

From Ancient Sea Routes to Maritime Borders: Compound Displacement and the Legibility Crisis in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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Abstract This article reads Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) as a law-and-literature account of forced mobility before legal naming. It examines how the novel links the Gun Merchant myth, the Bengal chapters, the philological reconstruction of routes to Venice, and the Blue Boat episode in order to make contemporary cross-sea displacement historically layered, formally distributed, and institutionally difficult to classify. The article argues that Ghosh makes perceptible the pre-legal life of forcedness: not mobility outside law, but mobility experienced and narrated as necessity before it can be translated into institutionally recognizable form. To track that movement, the article develops two analytic concepts. Compound displacement names constrained mobility produced through environmental deterioration, livelihood pressure, migration brokerage, and border governance; legibility crisis names the difficulty of translating such forcedness into the individualized, linear, and attributable narrative form that refugee status determination most readily reads. Distinguishing these concepts from mixed migration, survival migration, and slow violence, the article keeps legal doctrine in a supporting role, using refugee law, rescue at sea, place of safety, and non-refoulement to clarify what the novel formally stages. It concludes that the framework can also illuminate other world-literary narratives of transnational migration and maritime bordering, where ethical visibility does not automatically become legal readability.

Keywords compound displacement; climate migration; refugee law; maritime border; world literature

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Introduction

The Blue Boat episode in *Gun Island* offers one of the novel's starkest scenes of cross-sea vulnerability: a weather-beaten blue fishing vessel carrying refugees from the Sinai drifts in the Mediterranean after its engine dies, while charter boats, coastguard ships, journalists, and anti-migrant activists crowd the surrounding waters; in the midst of this standoff, Rafi suddenly recognizes Tipu among the passengers, "right there, by the smokestack" (Ghosh 285-86, 301-02). The scene is powerful not only because it dramatizes peril at sea, but because it concentrates a broader problem running throughout the novel. The mobile subjects gathered there are ethically and narratively intelligible as people under pressure. Their movement is shaped by environmental deterioration, livelihood insecurity, smuggling routes, trafficking violence, and border hostility. Yet this forcedness does not automatically become legible within the classificatory terms of international protection.

This article approaches that gap as the novel's central law-and-literature problem. *Gun Island* has been read most often through three overlapping conversations: ecocritical accounts of climate crisis, blue-humanities and hydrocolonial accounts of maritime space, and migration-centered accounts of precarity, bordering, and transnational mobility. Read alongside Ghosh's own *The Great Derangement*, the novel clearly belongs to broader debates shaped by Ursula Heise's account of planetary environmental imagination, Rob Nixon's account of slow violence, and Debjani Ganguly's work on the contemporary novel as global form.¹ Blue-humanities and hydrocolonial work by Isabel Hofmeyr, Hester Blum, and Steve Mentz further clarifies why oceans, ports, and routes should be treated as historically dense spaces rather than empty intervals between national territories.² Migration-centered readings, including criticism by Pablo Mukherjee and Alexa Weik von Mossner, show that movement in the novel is unequal, mediated,

1 Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*; Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*; Nixon, *Slow Violence*; Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World*.

2 Hofmeyr, *Dockside Reading*; Blum, *The View from the Masthead*; Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*.

dangerous, and politically regulated rather than a romantic figure of global flow.¹ Recent work on *Gun Island* has also emphasized planetary environmentalism, storytelling, and multispecies migration, most notably in Khan's account of planetary environmentalism and Hoydis's reading of the novel as a parable of multispecies migration.²

The present article builds on these approaches but shifts the emphasis from representation to institutional readability: if the novel makes displacement so perceptible, why does that displacement remain difficult to name in stable legal terms? A selective law-and-literature premise is useful here, since legal institutions depend on narrative forms through which persons become readable as bearers of claims.³ Joseph Slaughter's account of how international law and narrative form together produce the recognizable rights-bearing subject offers the most useful point of orientation for that question, and *Gun Island* will be read here as foregrounding the underside of that same process.⁴ The point is not to prove that Ghosh's characters should simply be reclassified as Convention refugees. It is to show how the novel exposes a mismatch between complex mobility and the narrative forms through which protection is usually granted.

To make that mismatch visible, the article uses two concepts. "Compound displacement" names constrained mobility produced through the interaction of environmental deterioration, livelihood pressure, migration brokerage, and border governance. Such movement is not reducible to a single environmental cause, but neither is it adequately described as free economic choice. "Legibility crisis" names the threshold problem that follows: the difficulty of translating compound forcedness into the individualized, linear, and attributable narrative form that refugee status determination most readily reads. Here "pre-legal" does not mean outside law or prior to politics; it names the experiential and narrative life of forcedness before that forcedness has been translated into institutionally recognizable form. The legal framework is therefore deliberately limited to the refugee definition, non-refoulement, and the law of rescue at sea, including the question of place of safety. Law is used here not as an external test imposed on the novel, but as a way of clarifying why the forcedness made vivid by literature does not necessarily become institutionally protectable. Literary analysis carries the primary interpretive weight; legal materials are introduced only where the novel's own scenes activate them, and

1 Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments*; Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies*.

