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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Migration, Heat and Climate Justice in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

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ABSTRACT

The word "Anthropos" in the Anthropocene suggests that humanity as a whole is responsible for climate change. Critics from the postcolonial and Marxist traditions have questioned this "we" for years, since the people who burn the most carbon are not the people who suffer first. This paper asks how two recent novels handle that problem. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) follows climate displacement from the Sundarbans to Venice, and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) opens with a lethal heat wave in India and then follows an institutional response. The paper compares them on three questions: who is harmed, who is held responsible, and who is allowed to act. It argues that *Gun Island* spreads vulnerability and responsibility across long colonial and consumer histories, while *The Ministry for the Future* ties justice to institutions that speak for the vulnerable. Each approach has a risk. The first can leave responsibility vague, and the second can leave the vulnerable as people who are spoken for. The paper treats this as a question of form and politics together.

Keywords: Anthropocene, climate justice, climate migration, heat, Global South

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FULL RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The Anthropocene is usually explained as the age in which human activity has become a geological force. The term is useful, but it carries an assumption in its Greek root. It names the *anthropos*, the human, as the agent of the change. Malm and Hornborg object to this directly. They argue that "the fossil economy was not created nor does humankind uphold it in general" (62). On their account, the early steam engine was adopted by a small class of owners who depended on slavery, colonial exploitation and factory labor, and the species did not choose it together (63-65). Chakrabarty, who first made the species argument famous, now says something close to this. In a 2022 essay, he writes that "humanity can never speak as one" and that "[t]here is no one we to respond to a planet that is studied by climate scientists as one" (222, 231).

This criticism raises a question for literature. If the Anthropocene is not a story about one human "we," then a novel about it must decide whom it is about. It must decide who suffers, who caused the harm and who gets to respond. Ghosh and Robinson both write novels that touch India and South Asia, but they answer these questions in different ways. *Gun Island* follows Deen Datta, a rare-book dealer from Brooklyn, as a Bengali legend and a string of strange events draw him into the lives of migrants moving from the Sundarbans to Italy. *The Ministry for the Future* begins with a heat wave that, in the summary given by Mikes and New, "kills 20 million people in India" (228). It then follows the work of a new United Nations body charged with protecting future generations.

The research question is this: when these novels ask who the *anthropos* is, what do they say, and what do their forms allow them to say? I argue that *Gun Island* answers by making responsibility historical and diffuse, and by letting displaced people carry the story. *The Ministry for the Future* answers by making responsibility institutional and by building a body that speaks for those without power.

The Critique of the "We"

The strongest version of the critique comes from Malm and Hornborg. They point to the unequal use of fossil fuels and cite figures showing that the richest 7 percent of people produced about half of global emissions in the early twenty-first century, while the poorest 45 percent produced about 7 percent (64-65). They say that the "human" label is too thin an idea to carry this kind of cause (65). Chakrabarty makes a related but different point. He does not deny that climate science treats the

Earth as one system, but he stresses that human history has never produced a single collective "we" (231). He also warns that some critiques of the universal "human" overlook the hopes of people in Asia, Africa and Latin America who want what the rich world already has (228-29). This warning matters for my argument, because it means that climate justice is not only about blame. It is also about who gets to develop and who has to adapt.

Xausa adds a literary version of the same problem. Writing about Alexis Wright's novels, she draws on Rob Nixon's idea of slow violence, which is harm that arrives slowly and out of sight (105). She notes that apocalyptic fiction can hide colonial violence, because for many Indigenous people the present is already a kind of dystopia and the crisis is a spiral of ongoing harm, not a single future collapse (104-06). A novel that opens with a spectacular disaster may look different, in its politics, from one that follows a slow erosion.

The Two Novels in Criticism

Writing on *Gun Island* is large, and much of it already reads the book in terms of justice. Pancholi and Mishra argue that the novel links ecological decline in the Sundarbans and in Venice, and that it follows migration after Cyclone Aila through trafficking networks and abusive "connection houses" (7-8). Francis reads the novel through myth and migration and stresses its closing call to shared responsibility (32-35). Samkaria reads it through migrant ecologies and non-human agency, and she notes that Dalit displacement meets climate change in the book (36). Syed and colleagues read it as a study of the devastation of nature and the exploitation of Indigenous people (22-29), and Khan links it to consumption, anthropocentric habits and the suffering of marginalized people (49-57). Kumari and Mondo add readings centered on myth and on Deen's rationalism (Kumari 2-7; Mondo 57-61).

