

## **‘What were young people to do?’**

### **What we can learn from Amitav Gosh’s *Gun Island* about the gaps in European climate migration policy.**

Group 7

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#### **I. Introduction**

With the emerging and increasing consequences of climate change, it has been long acknowledged that climate migration is a future certainty. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, water stress could displace 700 million people by 2030. Moreover, according to a World Bank report, unless remedial action is taken, there may be 216 million climate change migrants by 2050.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, action in this regard is urgent. However, governments often fail to address it effectively. Moreover, discussions surrounding climate migration, due to their relation to the broader ‘issue’ of migration, are frequently derailed by various anti-immigration sentiments. As a result, the place of climate refugees in current migration frameworks and the future of climate refugees seems lost on the reality of climate refugees.

In an attempt to bridge this gap, the personal experiences of climate refugees in Amitav Gosh’s *Gun Island* can be consulted to better understand the crisis between climate migration and ‘Fortress Europe’. To this end, this review firstly discusses the narrative of the book with special attention to the storylines of climate refugees within the book (II). Then, taking an international law and human rights perspective, this review will briefly establish the EU’s obligations to climate refugees (III). Later, it will analyze what the experiences from the characters in the book can tell us about the inadequacies of the European migration framework in dealing with climate refugees (IV).

#### **II. *Gun Island*’s Narrative**

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<sup>1</sup> European Parliament, At a glance. Thinking about tomorrow. The future of climate migration, available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729334/EPRS\\_ATAG\(2022\)729334\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729334/EPRS_ATAG(2022)729334_EN.pdf), accessed on 15 January 2023.

*Gun Island's* central character is Dinanath Datta (Deen), a rare book dealer from Kolkata, India who becomes obsessed with some mysterious symbols decorating a remote shrine in the Sundarbans. Deen thinks these symbols may commemorate the 17th-century legend of a Gun Merchant who tangled with Manasa Devi, the Hindu goddess of snakes. This takes Deen on a global quest in order to solve the mystery. His journey unfolds in a series of events which wonderfully exhibit the current reality of climate change and how it is effectuating the migration of both humans and animals.

His quest takes him to the Sundarbans where Ghosh encaptures the first climate related catastrophe, the cyclone Aila which hit in the Sundarbans in 2009. Ghosh notes that:

‘[t]he sea had invaded places where it had never entered before; vast tracts of once fertile land had been swamped by salt water, rendering them uncultivable for a generation, if not forever.’(...) Communities had been destroyed and families dispersed.’<sup>2</sup>

During his journey in the Sundarbans, Deen meets Tipu, a tech genius, who helps people from India and Bangladesh immigrate illegally to other countries. Ghosh highlights the impoverished state of the Sundarbans and the frequent and unpredictable natural disasters which forced a number of people to migrate.

‘In these parts, there’s a whole bunch of dirt-poor, illiterate people scratching out a living by fishing or farming or going into the jungle to collect bamboo and honey. Or at least that’s what they used to do. But now the fish catch is down, the land’s turning salty, and you can’t go into the jungle without bribing the forest guards. On top of that every other year you get hit by a storm that blows everything to pieces. So what are people supposed to do? What would anyone do?’<sup>3</sup>

Ghosh, throughout the rest of the book, portrays the horrendous difficulties that migrants might have to encounter when immigrating from a country like the Sundarbans to somewhere safer.

‘...those who can't pay the ransom are given drugs to make them senseless. Then they're taken to the operating theaters, where an organ is removed, usually a kidney. Then these organs are sold - often to Europeans.’<sup>4</sup>

Rafi, a young fisherman in the Sundarbans, chooses to immigrate in order to experience true freedom. Since building a future in the Sundarbans has become virtually impossible, he expresses a feeling of choicelessness. Rafi recalls his grandfather’s words:

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<sup>2</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island* (John Murray, 2019) 48.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 87-88.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 189.

‘he’d tell me that I didn’t need to learn what he knew because the rivers and the forest and the animals are no longer as they were. He used to say that things were changing so much, and so fast, that I wouldn’t be able to get by here. He told me that one day I would have no choice but to leave.’<sup>5</sup>

Rafi’s grandfather’s premonition of his inevitable migration reveals the loss of transgenerational knowledge and how parents no longer need to pass on their craft to younger generations. Due to climate change, new generations will not be able to make a living out of those crafts, and will have no other option but to leave.

Later on in the novel, Deen is invited by one of his oldest friends, Cinta, a Venetian history professor, to attend a conference in Los Angeles. Ghosh uses this to highlight yet another natural calamity: From the seat of his plane, Deen could see that raging forest fires in Los Angeles had laid the forests almost entirely to waste. So much so that he thinks of it as a ‘vast field of ash’<sup>6</sup>. A while later, Deen’s journey takes him to Venice.

As we can see, Ghosh cleverly does not only depict Deen’s journey from the Sundarbans to Los Angeles and then to Venice as the protagonist deciphering the mystery of the legend of the Gun Merchant, but uses such in order to illustrate the climatic disasters that are wreaking havoc in the different countries Deen explores.

