

The Economics of Displacement: Climate Refugees and Disposable Labour in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract

Amitav Ghosh's Gun Island represents climate displacement as an economic process rather than a single environmental event. This paper traces a causal chain from carbon-intensive accumulation to ecological damage, livelihood loss, debt-financed migration, irregular legal status, and disposable labour. Environmental economics explains climate change as a negative externality whose benefits accrue disproportionately to wealthy producers and consumers, while vulnerable regions bear its costs. Political ecology, labour theory, the capability approach, precarity theory, and environmental justice reveal the institutions that convert those transferred costs into exploitable workers. Through the novel's movement from the Sundarbans to Venice, Ghosh connects unstable ecosystems with an unequal mobility regime: capital crosses borders freely, whereas displaced people encounter traffickers, detention, xenophobia, and deportability. Their insecurity is economically productive because employers and intermediaries can extract labour while avoiding durable obligations. The novel, therefore, challenges the supposedly neutral category of the "climate refugee." Displacement emerges from the interaction of climatic, colonial, political, and economic pressures. A just response must combine mitigation and loss-and-damage finance with livelihood protection, safe mobility, labour rights, regular status, and migrant political voice.

Keywords: Climate migration; environmental displacement; disposable labour; migrant precarity; political ecology; border regimes; environmental justice; *Gun Island*.

Introduction: From Ecological Loss to Precarious Labour

In *Gun Island*, migration from the Sundarbans to Europe reveals the instability of the landscape and how it leads to the breakdown produced by precarious labour. Various factors, such as storms, changing waterways, species disruption, and erosion, limit the choices available to vulnerable communities. Ghosh migrant workers navigate various circumstances and are forced to make a living at home, which makes it difficult for those with fewer economic resources and less protection. As a result of this, when a migrant worker moves through brokers, borders, detention centres, and informal employment, the ecological displacement is turned into labour exploitation (Ghosh, 2019). The novel, therefore, presents an unequal geography in which migrant workers suffer more from the environmental crisis and absorb all the environmental damage. At the same time, wealthier economies reap the benefits without any labour or acknowledgement. Kanai accordingly calls the

Sundarbans "the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 14).

The paper examines this chain in which the cost of carbon-intensive accumulation is transformed into vulnerabilities faced by poor migrant communities. In this way, ecological damage destroys the place of livelihood and weakens its very structure, while on the other side, poverty and debt restrict the possibility of staying at home. Migration in such a scenario becomes more about a constrained response rather than a voluntary decision. At the borders, it creates and maintains an insecure legal position, thereby increasing employers' power over them. Under these harsh conditions, migration is expressed more as an individual choice than a strategy of constrained survival. Also, states do not simply respond to irregular migration; they often limit legal avenues by closing their borders. In such cases, migrants are often placed outside secure legal process, and they are entered into the country without legal status, which makes employers pay

them less, mistreat them inhumanely, and finally dismiss them from the workplace. The term “*climate refugees*” brings their plight to the forefront, and it captures the injustice due to environmental displacement. Though the term highlights their suffering, it later oversimplifies why they migrate. Ghosh posits that climate change plays an important role alongside other factors, such as debt, unemployment, colonial history, restrictive borders, and scarce employment opportunities.

Methodology

The present paper employs a qualitative analysis of Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*. It draws on concepts such as climate migration, debt, labour migration, insecure legal status, border control, and livelihood loss. The research is carried out using the primary text, with secondary academic sources to support and bolster the argument.

Externalised Nature and Unequal Vulnerability

Greenhouse gas emissions create a negative impression because companies and consumers receive both energy from fossil fuels and, in turn, fossil fuels do not incur the full social and environmental costs. A stable climate is a global public good, meaning everyone benefits from it, including people who have not paid to protect it. This, in turn, incentivises businesses, individuals, and governments to leave the organisation and pass responsibility to others, ultimately resulting in excessive emissions and insufficient climate action. Effects are not equally distributed. Wealthy societies receive more benefits while poorer communities are left behind. Climate change is, however, not a failure of market trends but also an unequal transfer of environmental costs from richer groups to poorer communities, vulnerable regions, and future generations.

