

# Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: Digital Age Man as Technology Possessed Impersonal Systems

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**Abstract:** *One of the unique cultural phenomena of the twenty-first century is the rising use of digital and computational technology and devices, where space for the imaginative and the emotional necessitates, quite naturally, a new reconfiguration. This reconfiguration is evident in the way people interact with each other and the world around them. The internet has created a global community where people can connect and communicate with each other instantly, regardless of distance or time zones. Social media platforms have become a ubiquitous part of modern life, allowing individuals to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with others on a massive scale. As we continue to embrace these new technologies, they continue to shape culture in ways that one cannot yet imagine. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* unfolds on a global scale and mirrors global issues that have transformed the life of both human and non-human world. This study explores the impact of technology and social media in the twenty first century human world at large in the novel *Gun Island* written by Amitav Ghosh*

**Keywords:** Technology, social media, internet, digital age, migration, transformation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The story of Amitav Ghosh's fiction, *Gun Island*, is set in the Sundarbans of India, Brooklyn, Los Angeles, and Venice, Italy. Dinanath Datta (called Deen in the United States of America), a Bengali Indian living in Brooklyn is "a dealer in rare books and Asian antiquities" (Ghosh 3). During one of his yearly trips to Calcutta, he is caught up in the mythology of the "Gun Merchant" or "Bondooki Sadagar". Deen is extremely curious and feels strongly drawn to unravel some of the mysteries surrounding the ancient folklore of the Gun Merchant, his being cursed by Manasa Devi, his migration to Venice to escape the curse, his success in amassing great wealth, and a subsequent return to the Sundarbans to build a temple. In the course of the narrative, the narrator, Deen, constantly relies on gadgets and tech savvy characters to communicate and collect information. While retelling the story of Manasa Devi along with Deen's research on the "Gun Merchant" or "Bondooki Sadagar" mystery, Ghosh skillfully covers topics as diverse as climate change, mythology, the historical connection between India and Venice, human migration and technology.

Deen finds that the legend still has an impact on current events like migration patterns and climate change. In his quest he comes to an understanding how humans have lost the will and freedom as they are possessed by the demon called technology. Humans and non-humans have become impersonal systems as systems have taken over the world. There is no barrier to becoming possessed with the demon called technology. Internet access, wifi, laptops, Television, cellphones, and social media are the primary ways that technology is presented in the novel. Ghosh says in an interview that technology has completely changed all of the parameters that we used to think of as belonging to technology. Furthermore, he adds that a few years back it was believed that one has to grow in a technologically advanced nation to be familiar with technology. Now anyone can become familiar with technology from any place. (Jha)

Digital age men have become obsessed with media attention and celebrity culture. Television shows, social media platforms, and other forms of media bring attention to individuals, consequently increasing their popularity. Kanai Dutt typically represents the present age media personalities who are loud and trying to demean the people they encounter on shows to keep themselves in the limelight. While introducing Kanai Dutt, a distant relative of Deen, he sarcastically introduces him thus:

establishing himself as a darling of the media: it was by no means uncommon to turn on the television and find him yelling his head off on a talkshow. He knew everyone, as they say, and was often written about in magazines, newspapers and even books. The thing that most irritated me about Kanai was that he always found a way of tripping me up. (Ghosh 4-5)

While Kanai an attention seeker in media, Deen even captures the typical Indian viewers of media at home, the whole family glued to television killing time. One evening, Deen visits his sister's apartment and he finds her, and her whole multi-generational household, sitting rapt around a television set. And what should they be watching but a (bizarrely modernized) version of the legend of Manasa Devi and the Merchant? I was told that this was now the most popular show on regional television. (Ghosh 20-21)

Deen represents twentieth century Brooklyn based man who thinks he is so modern and a rationalist. When he is remembered of his existence in Brooklyn, immediately he looks for his American cell phone as he uses a different device with a local SIM card. The various feelings that Deen awakens in him as a result of the cell phone are vividly portrayed in the novel. Deen accounts that no human being has tried to reach him except for the automated messages. He feels a sense of injury to find no one has tried to reach him over the phone. As he sits and ponders suddenly "like a dying ember coming to life, the phone's screen began to glow" (Ghosh 23). The next moment it startled him as "the device let forth a trill, so piercing that the stray cat that had been yowling outside my window took to its heels" (Ghosh 23). As he sits transfixed and stares at the screen, he is even more astonished to receive a call from an Italian friend. (Ghosh 23) The accidental and sudden noise made by the phone takes human beings and animals unawares, particularly the older people.

