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## From *Bastuhara* to *Immigrati*: Resistance and Refugee Solidarity in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*

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### Abstract

Refugees exist throughout human history, though it is after the British imperial collapse that the term ‘refugee’ finds currency in South Asia. This paper shows how refugee solidarity finds different expressions in the face of resistance and securitization in two of Amitav Ghosh’s novels - from the state-sponsored genocide of refugees in the regime of a left-wing government in *The Hungry Tide*, to the right-wing resistance denying the entry of immigrants stranded on the Italian coastline of the Mediterranean in *Gun Island*. This paper also unfolds how politicization of issues like sheltering and socializing the refugees affects the idea of solidarity: the indifference of civic society to state-sponsored atrocities against the refugees in *The Hungry Tide* stands in contrast with the support extended to illegal immigrants by the human rights activists despite the opposition of “right-wing, anti-immigrant groups” in *Gun Island*. Finally, the paper reflects how, in this age of economic globalization, digital media appears more powerful than any doctrinaire ideology of the ‘dispossessed’ in managing refugees’ solidarity.

**Keywords:** Refugees, immigrants, sociality, resistance, refugee solidarity

### Introduction

*“The refugee question is, of course, the most visible form of the current planetary crisis. Ten years ago if somebody had suggested that the movement of a relatively small number of people would fundamentally destabilize the political systems of Europe and North America nobody would have believed them—but that is exactly what has happened. But I think it is vital to point out that the current migrations cannot be reduced simply to “climate change”; they are the product of many interesting factors.” - Amitav Ghosh<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> In reply to a question put by Asis De (one of the authors of this article) in an interview, Amitav Ghosh’s statement quoted above appears quite significant. For details, please see: *Amitav Ghosh’s Culture Chromosome*, eds. Asis De and Alessandro Vescovi (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2022), 336.

Postcolonial Anglophone literature has deployed variously the tropes of cross-border migration, homelessness, refugeehood and asylum as a means to describe the plight of minoritarian communities and their persecution in the host society or even in the erstwhile homeland. Literary narratives showcasing refugees deal invariably with individuals and sometimes collective human migration, misery, anxiety and bewilderment embedded behind the official history and statistics of refugee movements and rehabilitations. Though history plays a significant part in contextualizing the conflicts in refugee narratives, the writer's selective preference is how s/he represents the dimensions of the conflict/s between social groups and individuals. The creative imagination of the author tends to rest upon the refugee's principal emotions like fear, shame, suspicion, anxiety and anger. In addition, the trauma of migration, sense of loss and the memory of the past, in delineating a comprehensive matrix, straddle both the past life and the present status of the refugee, as the "refugee's self-identity is anchored more to who she or he was than what she or he has become" (Daniel and Knudsen 5). In the age of economic globalization, this is often true of illegal transnational labour migrations, where the migrant individuals from economically weaker nations struggle to access better opportunities and resources in the host societies of the developed nation-states. The influx of refugees and economic migrants impacts the host societies not only by altering the demographic pattern of the resident population, but often by significantly transmitting newer socio-cultural practices and religio-political ideologies, by grabbing shares of economic resources from the resident population and thereby adding to chances of contentions, suspicion, distrust, hostility and violence.

However, the ground realities of refugeehood and the literary representations of the plight of the refugees across the world are different from each other. The scenario of refugee support systems and rehabilitation for the asylum seekers and the illegal worker-migrants in the developed countries of the Global North is substantially different from that of the South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh, where the identity of the refugee is mostly conceptualized as victimized border-crossers<sup>3</sup> and historically validated by the post-Partition political remapping of the Indian subcontinent. Resultantly, literary narratives upholding refugees' experiences in these South Asian countries focus mainly on issues like pre-migration ethnic conflicts, the plight and dehumanization of refugees in camps, railway stations and terminuses, individual memories of exploitation, violence and injustice, the indifference of the state in rehabilitation and sometimes on the state-sponsored atrocities inflicted upon groups of refugees. Issues like rights of the refugees, civilian movements to open up resource and legal supports for both refugees and economic migrants— which are often seen in Euro-American narratives, are hardly visible in South Asian Anglophone refugee narratives. Instead, most Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi literary narratives represent how groups of dispossessed people (primarily identified as homogenous ethno-religious communities) demanding meager doles and settlement are used as vote banks by political parties. The major politico-historical events which act as springboards of refugee narratives in the subcontinent are the Indian Partition at the end of the British Raj in 1947, the birth of new nation-states of India and Pakistan, the largest-ever population exchange on ethno-religious community-identity in South Asia, incidents of violence *en*