Ghosh expresses this concern through the Sundarbans, where this inequality occurs every day, where boundaries between land and water constantly change, and where every household depends on the ecological conditions of the place for survival. According to Rob Nixon, “*slow violence*” describes damage in such places that occurs gradually, goes unnoticed because it is less dramatic and receives

less public attention than a sudden disaster (Nixon, 2011). A cyclone may suddenly catch people’s attention. However, the long-term effects include damaged farmland, declining or dying fish populations, damaged homes, and young people leaving their homes because they cannot secure a safe future for themselves. Bose and Satapathy posit that migration in the novel results from several combined factors, such as poverty, politics, climate change, and inequality, rather than a single natural disaster (Bose & Satapathy, 2021). Nilima observes that “The islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being swallowed up by the sea; they are disappearing before our eyes” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 24). After Cyclone Aila, moreover, “*vast tracts of once fertile land had been swamped by salt water, rendering them uncultivable for a generation, if not forever*” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 54). Political ecology asks how environmental hazards damage certain communities. The answer reveals who owns the land, who has access to jobs and public services and who is protected from the state and the extraction of colonial histories. Labelling migrants as victims leaves them in a position where hiding from nature puts them away from political and economic institutions without any secure property, savings, or insurance. In Ghosh’s novel, climate change affects the human population and other beings across the planet. However, its human costs are unequal: in the novel, ecological damage drives migration, making it impossible for people living in high-risk areas to work from home.

Livelihood Loss, Capabilities, and Constrained Mobility

Economic theories explain why certain communities or individuals choose to work elsewhere. However, this may sometimes wrongly suggest that migrants always have a free choice. Climate change compels people to stay in one place or to move to another. When the community’s livelihood depends on farming activities and fishing, and local employment is collapsing, staying in that place is no longer a viable option. Black and colleagues explain that migration results from a mix of environmental, economic, political, and social pressures (Black et al., 2011). This idea suits Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*, where environmental pressure

does not directly cause migration but works through differences in employment, family, wealth, access to the border, safety, etc. As the novel states, “*Making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year*” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 55).

Sen’s capability approach distinguishes between two things: that possessing resources does not mean having real freedom or having meaningful choices (Sen, 1999). A migrant may unwillingly and formally choose to leave because of the unavailability of a job at the place, or the place possesses unrealistic opportunities to remain safe, and local migrant routes are sealed and shut down. In this way, migration is not always voluntary but is forced by circumstances. People are forced to make decisions in difficult circumstances. This distinction also demonstrates that calling migration a form of climate adaptation can shift the government’s responsibility onto local people. Remittance in this case may help local people. However, families also bear recruitment costs, prolonged separation from family members, physical and health risks, and the possibility that migration may bring little to no financial return.

The poorest people are unable to move because movement also requires money, legal documents, reliable information, and social connections. People who somehow manage to move have legal possession, sell valuable possessions, depend on agents to organise their journey, and can borrow money. Yea explains that environmental decline, debt, gender inequality, and the combined recruitment system make migration difficult and dangerous for South Asian people (Yea, 2025). *Gun Island* also captures the same dilemma that displacement does not begin when someone leaves the home; it begins when livelihood starts to disappear, and it gives rise to resulting poverty and insecurity throughout migrant life. The young are described as “*borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere*” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 55).

Debt, Brokerage, and the Commodification of Movement

When safe and legal routes are limited, brokers and smugglers profit by selling transport,

documentation, information, and secret border routes, creating a profitable market in such scenarios. Tighter border control makes these journeys more difficult. Increased policy may make these journeys more dangerous, so smugglers charge more in such cases, but they do not stop people who feel they must migrate from crossing the border. Many migrants take loans for their journeys and must repay them with the wages they earn later in life. However, their agreements with brokers are informal or illegal; in such cases, migrants have little or no protection if prices are suddenly hiked in the coming years. Tipu names this market “*the people moving industry*” and calls it “*one of the world’s biggest and still growing fast*” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 66).

In *Gun Island*, the journeys of Tipu, Rafi, and other migrants show that people cannot easily be placed into separate categories such as economic migrants, trafficking victims, or climate refugees. Environmental damage influences their decision to leave, but their journeys are controlled by people and organisations that profit from their vulnerability. Roy argues that Ghosh shows different ways migrants are exploited and experience a “*precarity of place*,” meaning they lack a secure sense of home or belonging (Roy, 2023). The modern economy treats both nature and workers as things that can be used for profit. Just as natural resources are exploited, migrants are treated as workers who can be moved and replaced whenever necessary.

Migrants often borrow money to pay agents and cover the cost of travelling abroad. Because they must repay this debt, they may have little choice but to accept low wages, unsafe working conditions, poor housing, or withheld wages. Their families may also depend on them to send money home. When their earnings are too low, migrants may need to borrow more money or migrate again. Environmental hardship, therefore, leads to financial hardship, which allows employers and traffickers to control workers more easily. Palash explains the logic directly: “*It is to their advantage to keep people in debt. That way they can force them to do whatever they want*” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 205).

Borders and the Production of Disposable Labour

Borders do not affect everyone equally; they allow movement for some people while restricting entry for some. Wealthy people, legal, skilled professionals can cross the border legally, while other poor migrants have to go through strict visa rules, detention and the resultant deportation. This constant psychological threat creates “deportability”. Even if migrants are not deported, it creates constant fear in their minds; fear of removal may put them in a situation where they are afraid to report abuse, change jobs, seek health care, or organise work with other workers. The economy benefits from their work, but they are not receiving any privileges or the same level of security and political rights. Palash describes this as living “in a kind of limbo” because of unresolved “status in Italy” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 271).

