culture of feeling"⁷ (Qtd in Hafstein). Through a folklore a generation can communicate with its previous generations. It strengthens the sense of solidarity, identity and community. They can appreciate primitive people's aesthetic sense of beauty and their capacity to form meaning out of ordinary objects of nature. The tradition of folklore is a verbal art of people passing down generations after generations. Ian Brodie says that folklore is common, rural, unlettered, non-cosmopolitan people's art. The folklore used in the novel is never static. Rather it is all alive and dynamic with a conspicuous circular shape where culture circulates from the rural folk to the urban folk and then from the urban to the rural. The local, rural Bengali myth of Goddess Manasa, Gun Merchant, Chand Sadagar turns out to be the centre of attraction for their trans-local appeal to the cosmopolitan globe trotters like the narrator Dinanath or Deen and Cinta. Though Deen comes to know of the Gun Merchant in his ancestral land, the mythical figure becomes a part of his cosmopolitan life. The impact of the Gun Merchant's legend is felt everywhere

the narrator goes. In his journey to Los Angeles, Brooklyn and Italy, Deen can never keep himself aloof from the very thoughts of the Sundarbans, the snake Goddess and the protagonist Bonduki Sadagar. The cross-cultural sojourner Deen discovers new meanings in the mythical journey of another folkloric transcultural traveller named Bonduki Sadagar.

The Gun Merchant is the English translation of Bonduki Sadagar. But, interestingly, the term Bundook does not refer to a rifle as *Gun Island* is more than a mere fictitious tale related to the escapist merchant and the pursuing snake goddess. The novel brings to our notice the legendary characters like Lakhindar, Satya Pir, Chand Sadagar, Bonduki Sadagar etc. People built shrines at the juncture of many currents in the Bengal Delta to commemorate them. People are fond of their heritage, their communal memory. Each legendary figure bears a story of his own. Folklore or the oral story telling tradition is an effort to protect and preserve our heritage, culture and identity. "Seafaring" is a conspicuous motif in these folklores. The narrator comments on the popularity of Chand Sadagar's oral story as the childhood of Bengali boys and girls during his time was incomplete without listening to this story: "The origins of the story can be traced back to the very infancy of Bengal's memory" (6). The folktale of Bonduki Sadagar is also based on the same animosity between the Merchant and Goddess Manasa. The Merchant appears not only in Bengali folktales but also in Assamese, Bangladeshi oral tales in other forms. The legends seem to live through some cycles of life. These are regenerated by fresh retellings. The endeavour to discover the mystery of the seventeenth century tale of the Gun Merchant is a kind of enlightenment for the narrator. In his thesis on the fourteenth century Bengali verse Chand Sadagar he argues that its story remained incomplete until the seventeenth century when the Europeans established their first colonies.

The seventeenth century remained a troubled period in the global history as the Europeans started colonizing the Third World countries and Europe's Age of discovery found the New World or the Earth's Western Hemisphere. The New World was specifically known as America or the fourth part of the world. The seventeenth century was the time of rapid cross-cultural negotiation. Culture started travelling from one part to another with the colonial masters and the merchants from the colonized countries. The merchant's story unfolds the implications of Imperialism, slave-exchange, immigration, and multiculturalism. The discourse of folklore is not detached from history. Rather this oral storytelling method provides one with the enticing texts adding new dimension to history. The art of folklore reflects the social, colonial, political, cultural and economic relation among the countries. Though globalization is generally perceived in today's context its seeds were sown in the seventeenth century with the beginning of the imperialist mission of the white supremacy and the sailors started their errands of discovery through new sea-routes. The Gun Merchant's story unearths our cultural, social, political histories. The past becomes vocal

with our traditional tale. The narrator says, “It was as if a voice were crying out from the past ...” (223).