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<sup>3</sup> The confusion and violent schism of the politico-historical event of Indian Partition create the largest number of refugees both across the borders between India and the West and East Pakistan, and these people "are still identified as 'refugees' [...] especially if they are poor and of low caste" (Murshid 2014, 2).

route the cross-border migration and even during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971.

The plights of the poor and low-caste Hindu refugees pouring into India before and after the emergence of Bangladesh as a new nation<sup>4</sup> in 1971 find expression in Amitav Ghosh's earlier novels like *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Shadow Lines* (1988), but have been presented most prominently in *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Anshuman Mondal, in his book entitled *Amitav Ghosh*, points out that "the figure of the 'refugee' is one that has continued to inform his fiction throughout his career" (2). Mondal's observation, which most of Ghosh's readers took only as a scholarly statement, came at a time when Ghosh had published only five of his novels along with a handful of essays and nonfiction. It is only after the publication of his nonfiction *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* that the academia finds the reason behind Ghosh's fascination for the refugees and their predicaments, as the author acknowledges an ancestral connection with ecological migration: "My ancestors were ecological refugees long before the term was invented" (*The Great Derangement* 4). Ghosh's use of the term "ecological refugees" for his ancestors who migrated away from Bengal to Bihar due to a massive flood caused by the Padma River in the second half of the nineteenth century, emphasizes that migration caused by environmental disaster is in no way less significant than the politico-historical violence in the post-Partition Indian subcontinent. The refugee in Ghosh's literary narratives is the destitute who witnesses the loss of almost all materiality of his/her past in the whirlwind of situational disasters, very much like his "ancestors sitting huddled on an outcrop, looking on as their dwellings were washed away" (*The Great Derangement* 5). Ghosh's refugees, essentially, lack in the home: either they lose it or unwillingly leave it behind.

### **Refugees/Migrants – The Ethical Question**

In his novels, Ghosh addresses the refugee scenario as something fundamental to the socio-economic, political and the human conditions in the Indian subcontinent since the middle of the previous century. In his latest novel *Gun Island* (2019), Ghosh extends his horizon beyond the geo-spatiality of the Indian subcontinent to the European coastline of the Mediterranean. From the spectacle of the post-Partition, *Bastuhara* ("homeless") refugees of the Sundarbans rowing boats in *The Hungry Tide* to the sight of the economic *Immigrati* ("immigrants") on the blue boat stranded in the Mediterranean on its way to Italy in *Gun Island*, Ghosh's depiction of the refugees and their solidarity have accommodated multiplicity of vision. Representation of the refugees and cross-border economic migrants appearing as refugees has altered courses throughout Ghosh's literary career till now, as the spatio-temporal contexts in his novels differ substantially from each other. The vast tapestry of refugees' stories delineated in Ghosh's novels upholds refugees and economic migrants as they "'dwell in travel' in cultural spaces that

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<sup>4</sup> Since the Indian Partition in 1947, exploitation of resources and deprivation of political power contributed largely to people's dissatisfaction in East Pakistan. Moreover, the policy of the Pakistan government to make Urdu the national language severely undermined the sentiment of the Bengali-speaking resident population of East Pakistan since 1948. Finally, West Pakistan's disapproval of the electoral victory of the Awami League in East Pakistan in March 1971 and a genocide organized by the West Pakistani army and the 'Razakar' militia result in a civil war. In *The Indian Partition in Literature and Films: History, Politics, and Aesthetics*, Mehta and Mookerjee-Leonard observe: "The Bangladesh War, as it was called by the Indian government which joined East Pakistan in its fight after Pakistan bombed Indian Air Force bases, precipitated a new wave of migration and destitution along the India-East Pakistan border, recalling memories of 1947" (Mehta and Mookerjee-Leonard 2015, 2).