Ghosh juxtaposes Brooklyn based Deen against rural illiterate digital kids Tipu and Rafi to demonstrate how ignorant the American based modern man is. Ghosh realistically brings out the emotions and attitudes of the older vs. digital generation while using cell phones and the internet. Deen is a character from an older generation who believes strongly to be modern and rational while he seems small and annoyed of kids of the digital age who are well conversant with the internet and social media. Though Deen uses technology he is not as updated and quick as Tipu. He does not match with the felicity of the younger generation. Whereas Tipu who has not done his formal schooling and is not interested in formal schooling says "I can learn more on the Net than any of those teachers can teach me" (Ghosh 51). Tipu is a member of a generation that has been so accustomed to new technology that it comes naturally to him particularly "Internet". Deen feels intrigued and afraid of Tipu when they first meet because of the teenager's prowess with technology and his apparent ability to obtain whatever data he desires.

When Deen introduces Tipu he compares him to a creature with "probing eyes and darting movements" and he wears "a Nets T-shirt" (Ghosh 52). As they get introduced, Tipu says he knows everything about him and has come to know from Net. In front of Tipu, Deen is dumbfound and appears like "a character from a comic book" (Ghosh 53). Older generation depends on the kids to handle their private group and social media. As Tipu handles Nilima's social media he comments on the posts shared by Deen in a private family group, Deen becomes speechless not knowing what to say and he understands that there is nothing called private in this digital age. (Ghosh 58-59)

The twentieth century generation can only think of systematic procedures and believes in government institutions and rules. Deen possesses the papers regarding passports, visas, permits, green cards and the like as something "sacred". As though speaking to someone of limited intelligence Tipu says Deen that a phone is enough for migration and moreover he asserts,

'The Internet is the migrants' magic carpet; it's their conveyor belt. It doesn't matter whether they're travelling by plane or bus or boat: it's the Internet that moves the wetware – it's that simple, Pops.'

a phone is enough, and everyone's got one now. And it doesn't matter if you're illiterate: you can call up anything you like just by talking to your phone – your virtual assistant will do the rest. You'd be amazed how good people get at it, and how quickly. That's how the journey starts, not by buying a ticket or getting a passport. It starts with a phone and voice recognition technology.' (Ghosh 61)

"Internet being the migrants' magic carpet", the novel also exposes adverse consequences and harmful effects of inappropriate use of technology. Tipu gathers information about unauthorised ways to cross international borders from the internet. People migrate seeking a better life. They get the idea of a better life from the ads and pictures of countries shared in social media. Phone becomes their life and journey. In an interview, Amitav Ghosh remarks

A lot of this is happening because the systems exist, and these systems are not trivial systems. The human trafficking business is the biggest clandestine industry in the world, even bigger than the drug trade. It reaches very deep into society, especially poor societies. On top of that, you have the information system. If you are a poor kid in say Bangladesh or Pakistan—both of these countries have higher rates of internet penetration rates than the U.S.—you see these pictures on your cheap smartphone. You have social media and you are connected to people who can help you move. These technologies are absolutely at the heart of movement. (Ramakrishnan)

Deen feels guilty and ashamed for assuming that Rafi, as a fisherman in the Sundarbans, may not be familiar with cell phones. He notices first hand that young Indians, regardless of their socioeconomic status—rich or poor, educated or not—have an aptitude for using computers and phones that far exceeds Deen. This was contrary to the stereotypes that Indians like himself have grown up with, which claims that rural people are “backward”, particularly when it comes to modern technology. He is also ignorant of the fact that there are a lot of people in India, as well as many other developing nations, who have a high proportion of digital abilities that are utterly out of proportion to their financial situation and formal education. Despite knowing all of this, he disgraced himself by presuming that Rafi may not be familiar with the inner workings of a device as commonplace as a mobile. (Ghosh 85-86)