This intangible heritage becomes an object of our “...admiration, attachment, pride, shock”⁸. The variation of the plot of the folklore comes out of the various phases of history. History shapes the stories in new ways. Deen calls it the revival of “life cycles of story” (7). The Merchant’s oral story is never complete. It is always re-constructed and re-told with periodic variations. In the less troubled, less disturbed period of the fourteenth century the Merchant appeared as Chand Sadagar. Later in the seventeenth century the story gets a new lease of life with the waves of capitalism, slave history and migration instrumental to social transformation. It is not just an imaginative re-telling of a story. Rather it is a “historically specific response”¹⁰. Whatever started as a rural, oral story turns out to be an object of urban, global, and cosmopolitan interest. Another interesting fact is that Ghosh does not detach this sort of oral heritage study from his personal life. The folklore of the Merchant helps him solve the mystery behind the memory that is cultural, public, social, communal and colonial as well as personal at the same time. He comes to know of the folklore at a crucial period of his personal life. Here cultural heritage becomes a sort of a bridge between a community and an individual. The relevance of folklore study lies in an personal engagement and involvement, participation and negotiation with the community memory. The narrator gets involved with the mystery of the history truly, deeply, fully.

The Gun Merchant’s story begins as a local tale as the legend has a shrine in the Sundarbans. The narrator says: “...the figure of a Merchant crops up under many different names in our folklore” (8). The Sundarbans is selected as the very locale for setting out a journey not only for its ethnographic interest and socio-economic causes but also for the historical veracity of the fact that the Merchant of Bengal undertook a voyage in an earlier age as he had no other option but to sail from the Sundarbans to reach out the sea. The misconception of the narrator about the Gun Merchant’s tale as an object of local, rural interest is cleared when he discovers the transcultural association of the locale. The references to the snake-infested Sundarbans recur throughout the novel. Cinta says: “In Italy everyone knows about the Sundarbans. It is because of a famous children’s book that was set there. It was my daughter Lucia’s favourite book; she used to dream of that forest” (126). The Sundarbans has a ubiquitous, mysterious presence throughout the novel. The narrator as well as the readers can hardly forget its presence throughout the novel. It is not just a geographical reality here. It is very much alive with its mythical, folkloric essence. During his journey to Venice he sees underneath and finds a strange similarity between Venice and the Sundarbans. He was reminded of “patch of Bengal countryside” (147) while flying above the Venetian lagoons, marshy lands, and bending river. Even on the Venetian jetties, the worms eating into the woods remind Rafi of the Sundarbans where his grandfather showed him the way how to listen to them. Piyali Roy, a Bengali

American teaching in Oregon comes to the Sundarbans for protecting the environment from the manmade causes leading to the climate change. The climate change is a global threat creating crisis in the life of human and non-human beings. Due to climate change the animals are compelled to leave their habitat and migrate to new places. The crisis of climate change has mythical concepts in different religions. In Hindu mythology it is said that the demons create *pralaya* dissolving everything in the world. The Zoroastrians think that the rivers of molten metal will flow everywhere. The Christians believe that death, disease, famine will result in the Apocalypse. The Incas think that the world will come to its end through earthquake whereas the Muslims opine that oceans will burst forth and drown the world. These age-old folk stories of climate change are constructed to make us humane towards nature.

Myth and reality are complementary to each other in this novel. The narrative of Bonduki Sadagar revives when it gets connected to Cinta's intuitive power, Aztec's prediction, dark Madonna, the escape of Tipu and Rafi, the miraculous rescue of Tipu, Tipu's prophetic powers, and Cinta's prayer for rescue when their life was at stake in Venice. Cinta does not think that the tale was alive only for the people of the specific age. The Gun Merchant is alive in today's context in their beliefs, prayers, power of prognostication. She says: "It is about the here and now! It is more real than real life" (34). Whatever was thought of as a mere rural tale becomes urban, global with transcultural undertones. Cultures differ. But the beliefs of the people in the invisible power of the universe remain the same. There is no difference between the beliefs of the rural folk of Bengal and that of the sophisticated, cosmopolitan professor Cinta. Deen informs her that it was absolutely an oral culture or face to face culture of storytelling. Generations after generations turn their ears to the folklore. The story of the primordial past comes to life even in the age of human advancement. The folklore of the Merchant is no longer a document of the primitive people as it is rich in futuristic suggestions. Cinta thinks that folk stories serve a greater purpose than they are generally thought of. Stories, according to her: "...allow the past reach out to us" (127). The act of referring to the Venetian travellers like Ambrosio Bembo, Polos, Niccolo de' Conti who are contemporary of the Gun Merchant is an attempt at recovering history on a borderless space. Cinta, an Italian professor retraces and identifies the journey of the Bengali Merchant to see Venice as it was during the Merchant's time.