2 Khan, "Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*"; Hoydis, "Parables for Planetary Crisis."

3 White, *The Legal Imagination*; Brooks and Gewirtz, *Law's Stories*.

4 Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*

only at the level of detail those scenes require.

The Gun Merchant Myth, Ancient Sea Routes, and the Historical Depth of Cross-Sea Displacement

This section turns to the first dimension of the argument: the temporal depth of contemporary cross-sea mobility. If *Gun Island* is read only as a contemporary climate novel, a crucial dimension of its migration narrative disappears. The Gun Merchant myth and the novel's repeated return to sea routes do not merely provide symbolic texture or atmospheric depth. They reposition contemporary mobility within a much longer history of circulation, trade, escape, and coercion across maritime space. The novel's itinerary from the Sundarbans to Venice is therefore not a geographically accidental movement from one dramatic location to another. It is a narrative reconstruction of an older maritime world in which commerce, imperial expansion, and forced movement were never fully separable. By placing present-day mobility on top of these older routes, the novel refuses to treat cross-sea displacement as an isolated emergency of the twenty-first century.

The Gun Merchant legend is especially important because it organizes mobility through a structure of pursued escape. Nilima first encounters the shrine in the aftermath of the 1970 Bhola cyclone, when relief workers find an apparently miraculous refuge whose bell had rung before the storm and whose roof, "with the profile of an upturned boat," had sheltered villagers from devastation (Ghosh 15). The shrine's custodian is not a Brahmin priest but a Muslim boatman who explains that Hindus associate the site with Manasa Devi while Muslims regard it as a place protected by a pir [saint] named Ilyas; the poem attached to the shrine, he adds, was meant to be "passed on from mouth to mouth" rather than written down (Ghosh 16). Even before the novel turns to contemporary migration routes, then, the legend is already being mediated through catastrophe, borderland relief, oral transmission, and religious overlap. What matters here is not whether the legend can be translated into a modern legal language of refugee. It cannot, and the article does not ask it to do so. What matters is that the legend gives the novel a durable grammar of movement under pressure: departure is tied to danger, mobility to pursuit, and travel to forces larger than individual choice.

The legend's own narrative core makes that point even clearer. As Nilima recalls it, the Gun Merchant, like Chand Sadagar, refuses devotion to Manasa and is thereafter "plagued by snakes and pursued by droughts, famines, storms, and other calamities"; he flees overseas to "*Gun Island*," is captured by pirates, and is only released after the goddess promises to restore his fortune if he returns to Bengal

and builds her shrine (Ghosh 17-18). The point is not merely that the story contains movement. It contains movement under pressure, repeated flight, capture, exchange, and sea passage. The myth thus already sketches, in a pre-legal register, something close to what this article will later call compound displacement: movement compelled by multiple overlapping calamities, mediated by capture and exchange, and resolvable only through reciprocal commitments that the modern protection regime can no longer provide. This is also why the novel's maritime imagination should not be reduced to a familiar hydrocolonial gesture. Certainly, the text draws on the now well-established insight that seas are not empty surfaces but dense historical media shaped by empire, extraction, and circulation. Yet the point of invoking ancient sea routes is not simply to restate that colonial histories continue into the present. The stronger claim is that the sea route provides a form through which dispersed pressures can be gathered into a single historical field.

Venice is crucial to this restructuring of scale, and the novel is unusually explicit about why. Long before the final crossing to the Mediterranean, Cinta's work begins to translate the shrine's scattered clues into a historical route. In her conference lecture she pauses over the Venetian ghetto as "an island within an island," a phrase that jolts Deen because Rafi had earlier used almost the same words to gloss the shrine's concentric-circle symbol (Ghosh 81, 149-50). Cinta then explains that the Arabic *al-Bunduqeyya* [Venice] can also name hazelnuts, bullets, and guns, making it suddenly possible to hear Bonduki Sadagar not simply as the Gun Merchant but as "the Merchant who visited Venice" (Ghosh 151-52). In the conversation that follows, she goes further still: Misri [Egypt] and Rumali [Rumelia] point toward Egypt and Ottoman space, the aleph-like sign beside Ilyas suggests a Jewish captain, and the whole legend begins to look, in her words, "not just a wonder tale" but a narrative that is "historically quite plausible" (Ghosh 153-55).