flow across borders” (Dixon 10) and contribute to the novelist’s invocation of the “syncretic elements in culture(s) as a possible solution to the intercultural conflict” (Hoydis 25). Moreover, Ghosh’s treatment of the post-Partition refugees is often more ethical than political, as he told Frederick Luis Aldama two decades back: “And in the end my real interest is in the predicament of individuals” (Ghosh, “An Interview” 86-87). The hapless refugees and cross-border migrants appearing in Ghosh’s novels are not always victims of political, ethno-religious or racial conflicts, but also people devastated by environmental havoc, very much like Ghosh’s ancestors mentioned in *The Great Derangement*: the story of Lubna and her husband, immigrants from Bangladesh to Venice after the Bhola cyclone in *Gun Island* is an example. Another interesting point noticed in Ghosh’s novels, is the variety of the refugee figures: from the political and ethno-religious refugees in *The Hungry Tide* to the ecological refugees and young economic migrants illegally entering Europe in *Gun Island*, the novelist’s presentation of the cross-border intruders witnesses a transformation in the choice of ideas and ethical values. This paper attempts to explore how Ghosh represents the several situational conflicts with the majority resident population and the eventual migration: the mutual distrust and resultant anxiety as affective vectors behind the transformation of the citizen to the transnational refugee. However, it is also a truism that to Ghosh, the identity of a refugee or economic worker-migrant is hardly any permanent condition of hopeless exile, and it is only his/her resilient spirit that can transform a refugee into a resident in newer geo-spatial realities.

Claire Gallien’s consideration of the word ‘refugee’ as “historical construction” that privileges “political and ideological considerations over economic and ecological ones” (“Refugee Literature” 723) is fairly applicable to the post-Partition political and ethno-religious refugees in the spatio-temporal context of eastern India. Both the “historical construction” of the nation of India and the geo-political construction of its international border in 1947 are the prime conditions that permeate Ghosh’s imaginative construction of the term ‘refugee’ in his novels. Moreover, Ghosh’s migration-vocabulary register makes it clear why many of his fictional characters are migrants but not refugees, as the term ‘refugee’ has its exclusive politico-historical dimensions. Gallien finds ‘migrant’ as a rather inclusive “double-edged term” which is mostly used “to avoid discriminating between people because of their reasons for migration” (“Forcing Displacement” 738) and may, therefore, imply economic migrations whereas the “refugee” is the destitute migrating and seeking refuge for survival. *Gun Island*, Ghosh’s latest novel till date, is rather ambitious in its scope of cross-border migrations and the rights of the refugees, as the novelist craftily dissolves the border between the Indian conception and the UNHCR<sup>5</sup> interpretation of the term ‘refugee.’ The novel accommodates issues like voluntary economic migration and organized human trafficking of young worker-migrants from Bangladesh and Pakistan to European countries as refugees through the Middle East and Egypt crossing the Mediterranean and the Adriatic Sea. Ghosh shows how economic migrants from these countries include themselves in small groups of refugees from the war-torn Middle East and poverty-

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<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, has formulated an acceptable definition of the term “refugee” and made legal provisions to secure the human rights of refugees in its 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol. The ‘Signatory States Parties’ to one or both of these legal instruments to protect the refugees’ rights are 148, though India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh have not yet signed either of these documents. It is understandable how the conception of refugees and legal scope for the refugees’ rights in the Indian subcontinent differ from the globally accepted interpretation of the status and rights of the refugees. For details of the UNHCR signatory countries, please see <https://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b73b0d63.pdf>

stricken sub-Saharan countries to enter Europe as asylum seekers before settling down as workers and petty employees. Another vital point that surfaces up after exploring most of Ghosh's narratives is his strategic representation of the refugees not as individually significant characters, but as *en masse* with which the writer finds an ethical, humanitarian engagement. Few major characters like Tipu and Rafi in *Gun Island* are identified as refugees at specific points of the narratives, though they neither start nor end up in refugee camps. However, the transformation of Ghosh's refugees relies heavily on the novelist's multiplicity of vision at the intersections of the past and the present, politics and ideology, hatred and fear, chaos and order, conflict and consolation, mobility and settlements, memory and recognition, and quite exclusively, on his ethical responsibility to history.