Beliefs, faith, customs are permanent, universal. Just as the rural folk revered Manasa Devi as their protector, the pious Venetians also believed in Black Madonna. During the pandemic in Europe, when a quarter of the City's population perished and thousands of people died in no time the little alley named Corte Nova remained unaffected as a little girl living on the alley painted Black Madonna and hung the picture at the entrance. The little girl believed that Madonna would protect people and plague would not enter their part of the city. Her trust in Madonna won over the horrible realities of the pandemic. Madonna

protected the people who trusted her just like Goddess Manasa who also saved her children during a natural calamity. Like Goddess Manasa, Madonna also acts as a Mediator. Both of the deities from two different cultures stand between the people and the earth with their blessings and furies. Interesting enough is the fact that the image of Black Madonna of La Salute carved in the Byzantine style evokes connotations of the A-sa-sa-ra-me or the Minoan goddess of snakes.

The local and the trans-local interact with each other when Deen finds a book titled *The Strife of Love in a Dream* with illustrations reminding him of the shrine in the Sundarbans. The story is about a man setting off a journey to search for an “always-absent beloved and finds himself lost in a forest where he is surrounded by savage animals-wolves, bears, and hissing serpents” (207). The wandering man in his exhaustion falls asleep and dreams of erotic and terrifying things full of fantastical creatures, sculptures, monuments. The cryptic, multilingual messages engraved on them were of heterogeneous nature. The mixed culture of Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic of the sculpture is reminiscent of the pluricultural art of Bengal in the seventeenth century. The storyteller Nilima Bose recited some lines from the Merchant’s folklore:

Calcutta had neither people nor houses then

Bengal’s great port was a city- of- the -world. (21)

The shrine of the Sundarbans was built before 1690, the year of Kolkata’s founding. Dhaka was the great port of the undivided Bengal at that time. The term *nagar-e-jahan* comes from the Mughal emperor Jahangir’s (World Conqueror’s) name. These lines are the significant historical, cultural, political document of the seventeenth century Bengal. They have Persian influence in them. During that time multiple cultural influences and heritages from various countries like Arab, Portugal, Persia, and the Netherlands nourished Bengal. The consequences can be seen in the very sculpture and structure of the temple in the Sundarbans. The shrine there reminded the poet of the temples in Bishnupur. The unique Bishnupuri art flowering across Bengal at that time absorbed and mixed both “. . .Islamic and Hindu elements to marvellous effect” (22). So, truly, Bengal became the rich gold mine of mixed cultures, heritages, traditions and beliefs. Even the term *bundook* being an Arabian and a Persian loanword points to the exclusive status of the Mughals as a “gunpowder empire”. So, Bengal’s folklore of Bonduki Sadagar is not about a make-believe world. It is not just a relic of the bygone days. It is all about the making of an incredible Bengal which turned out to be the cradle of multiculturalism. Deen finds the intertextual relationship between the folklore of Bonduki Sadagar and the book titled *The Strife of Love in a Dream*. The very depiction of the dense, fearsome jungle in the book reminds him of the snake -infested Sundarbans of the oral story. The mythical and the real interact again in Deen’s perception. An image of writhing snakes is an affirmation of his belief that he has stepped into the dreamtime of the book like the Gun Merchant.