Cinta's reading restores the legend to history; the present argument moves in a slightly different direction. What matters analytically is less whether Bonduki Sadagar can be confirmed as a historical figure than the fact that the novel uses this philological labor to make the route itself appear as a layered medium through which mobility, trade, and pressure have been transmitted in continuous, if uneven, ways. Venice thus appears not merely as a destination but as a site where mercantile memory, multilingual etymology, and maritime history are compressed into the same interpretive space.

The importance of this philological sequence is formal as well as historical. The novel does not simply tell readers that Bengal and Venice are connected; it makes connection itself into an act of reading. Deen's progress depends on

mistranslation, correction, echo, and belated recognition: the shrine's symbols become readable only when they are routed through Cinta's archival knowledge, Rafi's local interpretation, and the multilingual instability of names. In that sense, the novel's method resembles the route it reconstructs. Meaning travels indirectly, across languages and religious traditions, and arrives only after delay. This delayed readability matters for the article's larger claim because the novel has already made interpretation difficult before law enters the argument. Mobility is not first presented as a case awaiting classification, but as a scattered archive of stories, signs, and remembered routes that must be pieced together. In this sense, the novel teaches its readers a method of reading that the protection regime is not equipped to perform: one that proceeds through delay, lateral connection, and the slow accumulation of partial signs.

Equally important is the temporal architecture of this discovery. The novel does not allow Deen, the philologist-protagonist, to grasp the meaning of the legend in advance; he is required to misread, to forget, and to be corrected by others before the route comes into focus. Rafi's casual phrase about an island within an island acquires meaning only after Cinta's lecture; Cinta's lecture acquires its full force only after Deen has already encountered the shrine; the shrine's symbols acquire their final coherence only when set against the multilingual instability of names like Bonduki, Misri, and Rumali. Each act of recognition arrives belatedly. This belatedness is not an accident of plot. It is the formal correlate of the route itself: a route that has carried meanings, peoples, and pressures across centuries can only be read in fragments, retrospectively, and through the patient cooperation of multiple voices. The novel thereby trains its readers in a temporal mode that institutional protection regimes are structurally unable to inhabit. Where asylum adjudication must arrive at decisions within compressed administrative time, *Gun Island* shows that the meanings now demanding legal recognition have been accumulating for far longer than any single procedure can register.

Seen in this way, the historical depth provided by the route changes the terms on which present mobility can be understood. Once contemporary movement is placed within a maritime continuum of trade, extraction, ecological vulnerability, and unequal circulation, it becomes harder to describe that movement as either an episodic humanitarian emergency or a purely economic choice. The route does not solve the classificatory problem that refugee law later encounters, but it makes clear why that problem will arise. If the sea route gives contemporary displacement its temporal continuity, the next question cannot simply be where people are going. It must be what kind of subjects are moving along this route, and why their mobility

resists the stable names that protection law prefers.

Compound Displacement and the Naming Problem of Refugee Law

The argument now turns to its second dimension: subject structure. The novel's most important intervention in migration discourse lies in the kind of mobile subject it constructs. The figures moving outward from Bengal are not most accurately described as either paradigmatic "economic migrants" or paradigmatic Convention refugees. Their departure takes shape within an environment where ecological deterioration, shrinking livelihood possibilities, generational pressure, and aspirational exit are tightly entangled.

Moyna's account of the aftermath of Cyclone Aila makes this clear in unusually concrete terms. After the embankments were destroyed and salt water rendered large areas uncultivable, "the exodus of the young was accelerating every year"; traffickers "descended in swarms"; boys and girls were "borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere," crossing into Bangladesh, joining labor gangs, or paying smugglers to take them by boat toward Malaysia or Indonesia (Ghosh 53). The result is not a cleanly classifiable narrative of free labor mobility, but neither is it a straightforward persecution narrative in the sense preferred by refugee law. *Gun Island* insists on a more unstable experiential structure: mobility is experienced as necessary before it becomes legally nameable.

Moyna's authority in this account is itself revealing. She speaks not as someone who has left, but as someone who remains: a nurse trained by Nilima's foundation, married into a household scarred by her husband Fokir's death years earlier, and now positioned to watch her son Tutul grow up in conditions she knows are deteriorating. Her perspective therefore introduces a structural asymmetry that refugee categories rarely accommodate: those who depart and those who stay are bound together by the same compound pressure, but only the former enter the field of legal classification. The young men and women whose names she does not list, who borrow and steal to pay agents, are absent from her testimony precisely because they have already become mobile; their absence is what gives her speech its weight. The novel here makes visible something that protection law structurally cannot see: that compound displacement is also, and inseparably, a story about those who remain in the place from which others must depart.