Scholarship on *The Ministry for the Future* is thinner in the open sources I could verify from before 2024. Mikes and New take the novel as a starting point for management research. They draw on an interview with Robinson and argue that the Ministry is a model for a body "representing the people of the future and the voiceless of the present" (228). Majeske's interview with Robinson stresses his utopian impulse and his practical interest in technological and regulatory fixes (Majeske). Canavan argues that the Anthropocene often looks at the present from a future where humanity has gone, which narrows room for utopian thought. He reads Robinson's *2312* as a book that keeps its ending open (255-82). Ali reads *New York 2140* as a

novel about class, in which the wealthy live in towers while the poor occupy collapsing buildings (137).

Harm

The harm in *Gun Island* is slow, and it moves through people. The novel is set in the Sundarbans, where Cyclone Aila has left salt in the soil and the water. Pancholi and Mishra describe how this makes land unusable and pushes young men to borrow money and migrate through trafficking routes (7-8). Their reading shows that the damage is not one event. It begins with a storm, but it continues through debt, work and borders. Tenhunen and her co-authors help explain why the same storm produces different results in different places. Their study of the long aftermath of Aila finds that it reinforced the neglect of coastal livelihoods in Bangladesh.

In contrast, in the Indian villages they studied, it led to new investment (222-35). They conclude that climate politics also involves rebuilding political agents and practices (222-35). This is useful for reading Ghosh. It tells us that harm in the Sundarbans is made by weather and by local power together, and the novel's migrants carry the second kind of harm with them when they leave.

The book also shows harm as a kind of knowledge held by those who suffer it. In a line Pancholi and Mishra quote from *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh says that people on the margins meet the effects first and are "the first to experience the future that awaits all of us" (qtd. in Pancholi and Mishra 7). The words are from the essay, not the novel, but the novel dramatizes them. Tipu and Rafi, the young men whose journey Pancholi and Mishra trace, know the sea routes, the brokers and the prices before the educated narrator does. Deen has to learn from them. In this sense the displaced are the book's experts, and the novel gives them authority that official reports often do not.

Responsibility

Responsibility in *Gun Island* is spread across time and across ordinary life. The clearest example is a quarrel between Deen and Cinta, the Italian historian. Deen says that warming is a natural phenomenon. Cinta answers with a question that Pancholi and Mishra quote: "Do they not come from cars and planes and factories that make whistling kettles and electric toasters" (qtd. in Pancholi and Mishra 4). The sentence turns the discussion away from nature and toward habits of consumption. It also links the novel to the argument of Malm and Hornborg, who insist that fossil fuel use has social causes and is not a trait of the species (62-65). Cinta's question points at kettles

and toasters, the goods that most readers use, and it does not blame an abstract humanity.

The novel adds a historical layer through the legend of the Gun Merchant. Francis notes that the story is set against the Little Ice Age, a period of famine and drought in many parts of the world (29-30). Pancholi and Mishra quote a line saying that "many parts of the world had been struck by famines, droughts and epidemics in the seventeenth century" (qtd. in Pancholi and Mishra 122), and they read the legend as a link between past climate disruption and human actions. Khan makes a similar point, arguing that the folktale connects human intervention in the seventeenth century with the present crisis (49-57). The result is a history in which the trade routes of early modern commerce and the consumer habits of today belong to one long line. This history is not about the species. It is about trade, empire and the demand for goods. Samkaria adds that the goddess Manasa's unseen boundaries can be read as limits on exploitative capitalism (39). This is a symbolic answer, since a goddess cannot be held to account in a court. But it shows the novel's instinct, which is to place the cause in an economic order and to give that order an enemy in the form of a myth.