### Migration and Counter-Migration of the *Bastuhara*: *The Hungry Tide*

Ghosh's fifth novel *The Hungry Tide* accommodates the issue of the settlement of political Hindu refugees from across the border of Bangladesh in the Sundarbans of coastal India, the rehabilitation of thousands of refugees in Dandakaranya – an infertile plateau in central India, their counter-migration to the Sundarbans as climate refugees and the state-sponsored evacuation of the refugees from the island of Morichjhāpi resulting in a genocide that soon lapses into oblivious public memory. In this novel, Ghosh initially treats the refugees as waves of poor and subaltern population who escape the ethno-religious violence in Bangladesh and enter the Indian Sundarbans to save life: “[I]n successive waves, some after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and some after the Bangladesh war of 1971” (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 59). The word ‘refugees’ has been used sixteen times in the narrative and Ghosh ascribes pivotal importance to the Morichjhāpi genocide (1979), which Anshuman Mondal finds as “a marginalised episode in the coercive history of the modern post-colonial Indian state” (133). The word ‘refugees’ has been first used in the third chapter during a conversation between Kanai and Nilima in connection with the Morichjhāpi massacre:

“It was around the time of the Morichjhāpi incident, so I was beside myself with worry.”

“Oh?” said Kanai. “What was that? I don’t recall it exactly.”

“Some refugees had occupied one of the islands in the forest,” Nilima said.

“There was a confrontation with the authorities that resulted in a lot of violence. The government wanted to force the refugees to return to their resettlement camp in central India. ...” (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 26)

After listening to the reference to “the Morichjhāpi incident” and his inability to “recall it exactly,” Kanai’s indifferent reaction exemplifies the common social amnesia that takes root in the violent state-sponsored attempt “to force the refugees” moving back to the “resettlement camp in central India.” The novelist “has enlivened the *fabula* of Morichjhāpi eviction into a beautiful *syuzhet*” (De 16) which fairly describes “the essential conflict arising between the human struggle for survival and the interdependency with nature” (Hoydis 293). *The Hungry Tide* upholds international migration of the political and ethno-religious refugees, which simultaneously displays the refugees’ internal reverse-migration to the Sundarbans on environmental reasons, as they “*have always lived—by fishing, by clearing land, and by planting the soil*” (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 262; italics original).

It is a truism that the counter-migration of large groups of the already rehabilitated refugees from Dandakaranya to the Sundarbans as climate refugees is the key which ignited “the Morichjhāpi incident.” Ghosh’s literary-historical reconstruction of Morichjhāpi massacre and its context finds exposure through Nirmal’s diary and

Nilima's memory. The nineteenth chapter of *The Hungry Tide* and its tale-telling title "Morichjhāpi" situates the ethno-religious refugees in the spatio-temporal context: "the poorest of rural people, oppressed and exploited both by Muslim communalists and by Hindus of the upper castes" (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 118). Ghosh makes a janiform treatment of the refugees in the novel, as he represents the refugees pouring in small groups and settling down in the islands of the Sundarbans in a totally different manner than the arrival of the tumultuous wave of refugees counter-migrating internally from Dandakaranya to the Sundarbans looking for the riverine climate and environment. The influx of the huge peasant population arriving to Morichjhāpi in large groups "from a government resettlement camp" situated at "a place called Dandakaranya, deep in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, hundreds of miles from Bengal" (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 118), draws the attention of the state, whereas small groups and families of the refugees from Bangladesh settled in the islands quite silently. However, after encountering the hostile environment and people of Dandakaranya for almost a decade, most of the already rehabilitated refugees "organized themselves and broke out of the camp" and "moved eastward in the hope of settling in the Sundarbans" (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 118). One should unmistakably notice the issue of refugee solidarity in the refugees' "organized" resistance and reverse-migration to the familiar riverine ecology of the Gangetic archipelago. As Nilima makes her assessment of the political situation with an air of journalistic detachment, it was just "a miscalculation" on the part of the refugees who thought to earn favour of the new "Left Front ministry" (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 119) in power in West Bengal.