This article describes that structure as "compound displacement." The term is used here analytically rather than doctrinally. It does not propose a new formal legal category, nor is it simply a more fashionable synonym for "mixed migration." More importantly for the present reading, compound displacement names a narrative

structure before it names a policy problem. *Gun Island* distributes pressure across weather, land, debt, family expectation, digital aspiration, smuggling knowledge, and border violence. No single element explains departure on its own; each becomes forceful because it is narrated in relation to the others.

The term therefore differs from several neighboring vocabularies. “Mixed migration” usefully describes routes on which people with different statuses, motives, and protection needs move together, but it does not by itself explain how forcedness is produced or narrated. Alexander Betts’s influential concept of “survival migration” comes closer, since it names persons outside their country of origin because of an existential threat for which they lack access to domestic remedy or resolution (Betts 4-5). Yet Betts’s concept is primarily a normative category for identifying a protection gap; compound displacement is a literary-analytic description of how multiple pressures become narratively entangled before any legal category can receive them. Nor is the term reducible to Nixon’s “slow violence” (2). Slow violence clarifies why gradual environmental harm is hard to perceive, but in *Gun Island* environmental attrition is only one strand in a wider structure of livelihood pressure, brokerage, aspiration, debt, and border governance. The problem is not simply whether damage can be seen. It is whether a dispersed field of damage can be compressed into a claim that institutions know how to read.

Tipu’s trajectory is crucial here because the novel refuses to make him a transparent victim. Returned from Oregon, expelled after being mocked as someone from a place where “only servants and whores came from the Sundarbans,” and increasingly convinced that he can “learn more on the Net” than in school, he is formed at the intersection of precarity, aspiration, humiliation, and digital mediation (Ghosh 55-56). His speech often sounds entrepreneurial, even abrasive, but that tone does not cancel the pressures around him. It complicates them. Ghosh thereby avoids the sentimental grammar in which mobility becomes legible only when the migrant appears passive, wounded, and morally uncomplicated.

The Bengal chapters are especially important because they show how forcedness emerges before any formal crossing into the legal vocabulary of protection. The pressures described there are cumulative rather than spectacular, closer to what Nixon calls “slow violence” than to a single catastrophic rupture. Ecological instability gradually thins out the conditions under which life can be reproduced; economic difficulty becomes tied to the sense that younger people must leave; migration networks give pressure a route, a price, and a risky horizon of expectation. Tipu says as much, albeit in his own idiom, when he describes his work as part of “the people-moving industry” and explains that “the fish catch is

down, the land's turning salty," the forests are increasingly inaccessible, storms keep returning, and "if you've got any sense you'll move and to do that you need someone who can help you find a way out" (Ghosh 65). The phrase "find a way out" is crucial. It makes departure sound at once pragmatic and coerced, chosen and compelled. The novel thereby captures the pre-legal life of forcedness: a subject can be pressured into motion long before that pressure acquires a stable legal name.

This point matters because the novel stages a clash between lived narration and institutional narration. Refugee law remains organized around a story of individualized fear, persecution, causal attribution, and Convention grounds¹. *Gun Island*, by contrast, gives readers stories that are layered, dispersed, and unevenly voiced. Moyna speaks as a local witness to ecological and social attrition; Tipu speaks as a broker who has learned the market in routes and stories; Rafi speaks in the quieter register of someone who knows he may have "no choice" but to leave (Ghosh 68, 95). The mismatch is therefore not only conceptual. It is built into the novel's distribution of voices.

This distribution of voices is itself a political and formal choice. Ghosh does not place the meaning of displacement in the mouth of a single authoritative narrator, nor does he allow one character to stand as the transparent representative of climate migration. Moyna's account is grounded in village memory, damaged embankments, salinized land, and the visible departure of the young. Tipu's account translates that same pressure into the language of networks, fees, scripts, and opportunity. Rafi's account is more hesitant and inward, registering necessity as something anticipated before it is fully acted upon. The novel's refusal of a single explanatory voice matters because it formally resists the kind of single-stranded account that institutional recognition often prefers. Compound displacement is therefore not simply what the characters experience; it is how the novel distributes the work of explanation among them.

Tipu's own account makes this clash brutally explicit. For those applying for asylum in Europe, he says, starvation after flooding, poisoned groundwater, or debt violence "none of that shit matters"; "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" (Ghosh 67). The vulgar directness of the sentence is part of its force. Tipu reduces asylum narration to a teachable script, but the reduction is not merely cynical. It reveals that a life shaped by gradual environmental and economic pressure may have to be retold as a more recognizable story of persecution before it

1 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954, 189 UNTS 137, arts. 1A(2), 33(1).

can be heard.