The novel ends with the story of the so-called Blue Boat. This boat is faring, full of refugees, amongst which is Tipu, to Italy. However, they are being stopped from approaching land by the Italian military and antagonistic right-wing groups. Gosh hereby reminds the reader of the hardships that migrants have to face when trying to secure a safer future, as they are put in severe danger by those protecting ‘Fortress Europe’. At this point, Ghosh links the climax of the novel to the legend of the Gun Merchant, where, similarly to how the Gun Merchant is saved by the creatures of the sea and sky, the migrants too are saved by whales and dolphins circling the boat thereby creating a barrier to the approaching warships. In spite of the various catastrophic effects of climate change illustrated throughout the novel, Ghosh ends the book on a positive note as the migrants are rescued, enabling the reader to hope for a better future.

### III. EU legal obligations towards climate refugees

Gosh, on several occasions, emphasizes the EU’s lack of commitment towards the climate refugees crisis. Tipu is especially critical towards the role of the EU and how it is not doing enough to properly tackle the situation. In this respect, before moving to the analysis, it should be briefly clarified which are EU’s legal obligations.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 116.

At international level, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), contains a strong focus on adaptation measures<sup>7</sup> which are essential to address the vulnerabilities created by climate change, such as climate-induced migration. Article 7 of the UNFCCC obliges Parties to take ‘decisions necessary to promote the effective implementation of the Convention’. Therefore, the EU shall take action to regulate climate migration. On a more concrete basis, the protection of climate migration can also be inferred from article 8 of the Paris Agreement that emphasizes the importance of ‘averting, minimizing and addressing loss and damages associated with the adverse effects of climate change’.

Moreover, the EU has always positioned itself as a big advocate for human rights. However, there are several rights of these climate refugees that are being violated by the EU’s negligence. This is specially the case on two core rights: the right to life (article 2 ECHR) and the prohibition to torture (article 3 ECHR). The European Court of Human Rights has interpreted it broadly, extending the right to life to the right to live in dignity and to be protected from environmental harm.

Lastly, the EU is bound by the principle of non-refoulement. This forbids the EU to return asylum seekers to a country in which they would be in danger of being subject to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The natural degradation in the Sundarbans and in some areas of Bangladesh makes it impossible for refugees to return to their hometowns without facing severe poverty and a lack of basic utilities, which can be qualified as degrading treatment that would clash with the right to live in dignity.

Although climate induced migration is a rather new topic in international law, the EU is bound to take action according to its various international obligations. As a result, it will be forced to take a leading role to address climate migration. In terms of how the EU should address this, this review believes that, considering the experiences of climate refugees encaptured in the book, a legal framework should be adopted that fits their needs specifically.

#### IV. Analysis: what should EU policy address according to *Gun Island*?

Through the experience of Tipu and Rafi the reader is presented with many issues that can become important suggestions to how European policy on climate migration should be filled in.

##### IV.A. Framing the lack of a legal validity for climate refugees

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<sup>7</sup> Article 4 (1.b, 1.e, 1.f and 4) UNFCCC

A major issue is that there is currently no legal position carved out for climate refugees. This means that in terms of what qualifies a refugee for asylum, which may be that their land has become infertile or has flooded entirely, are not sufficient to have them be granted asylum. In *Gun Island*, the reader learns this from Tipu, who has assumed the position of ‘the storyteller’, whereby he tells others what to tell migration officers at the European borders. He tells Deen ‘Politics, religion and sex is what they’re looking for - you’ve gotta have a story of persecution if you want them to listen to you.’<sup>8</sup> The lack of validity that is given to the motives of climate refugees, therefore, generates a black market, whereby such ‘storytellers’ aid people in deceiving migration officers at the European borders in order to gain asylum.

The apathy of migration officers to the hardships faced by climate refugees is reflective of the broader European position on the matter. Although the EU has recognised the seriousness of the climate migration crisis in the Green Deal following COP 21 in Paris, the new pact on migration and asylum has not listed climate change within the ‘valid’ list of motives to seek asylum. Therefore, if they were to tell the truth, climate refugees could not achieve the legal status of an asylum. Given the already stringent migration policies that have gained Europe the nickname ‘Fortress Europe’, the process for a climate refugee to get footing in Europe is incredibly difficult, which the EU itself has recognized is likely to become a ‘crisis’. In order to address the issue, the Commission’s Directorate General for Migration and Home Affairs has suggested creating a new status of ‘permanently forced migration’ destined exclusively to climate migrants. Such a legal position would validate this type of migration and ensure that those that come from areas devastated by climate change are not left to deceive the system in the hopes of receiving asylum.