The ads and pictures of countries shared in the social media influence Tipu and he becomes obsessed with Venice and decides to migrate illegally. Before beginning his journey, he does a lot of research on the Net, taking printouts of history, geography and even fauna in Venice. He has cheated his mother by sending photo shopped pictures taken in Bangalore. He has maintained to be careful by communicating with his mother Moyna only through social media. (Ghosh 180-181) He ends up a refugee when he reaches the shores of Venice. The news of the refugees spread in social media and the live coverage by journalists helps them to get freed. (Ghosh 276-277) The systems and technologies made it possible.

Technology circulates information at an unprecedented speed. Deen shares a picture of the spider he encounters in Cinta’s apartment in Venice for Piya to see. Tipu contacts Deen from India and during his journey to Europe. Palash, a man who works with Lubna, illustrates the ubiquitous nature of technology and its impact. He says that reading lets him escape reality and dream up his own fantasies. But he wonders:

If mere words could have this effect, then what of the pictures and videos that scroll continuously past our eyes on laptops and cellphones? If it is true that a picture is worth a thousand words then what is the power of the billions of images that now permeate every corner of the globe? What is the potency of the dreams and desires they generate? Of the restlessness they breed? (Ghosh 269)

This constant exposure to images has created a kind of “restlessness” that is typical of the moment we live in, when the pace of the world seems to have accelerated. This is expressed by Deen: “it was as if the very rotation of the planet had accelerated, moving all living things at unstoppable velocities, so that the outward appearance of a place might stay the same while its core was whisked away to some other time and location” (Ghosh 166).

In his search Deen travels a lot and he feels helpless observing the fast changing interconnected global issues. He shares his feelings with Cinta. He says “It’s a strange feeling, as though I’m not in control of what I’m doing. It’s as if I were fading away, losing my will, my freedom” (Ghosh 214). Cinta comes up with an unexpected explanation: she claims that, during the Inquisition, there were many cases of people presenting the same symptoms as Deen, and who were “beset by a feeling that inexplicable forces are acting upon them in such a way that they are no longer in control of what happens to them. Most cases of possession are exactly like that” (Ghosh 215). Deen, who is quite sceptical, is not sure to understand what she means. Cinta goes on: “You and I don’t live in a world where it is possible to be possessed in the old sense. These things happened to our ancestors because their will, their sense of their presence in the world, were essential to their very survival” (Ghosh 215-16). They depended on the resources of the Earth and other people. The “loss of presence” meant their loss as a person. But nowadays

We live in a world of impersonal systems; we don’t have to impose our presence on a cash machine in order to get our money; we don’t have to exert our will on our cell phones in order to make them work. In our circumstances no one needs to assert their presence in order to get by from day to day. And since it is not needed, that sense of presence slowly fades, or is lost or forgotten – it’s easier to let the systems take over.’ (Ghosh 216).

The emphasis on the fact that impersonal systems, by which Cinta means cell phones, cash machines, computers etc, encourages a questioning regarding the role of human beings and their presence: “The world had changed too much, too

fast; the systems that were in control now did not obey any human master; they followed their own imperatives, inscrutable as demons” (Ghosh 280). Cinta concludes that “the world of today presents all the symptoms of demonic possession” (Ghosh 216).

In this digital age, change is inevitable. Living in the age of rapid evolutionary developments, the challenge arises from constantly adapting to the current digital concerns in all fields. The digital transition is powerful and pervasive. In actuality, technology has already altered the way we behave as people. The influence of social media and digital services has become part of the human lifestyle. This article reflects on how the themes specific to digital and technology help to create meaning as Deen reflects on media, digital environment, and other aspects of technologies. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh attempts to broaden literary imagination in the midst of global challenges where the omnipresence of technology takes over and states to advantage of the circumstance to reimagine new futures, in this period of global transformation.

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