The choice of register matters here. Ghosh could have framed this insight in the analytic prose of an authoritative narrator; instead he allows it to surface through Tipu's profanity. The vulgarity is not incidental ornament. It marks the friction between the bureaucratic vocabulary of "Convention grounds" and the lived vocabulary of those who must navigate them. By placing the diagnosis of asylum's narrative requirements in the mouth of someone whom asylum adjudication would itself find awkward to process, a young man who is ironic, mercenary, and aware of the script. Ghosh draws attention to a further asymmetry. Those most likely to articulate the structure of the legibility crisis are also those least likely to be heard inside the institutions that produce it. Literary form here performs an analytic operation that doctrinal commentary cannot easily reproduce: it lets the critique come from inside the position it describes.

This mismatch helps clarify why the article frames the issue as a naming problem rather than a simple definitional deficiency. A naming problem is not just a matter of saying that the law is too narrow. It is a matter of showing how certain experiences must be translated before they can be heard at all. The novel therefore does not simply ask readers to sympathize with migration. It asks them to notice the violence of compression: a dense field of relations must be narrowed into a story that institutions can process.

At this point, compound displacement becomes inseparable from the article's account of legibility. Tipu is proud of tailoring "stories like they want to hear," while Rafi, from a different social location altogether, quietly remarks that his grandfather had long ago warned him that conditions in the Sundarbans were changing "so much, and so fast" that "one day I would have no choice but to leave" (Ghosh 68, 95). The contrast between these voices is one of the section's key literary effects. Tipu treats forcedness as something to be packaged; Rafi speaks it as a future that has been approaching for years. Between them, the novel presents migration as a layered structure in which ecological deterioration, livelihood precarity, route dependency, and border pressure intensify one another.

Tipu matters here not only because he voices the mismatch, but because he has learned to operate inside it. He understands that institutional hearing comes at the price of narrative rewriting: experience must be translated into the idiom that asylum systems are prepared to recognize. In that sense, *Gun Island* shows more than a failure of institutions to read complex mobility. It also shows subjects being pressured to rewrite themselves in order to become readable at all. This is where the argument approaches Slaughter from the other direction. Where Slaughter

shows how human-rights discourse co-produces the recognizable rights-bearing subject through its preferred narrative forms, *Gun Island* shows the underside of that same process: subjects whose forcedness exceeds those forms must either rewrite themselves into recognizable shape or remain institutionally unreadable.¹ The legibility crisis, in other words, is not only a failure of reading; it is also the production of strategic self-narration as a condition of being heard at all.

The structural reasons for this pressure can be stated briefly. Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention demands a well-founded fear of persecution that is individualized, attributable to one of the five Convention grounds, and tied to the failure of the country of nationality to provide protection². Each of these requirements presupposes a narrative form: a single threatened subject, a recognizable agent of harm, and a causal chain that runs in one direction. *Gun Island* organizes its account of forcedness in almost the opposite key. It distributes pressure across multiple voices, refuses to localize harm in a single persecutor, and weaves environmental attrition into the slow erosion of livelihood, family, and community. The mismatch is therefore not an accident of representation but a clash between two narrative grammars: one centered on attribution and one on accumulation. This does not mean that refugee law is wholly static or incapable of recognizing cumulative forcedness. UNHCR has stressed that climate- and disaster-related claims may, in specific circumstances, fall within the 1951 Convention, and broader regional instruments such as the OAU Convention and the Cartagena Declaration extend protection to persons fleeing events or circumstances that seriously disturb public order³. The point, however, is that even these more capacious frameworks require compound pressure to be narrated as a recognizable claim. Their breadth therefore does not displace the article's argument; it clarifies why the difficulty is a naming and legibility problem rather than a simple definitional deficiency.

Once the naming problem is understood in these terms, the article's turn to the maritime border becomes logically necessary rather than merely dramatic. If forcedness is already difficult to stabilize on land, the difficulty becomes sharper

1 Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*

2 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954, 189 UNTS 137, arts. 1A(2), 33(1).

3 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Legal Considerations regarding Claims for International Protection Made in the Context of the Adverse Effects of Climate Change and Disasters* (1 October 2020), paras. 5, 9, 13, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2020/en/123356>; OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, adopted 10 September 1969, entered into force 20 June 1974, 1001 UNTS 45, art. I(2); Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, adopted 22 November 1984, conclusion III(3).

once mobile subjects enter a space organized simultaneously by rescue imperatives, border enforcement, and uncertain disembarkation. The sea does not create the crisis of legibility from nothing. It intensifies a problem already present in the structure of compound displacement. The next section therefore turns to the Blue Boat episode, where the instability of naming becomes a more visible instability of protection.