Agency

Agency in *Gun Island* is shared among people, animals and legend. Samkaria shows how the displacement of a dolphin shifts the usual human gaze, so that the animal's loss becomes part of the plot (34-35), and Kumari agrees that dolphins, snakes and spiders drive events (6-7). Pancholi and Mishra note that the novel's creatures move in response to warming, and they record the line that "the water, the currents, the earth itself – was rising against them" (qtd. in Pancholi and Mishra 97). The sentence gives the environment a will of its own. It also expresses how it feels to live where the ground is changing. Human agency, though, is often limited to survival and rescue. The migrants cross borders and endure brokers, and Francis describes the novel's closing rescue of the Blue Boat refugees as an appeal to the "law of the sea, the law of humanity and the law of God" (qtd. in Francis 32-34). This is a moral appeal, and it is powerful. But it is not a plan. The novel shows who is harmed and where the blame lies, and it shows ordinary people responding with courage and solidarity. It does not show who could change the system that produces the harm. I come back to this limit in the comparison.

Harm

The Ministry for the Future starts in a different place. The opening heat wave is sudden, and it is mass death. Robinson told Lewis Gordon that writing it was "a

terrible, dreadful experience," and that he wanted India to play a major role because it is especially at risk from rising wet-bulb temperatures (Gordon). The choice rests on research. Raymond, Matthews and Horton report that a wet-bulb temperature of 35°C marks the upper limit of human tolerance and that extreme humid heat has more than doubled in frequency since 1979 (Raymond et al.). They name South Asia and the Persian Gulf as places where millions of people are on the front line of exposure, and they identify outdoor laborers, the elderly and people with health conditions as the most vulnerable (Raymond et al.). Im, Pal and Eltahir project that in the densely populated agricultural regions of the Ganges and Indus basins, extreme heat could approach the survivability threshold by the late twenty-first century under high emissions (Im et al.).

These studies matter because they show that the novel's opening is a plausible reading of the science and not a random horror. They also show who is exposed. The people most at risk are those who work outdoors, in fields and on roads, and who cannot choose to stay in cool rooms. A reader who knows this will see that the novel's disaster has a class and a place built into it. The harm is not spread evenly across humanity. The heat wave also raises the issue Xausa describes. An apocalyptic opening can make crisis look like a future event that arrives all at once, when many people already live with slow harm (104-06). *The Ministry for the Future* is not simply a book of this kind, because most of it is about patient institutional work. But its first chapters ask the reader to feel a sudden shock before the long labor begins. I read this as a strength and a risk. The shock gets attention, and it can also make the slow harms that came before it harder to see.

Responsibility

Responsibility in the novel is mostly economic and structural. In Mikes and New's account of their interview with Robinson, the author notes that "billions of people live in countries that depend on fossil fuel income to function" (233). He talks about paying fossil fuel producers and states to leave resources in the ground through a tool he calls "carbon quantitative easing" (231-33). This is a way of treating responsibility as something that can be bought out and shared. It accepts that the countries that depend on oil and gas have not simply chosen to harm. It also asks the rich world to pay. Robinson's habit of tying climate to class is visible in earlier work. Ali notes that in *New York 2140* the floods widen the gap between rich and poor, and that speculators profit from sea-level rise (137-38). The same instinct is present in *The Ministry for the Future*. The villain is a system of finance and fossil dependence, and

not the human species. In this respect the novel agrees with Malm and Hornborg more than it first seems to, since it also locates the cause in an economic order (62-65).

Agency

The most important feature of the novel's agency is the Ministry itself. Mikes and New describe it as an organization "representing the people of the future and the voiceless of the present" (228). They also stress that Robinson accepts working inside existing institutions, and that he treats violence as a warning. In the interview, Robinson says the ecoterrorist acts in the book are "appalling to me personally" and "a kind of a warning to the reader" (235). The Ministry offers legal and financial tools instead. Robinson, in Gordon's interview, rejects the choice between optimism and pessimism and says the book shows that even from a dystopian moment "we can still pull ourselves out of it by concerted political and social actions" (qtd. in Gordon). Majeske's interview points the same way, since it describes his writing as marked by a utopian impulse and a practical search for solutions (Majeske).