Nirmal's diary in *The Hungry Tide* may be seen as an apology of a left-wing idealist lamenting over the anti-human stand of the newly-elected Left Front government that preferred the project of wildlife sanctuary over refugee rehabilitation. In the twenty-seventh chapter, Ghosh represents the full story of the refugees' counter-migration through Nirmal's diary:

*we crossed the border... were met by the police and taken away; in buses they drove us to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness... those who lived there, that dust was as good as gold; they loved it just as we love our tide country mud. But no matter how we tried, we couldn't settle there: rivers ran in our heads, the tides were in our blood* (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 165; emphases original).

For the reason that "rivers ran in [our] heads, the tides in [our] blood," the peasant refugees started looking for any uninhabited, forested islands in the Sundarbans where they can find their familiar riverine environment and settle down:

*We sent some people ahead, and they found the right place; it's a large empty island called Morichjhāpi. For months we prepared...the police fell on us the moment we moved. They swarmed on the trains, they put blocks on the road — but we still would not go back; we began to walk* (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 165; emphases original)

As the sincerity of an organized movement is evident in the refugees' preparation for months before counter-migrating to the tide country, the tone of a desperately unified resistance against the state is also apparent in announcing – "but we still would not go back." It is a fact that in the countries of South Asia, refugee solidarity is still something that means unified and organized resistance of the refugees against their opposition, often the state. Unlike Europe or North America, the presence of the civic society or any such welfare organization standing beside the refugees and raising politico-legal battle against the state is hardly visible in the socio-cultural scenario of India. Therefore, it is the natural fate of most of such conflicts, where the refugees lose and their movement

crushed by the state. It is only the spirit of solidarity and unified resistance that makes a 'lost' movement historically, and sometimes politically, memorable.

In *The Hungry Tide*, it is Nirmal's diary that unfolds the sprouting of a sense of solidarity in Kusum, as she decided to accompany the Dandakaranya-refugees in their counter-migration to Morichjhāpi in the Sundarbans:

*hope blossomed in my heart; these were my people, how could I stand apart? We shared the same tongue, we were joined in our bones; the dreams they had dreamt were no different from my own. They too had hankered for our tide country mud; they too had longed to watch the tide rise to full flood... I gathered our things, put clothes on Fokir's back; with Rajen in our hearts, we stepped away from the shack. (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 165; emphases original)*

The unmistakable note of community feeling—“these were my people” sharing “the same tongue” and “joined in [our] bones” has an affective dimension where individual hope finds a psycho-social coverage and identifies the self with the collective nurturing the spirit of solidarity. Moreover, the common identity of the refugee plays an inclusive role in uniting the tide country people who “too had hankered for [our] tide country mud.” The solidarity in *The Hungry Tide* is born out of a sense of community feeling which is, in many ways, homogenous. As the unity of these refugees is strong, so is their resistance against the state that demands eviction “to make room for wildlife conservation projects” (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 59).