Blue Boat, Maritime Spectatorship, and the Border at Sea

The third dimension of the argument is spatial exposure. If the previous section examined how compound displacement resists stable naming, the Blue Boat episode shows how that instability becomes visible at sea. The scene matters not merely because it is dramatic, but because Ghosh stages the maritime border as a crowded theater of competing ways of seeing. Before the boat itself comes into view, it arrives through reports, satellite images, rumor, and digital circulation: Gisa traces its departure to the Sinai, where refugees had been held in a subterranean “connection house,” a trafficking hub associated with organ harvesting, until a storm destroyed the structure and the captives seized phones, hard drives, and eventually the boat itself under the guidance of a tall Ethiopian woman (Ghosh 285-86). By the time the vessel reaches the Mediterranean theater in which the Lucania and other charter boats are waiting, it is already more than a vessel. It is a moving archive of captivity, evidence, speculation, and risk.

The scene is also carefully choreographed as a problem of spectatorship. The Blue Boat does not arrive in empty waters. It is preceded by “a motley flotilla” of chartered vessels carrying activists of many stripes, and when it finally appears it is “a forlorn little fishing boat with its clinkered hull and flaking coat of blue paint,” shadowed by coastguard ships flying different flags, greeted on one side by cheers and on the other by roars of “Go back where you came from” and “Europe for Europeans!” (Ghosh 297, 301). The boat is thus framed by voices before it can speak for itself. It is cheered, denounced, filmed, pursued, and symbolically claimed. When the engine dies and the vessel begins to drift, Rafi suddenly sees Tipu “right there, by the smokestack,” collapsing the distance between public spectacle and known life (Ghosh 302). That recognition is one of the scene’s crucial formal turns: the migrant mass becomes a face, but only through a personal relation that interrupts the media field surrounding the boat.

Law enters this scene not as the master frame but as a subsidiary clarifying register. The duty to rescue under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) explains why distress at sea cannot be treated as a matter of political

preference¹. The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention) further operationalize that duty through search-and-rescue arrangements². The later guidance on place of safety clarifies why rescue is incomplete if people are merely removed from immediate danger without being brought somewhere their basic needs and onward protection questions can be addressed³. Yet Ghosh's interest lies less in expounding these rules than in dramatizing the interval they cannot by themselves resolve. The Blue Boat is no longer simply invisible, but visibility has not become arrival. The people on board have been located, watched, and surrounded; they have not yet been received.

The concept of place of safety deserves a closer look here, because it captures with unusual precision the gap between rescue and reception that the novel dramatizes. Under the IMO Guidelines, a place of safety is not merely a port at which people can be physically unloaded; it is a location at which the rescue operation can be considered terminated, basic human needs are met, and onward arrangements can be made, including, for those who may need international protection, access to fair status determination procedures⁴. A vessel itself can

1 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, adopted 10 December 1982, entered into force 16 November 1994, 1833 UNTS 3, art. 98(1).

2 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), adopted 1 November 1974, entered into force 25 May 1980, 1184 UNTS 278, reg. V/33.1; International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, adopted 27 April 1979, entered into force 22 June 1985, 1405 UNTS 97, annex, paras. 1.3.2, 2.1.10.

3 International Maritime Organization, Resolution MSC.167(78), "Guidelines on the Treatment of Persons Rescued at Sea," IMO Doc. MSC 78/26/Add.2, annex 34 (20 May 2004), paras. 6.12-6.18; International Maritime Organization, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and International Chamber of Shipping, *Rescue at Sea: A Guide to Principles and Practice in the Context of Refugees and Migrants Movements* (revised ed., IMO, 2026), pp. 8, 12-14, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/operational/imo/2026/151482>. The 2026 *Rescue at Sea* guidance is a soft-law instrument that interprets, rather than supplements, the existing treaty framework on rescue and disembarkation.

4 International Maritime Organization, Resolution MSC.167(78), "Guidelines on the Treatment of Persons Rescued at Sea," IMO Doc. MSC 78/26/Add.2, annex 34 (20 May 2004), paras. 6.12-6.18; International Maritime Organization, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and International Chamber of Shipping, *Rescue at Sea: A Guide to Principles and Practice in the Context of Refugees and Migrants Movements* (revised ed., IMO, 2026), pp. 8, 12-14, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/operational/imo/2026/151482>. The 2026 *Rescue at Sea* guidance is a soft-law instrument that interprets, rather than supplements, the existing treaty framework on rescue and disembarkation.

serve only as a temporary place of safety; lingering rescue at sea is, doctrinally, an unfinished rescue. The Blue Boat episode is staged precisely in this unfinished interval. The boat has been found, watched, and surrounded; the rescue has been declared; yet the question of where, and as whom, its passengers will arrive remains suspended. Ghosh's narrative pacing converts this doctrinal interval into a literary scene of extended attention. The novel slows the moment in which protection should have begun, and in slowing it, exposes how much institutional uncertainty that moment can hold.