Moreover, by establishing them as a separate group, receiving countries will be better equipped to deal with the needs of these refugees. Deen’s observations on the Blue Boat:

‘Rafi, Tipu and their fellow migrants had launched their own journeys, just as I had, long before them; as with me, their travels had been enabled by their own networks, and they, like me, were completely conversant with the laws and regulations of the countries they were heading to. Instead, it was the countries of the West that now knew little about the people who were flocking towards them.’<sup>9</sup>

It sketches the problem that is created by the lack of the legal position in that the receiving countries have no actual information about the people that are now expected to participate in their societies and fail to see their different needs. This can give place to exploitation by employers of industries where refugees work or even by their previous

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid (2) 67.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 280.

smugglers. Additionally, they might need re-schooling in order to transfer their skills in professions that were useful in their home countries to skills that are necessary in modern, urban Europe.

It can, therefore, be concluded that the book shows the apathy of the current framework to the existence of climate refugees. This is then not only for the refugees that are resorting to deception in order to make asylum, but to the whole system of migration.

#### IV.B. Addressing the issues of the escape to Europe

Through the story of the travel of Rafi's housemate, the reader learns that, in addition to supporting the black market of smuggling, refugees can become entrapped in the Libyan civil war as slaves. Additionally, refugees can also become victims of organ trafficking when their money runs out. The reader is confronted with various dangers that can be encountered throughout the long travel from South Asia to Europe and the way in which it supports various types of black markets across the Middle East and Northern Africa. The book, moreover, emphasizes that Europe "simply" blocking common routes does not stop the problem, but actually creates more problems: '[...] the traffickers were nothing but inventive.'<sup>10</sup>

When listening to the story of one of Rafi's employers about her own youth and migration to Europe, she tells the story of how, when she was young, a flood hit their village and destroyed their house and they climbed into a tree in order to not to be sucked into the water. However, the tree was infested with snakes and they killed some of her siblings who then fell into the water. As an almost perfect analogy for the experiences of climate change, she says:

'Can you imagine what that was like? Being in that tree, with the wind howling and the flood raging below, not knowing whether you would be killed by the storm or a snake?'<sup>11</sup>

It shows that the choice to make the dangerous journey to Europe does not necessarily become clearer when the journey becomes harder due to new European policies. Since staying ensures a different, though certain, type of doom, the attempts at migration do not stop when Fortress Europe makes it harder to get in. The only thing this really achieves is more casualties amongst the migrants and thereby more human rights violations at the hand of the European

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 174.

government. This then forces us to think about how to start addressing this differently, which will be addressed in the following section.

#### IV.C Communities in Europe and intentful migration

Throughout the book the crucial role of migrants in the EU economy is underlined. The book puts forward the idea that refugees that have silently settled in the EU have taken up jobs that are essential for the functioning of the EU.

‘Do they know that all of this is made possible by people like me? That it is we who are cooking their food and washing their plates and making their beds?’<sup>12</sup>

Not only does European society not recognise the important part migrants play in the economy, but they undermine it, as well. This is especially true for extremist right wing parties, who often blame immigrants for taking the jobs that EU citizens could have and make them accountable for the large rates of unemployment in some EU countries. This is seen by the end of the book when the Blue Boat trying to enter Italy it’s confronted by anti-immigrant groups with banners announcing: ‘No room here; go home’, ‘Climate migration= invasion’.<sup>13</sup> There’s no doubt that this kind of speech hampers directly the progress of a climate refugee policy at EU level.

Having acknowledged that certain areas in the world are likely to become inhabitable for the number of people that currently live there, such as the Sundurbans, we can define places that are likely to have many people emigrating. A fruitful strategy for the future would then be to plan relocation, within the region and to other continents, where labor-forces need them. If an official procedure for asylum would be created to deal with this relocation, it would relieve pressure on domestic conflicts that lie on the migration routes, decrease the amount of profit within their black markets and ensure that these refugees do not undergo processes of family separation in order to create more stable communities in Europe.

It cannot go unacknowledged that this presents an ideal view of what global migration would look like: organized, intentful and fair. This is far from what has happened in Europe so far. Gosh pictures it as ‘[Europeans] have always tried to preserve the whiteness of their own metropolitan territories in Europe’ whilst ‘... ultimately changing the demographic profile of the entire planet’.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, addressing climate migration more head-on is unlikely to be achieved in the EU.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 291.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 297.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 304.

## V. Conclusion

*Gun Island* portrays the horrific visions of environmental destruction and the desperate struggle of people trying to survive in the wave of a climatic catastrophe. The stories of climate refugees from the Sundarbans demonstrate why environmental migration is considered to be one of the most severe effects of climate change.<sup>15</sup> Despite this, the current EU framework does not cater for refugees who seek asylum in Europe due to the devastating effects of climate change in their home country. The novel depicts the difficulties such refugees need to face when trying to move to a safer country, enduring a long and dangerous journey, the administrative system at the European borders and the apathy of European society to their work and hardship. In the face of projected massive climate migration, urgent action is required, not only at EU level, but globally too. In order to create an effective, humane and future-proof framework, the experiences of climate refugees should always be considered to create policy that fits with their experiences. If policymakers wish to know how to do that, they might want to pick up a copy of *Gun Island*.

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<sup>15</sup> Gemenne, F., 2012, Environmental migration. In Martiniello M. & Rath J. (Eds.), *An introduction to international migration studies: European perspectives*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p.238.

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