

UNRAVELING THE REALM OF MYTHICAL FANTASY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S GUNISLAND

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ABSTRACT

The realm of fantasy always entices people and their imaginations through various genres of literature and the genre of fiction plays a major role in it. The mode in which the magic of fantasy works with the imagination determines its efficiency in transporting the readers to ecstasy. Amitav Ghosh's novel Gun Island takes the readers on an enchanting journey to a world of fantasy. It is remarkable to identify the multiple ways in which the elements of mythical fantasy get entangled with the daily life events of the characters. The study deals with the enchanting reverberation of mythical fantasy and how the protagonist encounters life situations where he can relate fantasy and reality. The study also delves into the transformation of the protagonist who gets entrapped in the world of fantasy and frightened by its charismatic influence over him after undertaking an adventurous journey to the mysterious Gun Island. The employment of the tool of fantasy to express the transgression of the identity even after the subject crosses the boundaries is also a major concern. The paper takes up a poststructuralist way of perceiving the notion of fantasy as a dynamic entity that influences and leads to the transformation of the protagonist when it transgresses his thoughts and ideas of perceiving the world differently. The paper aims to unlock the entity of fantasy to explore its effective employment in the narrative.

Keywords: Mythical fantasy, entices, realm immense, imagination, subject, entangled.

The ontology of fantasy entices the spectators as it transports them to a world of ecstasy. Fiction as a popular genre of literature also charms its readers and their imagination by offering the elements of fantasy woven into its plot. From the time of its emergence, the flourishing of the use of the tool of fantasy was accelerated by its increased demand.

Harrison Smith talks about the employment of fantasy in literature in various manners aiming to allure the readers, "On the one hand, it panders to ancient superstitions and fears, and on the other it projects man forward in time and space" (305). The two major streams of fantasy literature are classified as science and supernatural. The emergence of scientific fantasy can be traced back to a product of the "new scientific imagination," which was in turn the result of the growth and advancement in the scientific field. The supernatural fantasy expresses the willingness to escape "from a too fantastic reality into horrors which, however gripping, do not threaten us as probable or even possible". Although there are chances that the two types can be fused mostly the writers stick to one mode of writing (308). Like the writers of the past, the writers of the present are also putting efforts into blending the element of fantasy into the genre of fiction and it is also to be noted that the experts in the critical field are also making deliberations by exploring the immense possibilities within the vistas of fantasy.

The study attempts to argue the employment of supernatural elements of fantasy in the novel *Gun Island* by the iconic Indian writer Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh skillfully knits the supernatural element of fantasy into the storyline. He takes us back to the past where we encounter Manasa Devi, the snake Goddess. The novel throws light on the details about the protagonist Dinanath's previous birth as Banduki Sadagar. "Fantasies can help us consider profound ideas, to speculate, hypothesize and ask 'what if' kinds of questions that are integral to our lives". The fantasy stories can be interpreted in multiple ways. It can be perceived for its "pure escapism" that it can offer and also as an "allegory, political satire, or even a spiritual journey" (World of Fantasy 492). Thus, the various possibilities of imagination that are displayed allow the understanding of the various life situations or events that are more integral to the living experience in an intense manner.

The novel *Gun Island* explores the quest of the protagonist Dinanath collector of rare books to unveil the mysterious legend of the seventeenth-century merchant, Bonduki Sadagar. The Legend describes the figure Bonduki Sadagar which can also be translated as the 'Gun Merchant' as a person who is haunted by Manasa Devi, the Goddess of snakes. We also see the protagonist give details about his entanglement with one of the famous legends of a merchant named ChandSagar and his trifles with Manasa Devi. "I don't remember when I first heard the story... it sank so deep into my consciousness..." (GunIsland12). One reason why the story was deeply rooted in his consciousness was mainly because of the supernatural element of fantasy involved in it. "But some stories, like certain life forms, possess a special streak of vitality that allows them to outlive others" (12). The legend was sure to have that quality that determined its survival over the centuries. The Gun merchant was another person like Chand who disagreed with Manasa Devi being her devotee and had to face the wrath of the Goddess of snakes and sea creatures.

The plot revolves around the island of Sunderbans and gradually takes us to Los Angeles and finally to Venice. The protagonist's embroilment with fantasy was initiated by his visit to the shrine of Manasa Devi. The protagonist undertook the journey with Horen and Tipu. "...to get to the temple we would have to walk across a couple of hundred yards of mud..." (64). It was hard for Dinanath to manage walking through mud, unlike both Horen and Tippu who are accustomed to the ways of mud. The shrine of Manasa Devi is described vividly. It was not a giant structure and can be compared to the "thatched huts" visible in the countryside of Bengal "Yet the structure was so unexpected and so lovely that the sight fair took my breath away" (67). The structure of the temple, though simple, could catch the attention of Dinanath which hints to the reader that there is a kind of peculiarity in the building that may lead the narrative forward.