What the Blue Boat episode finally exposes is a regime of maritime spectatorship: a way of organizing the border in which migrants are seen, claimed, denounced, and filmed long before they are received. Spectatorship in this sense is not the opposite of legal recognition; it is one of the media through which recognition becomes politically expensive. This is why the scene is saturated with delay, noise, and mediation. Journalists rush to "put a human face" on the boat, anti-migrant groups threaten obstruction, and the vessel itself drifts in a corridor already thick with whales, dolphins, military hardware, cameras, slogans, and counter-slogans (Ghosh 302). Ghosh does not present the maritime border as a clean line between law and lawlessness. He presents it as a dense narrative space in which humanitarian pity, nationalist hostility, media appetite, ecological disturbance, and state power occupy the same field of vision. Tipu's reappearance matters because he has already named the narrative script demanded by asylum systems. On the boat, however, he is not telling that script; he is being watched inside one. The earlier problem of self-narration becomes a scene of visual capture.

Gun Island renders this politically concrete when the Italian helicopter finally announces, "We are from the Italian Navy and we are here to organize your rescue," only for cheers of relief to be met immediately by cries of "traitor" from hostile boats (Ghosh 308). The announcement is grammatically simple, but the scene around it is not. Rescue appears inside a field of accusation; humanitarian action immediately becomes political betrayal for those who police the border from the surrounding vessels. The sea is therefore where the gap between being seen, being saved, and being protected becomes hardest to ignore.

The accusation of "traitor" deserves attention as a small but precise diagnostic moment. In the maritime law framework that organizes the scene, the duty to rescue is not contingent on political alignment: it does not ask whose side the rescuer is on, and it does not depend on the political reception that follows¹. Yet the surrounding

1 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, adopted 10 December 1982, entered into force 16 November 1994, 1833 UNTS 3, art. 98(1).

boats treat the act of rescue as if it were a partisan choice: an act of solidarity with the rescued rather than the discharge of an obligation owed by all states. The novel does not stage a debate between these two positions; it lets them collide in the same acoustic space. Ghosh thereby exposes a structural feature of the contemporary maritime border that doctrinal description alone struggles to capture: the legal obligation to rescue and the political contestation of rescue have become routinely co-present, with the latter shaping how the former is performed, delayed, or politically taxed. The literary scene shows the cost of that co-presence in real time.

The principle of non-refoulement sharpens this reading, but it does not displace the literary point. The Blue Boat's prehistory, the subterranean trafficking site, the storm-driven escape, and the absent territorial order from which return would itself be a form of harm, constructs a situation in which going back cannot plausibly mean safety. *Teitiota v. New Zealand* is useful only in this limited sense: it suggests that environmental harm may, in extreme circumstances, intersect with non-refoulement obligations, while also showing how high and fragmented the threshold remains¹. In the novel, however, the force of the issue comes less from doctrinal possibility than from narrative arrangement. The story has already made return feel incoherent before law has decided how to classify the people who cannot return.

What "return" would even mean in this scene is far from obvious. The Blue Boat's passengers do not arrive on the Mediterranean from a single coherent point of origin to which they could conceivably be sent back. They emerge instead from a destroyed underground compound on the Sinai peninsula, from chains of brokerage extending into the Horn of Africa, from villages around the Sundarbans whose ecological foundations are themselves dissolving. The legal grammar of non-refoulement, anchored in Article 33(1) of the 1951 Convention and reinforced by complementary protection under international human-rights law, still requires return risk to be attached to a legally cognizable territory and a narratable chain of harm². *Gun Island* does not refute this requirement theoretically; it unsettles it narratively, by accumulating histories of dispersal so dense that "the country of origin" loses traction as a stable reference point. The novel's contribution to thinking about non-

1 *Teitiota v. New Zealand*, UN Human Rights Committee, Communication No.2728/2016, CCPR/C/127/D/2728/2016 (7 January 2020), paras. 9.4-9.14. For a complementary discussion of the rescue-protection nexus, see also United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *General Legal Considerations: Search-and-Rescue Operations Involving Refugees and Migrants at Sea* (November 2017), <https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2017/en/120361>.

2 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954, 189 UNTS 137, arts. 1A(2), 33(1).

refoulement is therefore not a doctrinal proposal but a structural challenge to the geographic imagination on which the doctrine relies.