Here the question of the *anthropos* becomes sharp. The Ministry speaks *for* the voiceless. That is a strength, because it gives a name and an address to a demand that was missing. But it also means that the people who suffer in the opening chapters are not the ones who make the decisions later. Mikes and New themselves describe the cost of inaction as falling on "voiceless victims in far-away places and by future generations" (228). The phrase "far-away places" is revealing, because it shows the reader's position. The reader is not in the far-away place.

Comparative Analysis

Both novels place the worst harm on the poor, but they treat time differently. *Gun Island* is a book of slow harm. Its migrants live with salt, debt and trafficking long after the storm, and the novel follows them across years and borders (Pancholi and Mishra 7-8). *The Ministry for the Future* begins with fast harm and then follows slow work. The science supports both patterns. Heat extremes, as Raymond and colleagues show, are increasing in frequency (Raymond et al.), and the Sundarbans story, as Tenhunen and colleagues show, is shaped by years of political choices after a storm (222-35). Together, the novels cover both of the shapes that harm takes in South Asia: the sudden killing heat and the long erosion of a livelihood.

On responsibility, the books agree on the target and differ in the method. Both reject the idea that humanity as a whole is to blame. *Gun Island* does this through Cinta's question about kettles and toasters and through the long history of trade and empire (qtd. in Pancholi and Mishra 4; Francis 29-30). *The Ministry for the Future* does

it by treating fossil dependence as a structure that can be bought out (Mikes and New 233). Malm and Hornborg would approve of both, since they want the cause to be social and specific (62-65). But the novels pull in different directions. Ghosh's version is diffuse, and it can leave a reader unsure who should answer. Robinson's version is specific, and it can leave a reader thinking that finance alone is the cause. Chakrabarty reminds us that climate politics must also take account of the hopes of late modernizing countries (228-29). Neither novel fully answers this point, though Robinson's idea of paying fossil-dependent states to stop comes closest.

Agency is where the contrast is sharpest, and it is where the title question is most pressing. In *Gun Island*, the displaced are the carriers of knowledge and the actors of rescue, but they have no route to power. In *The Ministry for the Future*, an institution has power, but it acts on behalf of others. We can state the difference this way. Ghosh's novel gives voice to the vulnerable and leaves the system untouched, while Robinson's novel changes the system and leaves the vulnerable mostly as the people being protected. Chakrabarty's statement that there is "no one we" (231) helps explain why neither answer feels complete. If there is no single "we," then no single actor can speak for everyone. A plan made by a few will always be a plan made for the many. A story told by the many will always struggle to become a plan. The novels do not escape this problem. They show it from two sides.

The forms of the novels shape these results. A form built on legend and coincidence suits slow, diffuse harm, because it can hold many times and many beings at once. A form built on reports and institutional voice suits specific responsibility, because it can name a mechanism and propose a fix. This is why the same problem looks different in each. The *anthropos* of *Gun Island* is a crowd of travelers, creatures and ancestors, held together by a story. The *anthropos* of *The Ministry for the Future* is a set of institutions and the people they speak for, held together by a plan. The two forms also deal differently with the risk Xausa describes. *Gun Island* works against the single catastrophe by being long and slow, which fits her call to see the present as an ongoing crisis (104-06). *The Ministry for the Future* begins with a catastrophe, but it quickly moves to the slow politics of response, so it also avoids the trap of treating the crisis as a single future event. In this sense, both books resist the apocalyptic habit, though by opposite routes.

Conclusion

The central question is who or what constitutes the anthropos. Both novels resist the facile assumption that it encompasses everyone. *Gun Island* depicts a

multitude of humans, animals, and ancestors, tracing responsibility backward through histories of trade and forward into the material lives of kettles and toasters. *The Ministry for the Future* shows a world in which a small number of institutions, backed by finance and science, try to speak for those who die in a heat wave and those who have not yet been born. In the first, the vulnerable speak and have no power. In the second, someone has power and speaks for the vulnerable. This leaves a useful lesson for readers and critics. A novel about the Anthropocene has to decide not only what the crisis feels like, but who carries it and who answers for it. Chakrabarty's claim that there is "no one we" (231) is a hard fact for both authors. The books do not fix it, but they show two honest ways of living with it. A reader who takes both seriously may come away asking for a literature that lets the displaced speak and also gives them a seat where decisions are made.

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