Inside the shrine, he meets another lad like Tipu named Rafi who happens to be Horen's grandson. His revelation about a belief among the people that a cobra has been there for many years to ensure the protection of the shrine from outsiders charms the readers. Though nobody has ever seen the snake people would like to believe it is part of the myth. But Rafi's words after Dinanath came out of the dhaam astonish the readers "...I could see it behind you. Its hood was raised and its head was above your shoulder..." (73). These words give the hint that the sighting of the cobra which is the symbol of Manasa Devi's presence excites the readers with its supernatural fantasy and the next moment the protagonist himself sees the snake "appearing out of the darkness like a whiplash, rearing up as if it had been waiting for me...I

realized that it was no ordinary cobra but a king cobra..." (74). The snake's attempt to attack the protagonist terrifies the readers. Here, Dinanath's real-life encounter with the cobra which was a part of the legend as the protector of the dham confuses him and as well as the readers to a great extent. He experiences the mixing up of his reality with the world of mythical fantasy and the readers also get mesmerized by the skillful weaving of fantasy into the reality of the characters. Tipu comes as a saviour and throws a net over the snake but unfortunately gets bitten and then the cobra vanishes. "Just as suddenly as it appeared, the cobra was gone, and the net was lying empty on the ground" (74). There is no evidence that they saw a giant cobra in the previous moment and it seemed to be a dream, but the bite on Tipu's leg was real, which reminds its presence in reality.

The protagonist's visit to the shrine brought a transformation in him, and he hoped his arrival in Brooklyn could help him get rid of the incident which happened in Sunderbans. But it was proved otherwise as he felt, "It was as if some living thing had entered my body...when I entered that shrine something fearsome, venomous and overwhelmingly powerful, something would not allow me to be rid of it" (97). He could not focus on his work as he was haunted by dreadful thoughts. The incident gradually takes a further hold of him even after Dinanath crosses the boundaries by flying to visit his friend in Los Angeles. The protagonist's visit to L A to meet his friend Cinta, who is a professor at Padova, was another incident where the readers are surprised by the incidents that unfolded during his air travel. It was worth noting that Tipu warned him to take care of snakes on his journey but Dinanath took it as a joke as he commented, "I'm going L A in a plane, business class if you must know". But unfortunately, his trip was not as easy as he expected. He came to know about the wildfires which had been happening for several days in L A only after boarding the plane. This news made him panic as he thought of going to L A to get rid of all the ill feelings and realized he was soon to enter a place affected by a wildfire. "The plane was flying low enough that I could see a great mass of blackened tree trunks rising out of a vast field of ash" (109). He could also witness a bird carrying a snake "flipping itself over, it tossed away its prey – a twisting, writhing, sinuous animal" (110). He felt like Tipu's prediction about the snake attack was to befall him. After reaching the hotel safely, Dinanath was upset, "It took me a while to realize that the fires were actually many miles away: in the darkness of the night, they seemed to fill the horizon..." (111). Even the sights of the wildfire he witnessed during the day keep haunting him in his sleep at night. "When at last I fell asleep, I saw the fires again in my dreams, with a glowing snake hurtling towards me, through the flames" (112). Dinanath realizes that, like the Gun Merchant, he was also haunted by the powers of the snake Goddess wherever he goes and the incidents in the mythical fantasy are now part of his real life and there is no escape from it. Gosh effectively mixes the elements of fantasy into the real-life incidents of the characters in the narrative.

The aspect of mythical fantasy embedded in the legend also reveals a kind of struggle for power. Rodríguez opines that "fantasy holds the promise of changing the representational order of things, it often relies on fixity and the sustenance of power struggles around the interplay of race, sexuality, gender, and class" (97). The legend of Gun Merchant and Manasa Devi is also a story of the power struggle between human and supernatural powers. The sea creatures are sent by their supernatural ruler to threaten a representative of the human race. It is evident that the supernatural entity overpowers the humans, as Dinanath can never get rid of the thoughts and he is always haunted even in his dreams.

Dinanath, along with Cinta gets the chance to visit Venice and take part in a mission to rescue the refugees on a ship, where again Cinta gives him hints about them following the routes of the Gun Merchant. "The Gun Merchant would have sailed past it just as we are now...And that island over there? and when the Merchant was here it would have looked much the same as it does today" (Gun Island 233). The protagonist ends up in Venice towards the climax of the novel where he feels like he is remembering his previous birth or rather some connection with Banduki Sadagar, the Gun Merchant. The crew again has an encounter with the sea creatures like whales and dolphins which gives an excitement to everyone on the ship "...the animals, who responded with an extraordinary display of acrobatics, leaping, somersaulting, and even looking us in the eye as they flipped over in midair" (246). This kind of interaction with the animals and their response was a new experience for the protagonist but Piya his friend who is also a cetologist had more information about such behaviour of the animals which she relates to the process of their migration. But this explanation could never satisfy Dinanath as he relates such behaviour to the arena of fantasy. "The sight was like nothing I had ever seen before; it seemed to belong not on the earth of human experience but in the pages of some unworldly fantasy..." (233). Eventually, he starts to believe that all his encounters with either the snakes or sea creatures wherever he goes around the world point towards a connection with the legend of Manasa Devi

The effect of the magical touch of fantasy was also visible in the transgression of the identity of the protagonist as he felt like a new person altogether although he used to get disturbed initially thinking of the incidents that happened in the shrine and gradually, he gets accustomed to such thoughts. His friend Cinta also helped him to find out that he was also following the paths of the Gun Merchant when he ended up in Venice. Ghosh portrays the influence of the supernatural mode of fantasy in the life of Dinanath who came from Brooklyn to escape his feeling of loneliness. His progression of identity gets fulfilled in Venice as he could be a part of a movement along with Cinta to rescue a group of refugees including Tipu who once saved his life.

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