Kusum's anxiety over the future of the refugee-settlers in Morichjhāpi finds expression in Nirmal's diary during the forced eviction - “Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them?” (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 261-62). An interesting reversal of the binary positionality of ‘they/us’ becomes visible as Kusum and Nirmal voluntarily identify themselves with the homeless refugees. The spectacle of the refugee-boat defiantly moving towards the speedboat of police, displays the solidarity of the dispossessed: “[T]he people in the boat joined together their voices and began to shout, in unison, ‘Amra kara? Bastuhara. Who are we? We are the dispossessed’” (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 254; emphases original). Nirmal's left-wing ideology prioritizes the refugees' rights and he finds solace only in philosophical reflection that may be taken as Ghosh's observation on the interrelationship between identity and belonging: “Where else could you belong, except in the place you refused to leave” (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 254; emphases original). The readers of *The Hungry Tide* do not feel astonished when they find the old, retired headmaster Nirmal mutters a slogan denying the refugees' possession and rights over the island: “I joined my feeble voice to theirs: ‘Morichjhāpi chharbona!’” [‘We won't leave Morichjhāpi.’] (Ghosh, *The Hungry* 254; emphases original). In one of her articles, Shameem Black observes how Ghosh's novel “uncover[s] a past in which refugees compete for legitimacy on tideland islands with endangered tigers” (*The Great Derangement* 302). Black's proposition of the refugees' competition with “endangered tigers” for “legitimacy” on the rights of the island is the fountainhead of an existential conflict between the destitute human beings and the non-human *others* standing on the brink of extinction. However, in *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh avoids providing any unitary concept of social and environmental justice applicable to both the non-human species and refugees in distress. The geo-cultural homogeneity of the refugee community and tide country people in *The Hungry Tide* promotes a sense of solidarity and prepares the ground for resistance against the state power in securing the refugees' rights over the land and rivers of the Sundarbans.

***Immigrati* on Work Migration across the Mediterranean: *Gun Island***

The refugee scenario in *Gun Island*, Ghosh's latest novel by now, is far more complex than in *The Hungry Tide*, as the new novel accommodates an intercontinental geo-spatiality and more culturally diverse spectrum. In this bipartite novel, subdivided into twenty-two chapters, Ghosh takes an ambitious leap by using a twenty-first century trans-continental spatial canvas to enable his fictional characters move from Asia to Northern Africa, Europe and the United States. Similarly, Ghosh's representation of the refugees and transnational migration finds a global turn as he alloys his cult area of the late-twentieth century poor, peasant refugee migrations with the much-discussed "European refugee crisis" (2015-16) to display the economic migration of young South Asian worker-migrants to Europe using the global human trafficking network. As the fictional characters cross the borders of different countries and cultural spaces *en route* their destination in Europe, the novelist takes freedom to use multilingual vocabulary including words and terms from the register of social media and cyber technology. In his latest novel *Gun Island*, Ghosh uses the word 'refugees' thirty-five times and its Italian equivalent 'rifugiati' eight times, whereas the word 'migrants' eighteen times and its Italian form '*immigrati*' twice— an extensive coverage not found in any one of his earlier novels.

However, it is pretty intriguing that despite his unmistakably global treatment of the refugee issue in *Gun Island*, Ghosh prefers to start with reference to post-Partition political refugees in the Indian subcontinent, adding a new 'ecological' dimension. Alongside the "steady flow of refugees from East Pakistan" and a fresh arrival of "many more hungry mouths" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 14) after the environmental disaster "known as the Bhola cyclone" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 13) set the spatio-temporal context of the ecological and economic cross-border migrations of the Bangladeshi people, which is a significant theme in the novel. The shocking metaphor of "hungry mouths" aptly illustrates the devastation of the ecological refugees. The character of Lubna Alam recounts before Dinanath - the protagonist of the narrative, how the cyclone destroyed their house in Bangladesh before their arrival in Europe: "Everything's gone now; the house, the people - the water's taken it all" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 160). The very geo-spatial positionality of Bangladesh has made the country vulnerable to weather catastrophes like cyclones and flood. Probably it will not be a conjectural observation that every severe weather catastrophe and the limited economic resource of the country had contributed to the transnational migration scenario a few decades back, as it happened in Lubna Alam's case "twenty years ago" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 161). In the twenty-first century, the neoliberal trends in global economy have changed the conditions of transnational migration, and when Lubna tells Dinanath - "You are going to enjoy yourself in Venice then- it's full of us" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 163), one readily understands that by "us" Lubna talks about a huge number of migrants from Bangladesh, all of whom can never be ecological refugees devastated by climate catastrophes. These migrants, as Ghosh depicts them - "a waiter in a café, and then a man who was selling chestnuts and another who was wheeling an ice-cream cart" (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 163), along with the crew-members of Lubna's team, are all young men arrived in Europe from Bangladesh as 'irregular' worker-migrants. The illegal "influx of refugees into Europe," as the Italian sociologist Donatella della Porta in *Solidarity Mobilizations in the 'Refugee Crisis': Contentious Moves* observes: "[I]s an act of resistance, with defiance of some laws that constrain movements on European soil" (20). Despite knowing this, the worker-migrants pour in the European countries in the guise of refugees and asylum-seekers, as in most of the European countries, there are strong networks providing legal support in the name of refugee solidarity.