Marx’s reserve army theory states that when a large number of people are unemployed or underemployed, workers are easy to control because they can be replaced if they demand better pay or conditions (Marx, 1976). Migrant workers face even greater insecurity because their legal status may depend on their job or residence permit. Standing describes such insecure workers as the precariat because they lack stable employment and reliable social protection (Standing, 2011). Migrants may also live under the constant fear of losing access to their legal rights and to remaining in the country. They are described as “disposable,” not because their labour has no value, but because employers can profit from their work without taking responsibility for their safety, families, and futures. The novel makes this process clear by explaining that traffickers “*put them to work on their farms and construction sites*” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 205).

Ghosh's novel shows that storms, animals, stories, and pollution move between countries more freely than poor migrants can. Although environmental problems already threaten Venice, it has become a strong anti-migrant spot. Refugees, those who enter by sea, are labelled and presented as a threat to the public, even though restrictive, unsafe borders have forced them to enter and restricted their movement. Legal routes have forced them to take dangerous journeys. This shifts the responsibility from wealthy countries and the border system onto the migrants’

lives instead. Hostility towards migrants also divides workers by encouraging them to compete against one another rather than recognising their shared economic struggles. This hatred is expressed in the shouted words: “*Go back where you came from . . . ! Not needed here . . . ! Europe for Europeans!*” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 281).

Sassen uses the term “expulsions” to explain how the modern economic system removes people from secure employment, stable homes, and legal protection (Sassen, 2014). In *Gun Island*, environmental damage forces people to leave their homes, but Europe accepts them only as workers with limited security and few rights. Employers need their labour, but society denies them existence or presence. This results in profiting from the business more without protecting migrant workers.

Environmental Justice and Decommodified Mobility

Environmental justice considers three main issues: first, distribution, second, recognition and third, procedure (Schlosberg, 2007). The first question addresses why wealthy groups benefit from fossil fuels while poorer communities face displacement, debt, and unsafe work. Recognition means treating migrants as individuals with their own experiences, rather than presenting them as helpless victims, criminals, or replaceable people, and procedure means that migrants and affected communities should have a voice in climate decisions, policy, border management, and employment. Through Ghosh’s storytelling, migrants gain an identity that allows them to be part of society rather than being reduced to numbers. This need for recognition is expressed in the call to “*put a human face on those refugees*” (Ghosh, 2019, p. 282).

Governments should act at every stage of the displacement process, and that turns environmental damage into forced migration and labour exploitation. The role of the government should be to reduce emissions quickly, with wealthier and larger countries contributing a large share because they have contributed more to the problem. Government climate grants may help vulnerable people build homes, buy food, access healthcare, and receive relief from climate-related disasters.

Good education, loans, and financial support make it easy for some people to remain safely at home. If people need to move, safe visas, regulated recruitment, transferable benefits, and opportunities for permanent residence can protect them from traffickers. All workers should have access to a safe environment, regardless of their immigration status, and be able to report abuse.

These measures will also make the system fairer. Employers also prefer vulnerable migrants because they can avoid paying for injuries, proper housing, or return travel, thereby making recruiters and employers jointly responsible. Providing enforceable contracts, allowing access to trade unions, and establishing compensation funds would put the costs on businesses. Climate funds should also foster relationships between migrants and worker-led organisations, rather than being spent solely on infrastructure. In this way, ultimately, migration could then become a safe way of adapting to climate change, rather than a desperate choice that exposes people to exploitation.

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* presents climate migration as an ongoing reality, closely connected to economic and political inequality. The problem is that when powerful economies stop paying for the environmental costs of their activities and environmental damage destroys the lives of local inhabitants, leaving them with very little choice. As a result of this, many are forced and put in a situation to borrow money and rely on migration networks, which brokers and traffickers often control. Once migration becomes unsafe, they are forced to pay more in fear of deportation or getting caught. Environmental crisis creates vulnerability, but economic and political institutions convert that vulnerability into disposable labour. Market, economic system, strict border policy, unequal citizenship turn environmental vulnerability into labour exploitation. *Gun Island* highlights the contradiction in an economy that allows money and cheap labour to move quickly. However, vulnerable migrants are pushed to move. Justice, therefore, must address the cause instead of rescuing people afterwards. This means cutting emissions, protecting

local jobs and livelihoods, creating legal migration routes, enforcing labour rights, and listening to migrants themselves. Only then can migration become a free choice instead of something people must endure to survive. The Blue Boat finally becomes "a symbol of everything that's going wrong with the world – inequality, climate change, capitalism, corruption, the arms trade, the oil industry" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 204).

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