Ghosh's outing with Cinta in Calcutta Maidan brings again the reference to the Bengali legend related to Manasa Devi. A jatra was going on and on the billboard a female figure wrapped with snakes could be seen. The very image appeared so fascinating to Cinta that she made an entry into the tent. Interestingly she finds a connection between the people of the east and the people of the west regarding their faith in legends and folklores. Even she explains how people of different continents live in the make believe world. Though Europe remains the well-spring of rational thinking there are some mysterious happenings which cannot be resolved and explained by natural scientific reasoning. In this context she introduces *tarantola's* reference. It's a kind of venomous spider in Italy. Its bite has strange effects. In some provinces the southern Italian people still believe that tarantula's bite can inject spirits into the body. Italy where the Renaissance rationalism bloomed once is the same place where tarantism thrives. She even refers to the Aztec predictions about Spanish invaders across the seas. Cinta's point of argument is that beliefs, faiths and legends are not limited by any cartography. Rather these perceptions are universal.

The motif of friendship is beautifully evoked in the novel with some variations. In the mythical story, the Gun Merchant in his transcultural journey was aided by Nakhuda Ilyas. In reality Tipu becomes a friend of Rafi and unknowingly they become partners of each other for another transcontinental journey in the postcolonial era. It is as if they are made for each other. It is as if they are bearing some pre-established, mysterious bond between them. It is as if the cobra-bitten Tipu identifies Rafi as his long-left friend in the mythical past. It is as if they are united once again through the agent of Manasa. With Tipu's drooping head on his lap Rafi tries to offer him some hope and solace: "Don't be afraid. The snake that bit you is no ordinary snake- my grandfather used to say that it had been sent to protect us" (78). Tipu in this crucial time says: "Who are you? . . . I feel I know you" (79). Rafi confirms, '*Amader konoporichaynei*. We've never met till today but I also feel that I know you" (79). The gripping tale of the fleeing merchant in order to avoid the snakes of Goddess Manasa finds a parallel in Tipu's condition where his agitated mind can apprehend the snakes nearing him. In an attempt at sucking the venom out of Tipu's wound, Rafi unknowingly builds a bond between them. The narrator comments, "...it was as if the venom that had passed from Tipu's body into Rafi's mouth had created an almost carnal connection" (81). What Deen experiences is the repetition of the tale of the by-gone days in the present context. The refugees originating in South Asia and travelling from one country to another with the help of the *dalals* in search of a better life reminds one of the plight of the Gun Merchant sailing overseas to escape the avenging Manasa Devi. The "sea" with its liquid cartographies is a metaphor for unbounded life. The novelist gives sufficient attention to the routes, the movement of the uprooted people in search of a 'habitable place'. Tipu turns out to be the post-modern gun merchant in his search for life. Tipu says: "Making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerated every year" (49). The strange repetition of the happenings of the

folklore is mysterious and real at the same time. Even the fictitious names of *Taal-misirir-desh*, *Rumaali-desh*, *dwiperbhetoraydwip*, *Bonduk-dwip* have some real cross-cultural connotations. Cinta thinks that the story is an apocryphal record of a real journey to Venice. The Merchant travelled from the Sundarbans to *Taal-Misirir-desh* or Sugar Candy Land i.e. Egypt as the term Misir indicates Egypt. Then he reached *Rumaali-desh* or the land of handkerchiefs. It indicates Turkey. The terms *Bonduk* and *dwiperbhetoreydwip* i.e. island within island refer to Venice. The sight of a paired symbol in the design of the shrine is indicative of the fact that Ilyas became a friend of the Merchant. The presence of the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet in the symbol confirmed the fact that Ilyas was a Jew. According to the story the Merchant was sold to Captain Ilyas in Goa by the Portuguese pirates. The fictitious tale is historically true as Goa remained the Portuguese Empire's capital and a hub of the slave trade. In the postcolonial era the labours were forcibly sent to the European plants to fulfil their masters' colonial ambition. The plight of the Merchant recurs in new forms in so-called borderless world. The Portuguese pirates' act of buying and selling slaves is symbolic of the imperialistic strategy of the Europeans who created victim and labour diaspora. Even the inhuman torture of the human traffickers on Tipu, Rafi, Bilal during their journey towards Venice is another present, postmodern version of the Merchant's story. The symbolical Merchant resurrects in new forms in new contexts. The mysterious migration of Tipu and Rafi from the Sundarbans through Egypt and Turkey to Venice is a repetition of the mythical pattern of the journey undertaken by the Merchant and Captain Ilyas.