In *Gun Island*, fictional Bangladeshi worker-migrant characters like Bilal or Palash are the typical literary representations of young South Asian economic migrants who are gradually populating the working class and service industry of several European cities. It appears strategic of Ghosh as he brings forward the tricky debate on the politico-legal status of the ‘refugees’ and the ‘worker-migrants’ in *Gun Island*, which had constituted the global argumentations over the ‘European Refugee Crisis’ (2015-16). As per the European Agenda on Migration<sup>6</sup> and the norms on the rights of refugees set by the UN in 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, illegal migrants entering Europe through human trafficking network, or for economic reasons, should not be eligible for the social protection and legal status of the ‘refugees.’ It is the reality, however, that few pro-refugee political organizations and so-called ‘liberal’ activists advocate for equal rights, social protection and legal status for every migrant and asylum seeker at par with the ‘refugees’ just on humanitarian ground. Agencies of trafficking sending worker-migrants to Europe through illegal channels seize this opportunity and continue shoveling African and Asian people across the Mediterranean, further complicating the process of rehabilitation to ‘crisis.’ *Gun Island* focuses precisely on the complications in the scenario of transcontinental work-migrations in an age of economic globalization and advanced cyber technology unlike any of Ghosh’s earlier narratives.

As Gisa reports Deen, the young worker-migrants from South Asia, particularly from Bangladesh, often constitute the large population of “the *rifugiati* and *immigrati*” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 145) in Italy: “[L]ast month Bangladeshis were the second largest group coming into Italy” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 146). Gisa also shares with Deen the news of “a boatload of refugees” that has been “spotted in the eastern Mediterranean” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 172). Deen comes to know from Gisa that most of the economic migrants from Bangladesh enter Europe with a motley group of refugees dispatched by traffickers based in Egypt: “[A] *gruppo misto* with Eritreans, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Sudanese, and maybe some Bengalese as well. That’s been the pattern with boats from Egypt” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 173). The experience of Rafi’s overland transcontinental migration from Turkey to Bulgaria with a group of ‘mixed’ refugees supports Gisa’s statement: “[T]here were a few Bengalis among them, but the others were from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan and some other countries, too” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 241). The young economic migrants reaching the European coastline as ‘refugees’ are not destitute asylum-seekers or war-victims but middle-class people from Bangladesh. These people can afford the expense of illegal transnational migration through unusual routes following an organized human trafficking system “with tentacles that reach into all regions and most countries in the world” (Farr 124). The availability of increasingly cheaper communication technology and the Internet facilitate the illegal movements of the young economic migrants, as Ghosh opines in a post-publication meet: “Every migrant, basically their movements are made possible through cell-phones: the payments to the traffickers, the destinations where they are going—all of it is completely tied to this technology.”<sup>7</sup> In this age of social media and advanced cyber technology, cell

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<sup>6</sup> The “European Agenda on Migration,” launched by the European Commission in May 2015, prioritize its fight against human trafficking and is structured along “four pillars: reducing the incentives for irregular migration; border management—saving lives and securing external borders; emphasizing Europe’s duty to protect implemented through a strong common asylum policy; and introducing a new policy on legal migration” (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019, 10-11).

<sup>7</sup> In the post-publication meet of *Gun Island* on 27 October 2019 during the Chicago Humanities Festival, Ghosh admits that a large part of this narrative comes out of the experiences he had during the European Refugee Crisis in 2015-2016. Please see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPsj\\_1stkBs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPsj_1stkBs) (accessed 2 May 2022).

phones often dismantle the local ties and provoke the young, aspirant worker-migrants of the Global South for the easy-going and glamorous life in the distant global in Europe. Moreover, the issue of social prestige in the home country and the dream-desire of sending hefty remittance lure the young worker-migrants so deeply that they even risk the Mediterranean on rubber rafts and ultimately land on disguised slavery in the hands of labour recruiters.