The ending of the episode returns the legal scene to the novel's mythic and ecological register. Birds circle in a "halo," the water flashes with bioluminescence, and "the creatures of the sky and sea" seem momentarily to rise around the boat before the navy cutters intervene and the refugees are transferred under spotlights. The vessel is then blown up and slowly sunk, while the rescued passengers wave goodbye to it from the cutters' decks (Ghosh 306-08). This is not a simple triumph of rescue. The destruction of the boat is a strikingly ambivalent image: the object that made survival possible must disappear, and with it disappears the material trace of the route that gathered these lives together. The boat's destruction is thus a final figure for the legibility crisis itself: even the artifact through which forcedness became visible is made to vanish. What survives is not the boat itself but the scene of interpretation it has forced into view. The Blue Boat episode thus turns narrative spectacle into institutional diagnosis, but it remains, first of all, a literary scene: a carefully staged convergence of voice, image, myth, ecology, and law.

This is where the present reading most clearly diverges from, while also depending on, recent multispecies accounts of *Gun Island*. Hoydis's reading of the novel as a story of planetary crisis and multispecies migration rightly foregrounds the birds, snakes, dolphins, spiders, and other nonhuman movements through which Ghosh unsettles a narrowly human scale of migration.¹ The Blue Boat ending confirms that insight, since rescue unfolds within an ecological and mythic field rather than a purely legal one. Yet from the perspective of institutional legibility, that very density sharpens the problem. The more fully the scene gathers human vulnerability, animal movement, mythic recurrence, and maritime spectacle, the less easily it can be reduced to the individualized account that protection procedures tend to require. Literary form expands the field of ethical perception; law demands a narrower grammar of readability.

Conclusion

Gun Island should not be read as a novel that simply asks law to widen its categories until every vulnerable mobile subject can be absorbed into them. Nor does it merely provide an ethical supplement to legal discourse by making readers feel sympathy for migrants whom institutions ignore. Its more demanding achievement lies in the literary forms through which it makes forced mobility readable before it becomes legally nameable: the route-form of the Gun Merchant myth, the distributed voices

1 Hoydis, "Parables for Planetary Crisis," 390-408.

of Moyna, Tipu, and Rafi, and the staged spectatorship of the Blue Boat episode.

The movement traced in this article has therefore been from ancient sea routes to the maritime border. First, the Gun Merchant myth and the novel's maritime route-form give present-day displacement a long historical depth, so that contemporary movement appears not as an isolated emergency but as part of a larger continuum of unequal circulation across sea space. Second, compound displacement emerges not only as a description of mixed causal pressure but also as a narrative pattern: environmental attrition, livelihood collapse, brokerage, aspiration, and border violence become legible through the interaction of different voices rather than through a single explanatory cause. Third, the Blue Boat episode turns this naming problem into a scene of maritime spectatorship. At sea, visibility does not guarantee recognition, and rescue does not by itself settle the question of reception.

For that reason, the article's claim is not that *Gun Island* proves its characters are all Convention refugees, nor that current legal frameworks are simply empty. The point is more exacting. The novel stages forms of constrained mobility that are cumulative, dispersed, historically layered, and formally difficult to compress. Law helps clarify why such forms may be hard to process, but the force of the argument comes from the novel's own narrative work: its myths, routes, translations, voices, delays, and visual scenes. "Pre-legal," in the sense developed here, was never a region outside law. It is the densely narrated life of forcedness that institutions are eventually asked to read, and that their compressed forms can register only by discarding much of what first made it legible to literature.

This is why law and literature must remain in productive tension in reading *Gun Island*. Legal concepts mark the threshold conditions under which protection may be granted, withheld, delayed, or fragmented. Literary form makes perceptible the pressures that those thresholds fail to register without thereby pretending to solve them. The novel does not offer a program for legal reform, but it performs an indispensable diagnostic function. It makes visible the institutional cost of forcing complex mobility into overly stable names.

The framework proposed here may also travel beyond Ghosh's novel as a tool for reading world-literary migration narratives in which environmental attrition, maritime passage, and institutional recognition fail to align. In Gurnah's *By the Sea*, for example, asylum depends not only on having suffered displacement but on deciding what can be told, withheld, or made readable within an official story of refuge. In Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone*, the lives of African asylum seekers in Berlin similarly expose the distance between narrative intelligibility and bureaucratic recognition. Such comparisons should not flatten the historical differences among

Indian Ocean exile, Mediterranean crossing, and European asylum procedure. They suggest, rather, that compound displacement and the legibility crisis name a broader critical problem for world literature: the recurring gap between lives that become recognizable to ethics and lives that become readable to law. In doing so, *Gun Island* becomes not a footnote to international law, but a literary site from which the limits of protection can be more sharply seen. If literature has a specific contribution to make to the international protection debate, it lies here: not in supplying new doctrinal categories, but in sustaining attention to the slow, distributed, and historically saturated forms of forcedness that doctrine, by design, must compress.

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