Ghosh contextualizes the discourses of myth and reality proceeding parallelly in this postmodern era of technological innovation. We are living in an "hyper age"¹⁰ of constant intersections of modern gadgets, internet, cultures and international policies of immigration. Internet has made the world easily accessible to all. "The novel is about so many journeys"¹¹ (Interview). The Gun Merchant started trans-Atlantic journeys with Ilyas in the past, Bilal journeys with his friend from Bangladesh to Europe. Lubna Khula journeys with her husband, Tipu and Rafi depart from the Sundarbans to reach Venice with the aid of internet and become preys to human traffickers and *dalals* midway. Tipu says, "The Internet is migrants' magic carpet (Ghosh 61). Globalization speaks of a culturally hybrid world where whatever is national, rural, local gets erased to give eminence to objects and subjects of transcultural, transnational, transcontinental interest. In an interview with Jr. Ramakrishnan, Ghosh reflects on the impact of social media on human mobility and migration, "You have social media and you are connected to people who can help you move. These technologies are absolutely at the heart of the movement."¹² The Gun Merchant of the seventeenth century is restored in as *Bonduki@bonduki.com* in the digital age by Tipu. Tipu contacts with Dinanath through this imaginary identity. His supernatural power of prediction in the digital age once again throws challenges to rationalism.

Ghosh's *Gun Island* is a novel not about our fossilized folkloric heritage. Rather this paves way for insightful introspection. Folklores offer us messages. Though the novelist strives to resolve the complex issues of mimicry and mockery of imperialism, migration of human and non-human beings on a transnational network, the novel remains open-ended. The question related to the inclusion of the immigrants in the European countries still remains unresolved. Will the European countries preserve their national culture? Or will they think beyond the borders in order to champion postnationalism? Who will control the human traffickers? Will the immigrants be able to call the foreign lands their home? The folklore encapsulating multiple concerns of the postmodern world offers humanism, universalism as solution. Nakhuda Ilyas of the myth and the Admiral in Venice are the symbolic representation of humanity at large. After letting the Blue Boat of the immigrants enter into Venice the Admiral says: "I have acted in accordance with the law of the sea, the law of humanity and the law of God"(285). In order to redefine culture and nation, Homi K. Bhabha says in *The Location of Culture*: "...the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora. . ." (7)

Notes

¹See Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*. Cinta believes in the power of the stories. Through stories running through generations after generations the universe unfolds its untold truth.

²See Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*. The mythical journey of the legendary Merchant recurs in a new form in today's transcultural world to trigger up new issues related to the question of immigration.

³See Heidi Shamasuddin's "Myths, Folklore & Legends: We Still Need Our Fairy Tales." You Tube. Stories are of universal nature. They speak of a cross-cultural borderless world.

⁴See Valdimar Hafstein's "Folklore Talks: Heritage, Folklore and the Public Sphere."

⁵See Andriy Nahachewsky's "What is Folklore? Episode 1 Definition."

⁶See Valdimar Hafstein's. "Folklore Talks: Heritage, Folklore and the Public Sphere." Folklores help us journey down the memories of a community.

⁷See Valdimar Hafstein's "Folklore Talks: Heritage, Folklore and the Public Sphere." The readers get absorbed in the oral stories to feel the pulse of a primitive civilization.

⁸See Valdimar Hafstein.

⁹See Valdimar Hafstein.

¹⁰Simon J. Bronner's "Convergences in the Hyper Era: Thirty Years after American Folklore Studies", *You Tube*

¹¹See Amitav Ghosh's Interview with Jr Ramakrishnan. "Gun Island is a Surreal Novel about Climate Change and Migration." *Electric Lit*

¹²See Amitav Ghosh's Interview with Jr Ramakrishnan. "Gun Island is a Surreal Novel about Climate Change and Migration." *Electric Lit*

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