In the last chapter of *Gun Island*, Ghosh showcases “the clamorous confrontation” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 274) between a group of pro-refugee activists and the “right-wing, anti-immigrant groups” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 272). As Palash tells Dinanath how “human rights activists across Italy had decided to take up the cause of the boatload of refugees” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 198), it becomes clear that the pro-refugee activists take significant role in scheming refugee solidarity in the face of right-wing opposition. In one of his articles, Lorenzo Zamponi points out how in Italy, particularly in “the last few decades, [it] has seen a significant presence of migrants’ and migration-related political activism, both in the institutional realm and in street politics” (104). However, as the activists greet the “refugees on the deck of the Blue Boat” with a “cheer of welcome,” the slogans from the anti-immigrant groups - “Go back where you came from [...] Europe for Europeans!” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 276) expound the right-wing desperate attempt “to preserve the whiteness of their own metropolitan territories in Europe” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 279). It is an ironic reversal of situation that the colonial guilt of “repopulating other continents” with “slaves and coolies” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 279) is historically countervailed by the flow of migratory people from the erstwhile Empires in this age of economic globalization. The novel ends with a hopeful note for humanity as a miraculous spectacle of bioluminescence is seen on the surface of the sea, and after the ministerial proclamation in public - “only in the event of a miracle would these refugees be allowed into Italy” (Ghosh, *Gun Island* 284), the admiral of Italian Navy allows a state-sponsored rescue of the migrants with a promise of rehabilitation. Refugee solidarity appears to win over the right-wing resistance, but in the name of miracle!

### **Conclusion**

In exploring Ghosh’s representation of refugee solidarity in the face of organized anti-immigrant resistance or state-sponsored oppressions with references to *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, one would unmistakably notice the difference between the spatio-temporal contexts of these two narratives alongside the diverse politico-economic and socio-cultural factors. Some readers may find *Gun Island* as the sequel to *The Hungry Tide* as a few major characters of the latter re-appear in this latest novel, but it is a truism that *Gun Island* is more global in spatial and cultural scope. The sight of the derelict blue boat full of young *immigrati* on the Mediterranean in *Gun Island* may appear comparable with the sight of the *Bastuhara* refugees in *The Hungry Tide*, but one need to remember that unlike the economic migrants waiting on the European coastline, the subaltern peasants are tied locally with the soil of tide country. The hardly literate peasant-refugees’ resistance and their solidarity against the state-sponsored oppression may be exemplary, but in course of time, has sunk as a chapter of forgotten history, whereas the young South Asian economic migrants escaping to Europe from Bangladesh as refugees is the recent reality in the evolution of the historical pattern of transnational migration. The post-Partition political, ethno-religious and climate refugees in *The Hungry Tide* mostly constitute a homogenous community and seek complete socio-cultural integration with the host cultural space in India as they have no home to return at their places of

origin, whereas the economic migrants showcased in *Gun Island* prefer dual citizenship of both the homeland and the host country as their politico-national identity. The South Asian economic migrants' experiences of transnational travel, camaraderie with dispossessed people of other ethno-nationalities, and their patient "listening to the trauma of another [can] contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community" (Craps 2).

A comparison between the two novels of Ghosh on the issues of resistance and refugee solidarity in this paper explicitly points out the transformation in the novelist's presentation of the transnational migration scenario before and after economic globalization: unlike the wave of low-caste peasant refugees in *The Hungry Tide*, the young economic migrants in *Gun Island* appear fairly skilled in using smartphones, the Internet and also in multilingual conversation – features of transnational extraterritoriality that interrogates the supposedly default monolingual imaginary along the borders of nations and simultaneously attempts to establish newer literary geographies which are more cosmopolitan in nature. Unlike the destitute *Bastuhara* – politically victimized refugees of the bygone era presented in *The Hungry Tide*, the economic *immigrati* in *Gun Island* hardly lament the loss of their roots but accommodate the rather unfamiliar realities of transnational routes to live their dreams together with stronger hope and confidence.

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