

Research Article

Memory and Identity in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*: A Critical Study

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Abstract: This article examines how Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* (2019) explores the interrelated concepts of memory and identity. Drawing on the novel's one of the principal characters, Deen's experiences, the study highlights how personal and cultural memories shape an individual's identity in a world marked by displacement and global migration. Including this character, other characters and incidents are also considered for analysis. The novel offers a powerful literary exploration of how memory—both individual and collective—serves as a repository for traditions, traumas, and aspirations, providing characters with a means to negotiate their sense of self in an ever-shifting landscape. Using insights from cultural memory theorists such as Jan Assmann, Pierre Nora, and Stuart Hall, this paper argues that Deen's journey is guided by revived memories, myths, and cultural roots that reconnect him to his origins. Furthermore, this study argues that the text demonstrates how memory acts as a vital agent in shaping identity.

Keywords: culture; diaspora; identity; memory; myth

Introduction

The contemporary world is shaped by mobility, migration, and cross-cultural encounters. In such contexts, individuals often strive to find a sense of belonging as the familiar markers of identity — language, tradition, landscape — are continually renegotiated. Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *Gun Island*, portrays this tension through the character of Deen, a rare books dealer who has left his homeland to live in America. Although he establishes a career abroad, he remains psychologically connected to his roots in Bengal, demonstrating how the migrant experience is both physical and emotional. His memories — both cultural and personal — play a significant role in shaping his identity, serving as bridges between his past and present. His cultural identity is stirred by meeting Nilima and by recalling the days he spent with Cinta. The narrative suggests that memory can be triggered by encounters, objects, or places that evoke a sense of home, making the past perpetually accessible in the present. This article investigates how Deen's memories become the guiding force in his quest for identity. It also explores how myths, folklore, and cultural history contribute to the novel's reconstruction of selfhood. Bengali folk poetry, particularly the Manasa Devi myth, inspires Deen to delve into history, leading him to discover the origins of Calcutta, the background of the Manasa Devi shrine, and earlier forms of Bengali civilisation. This historical exploration connects him to a broader cultural lineage, illustrating the enduring power of collective memory in shaping individual destinies. As *Gun Island* has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years, this study also engages with contemporary criticism, including that of Nayana K., Manjula K.T., and Ashna Francis. This study explores the novel's engagement with migration, environmental crisis, myth, folktale, and memory. Their perspectives help situate this reading within current debates in postcolonial and migration studies.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on *Gun Island* has increasingly focused on its treatment of migration, ecological crisis, and the spectrum of memory and identity in the context of globalisation. Nayana K. and Manjula K.T. have studied the novel, focusing mainly on myth and migration. At the same time, Ashna Francis offers a reading of how the novel intricately weaves together myth, folktales, and the crisis of climate change, connecting the human and the animal, the past and the present, and the natural with the supernatural. The novel uses the myth of the Gun Merchant as a central point to draw parallels between historical events, such as the Little Ice Age, and current climate-related disasters, including droughts, floods, cyclones, wildfires, and epidemics. Ghosh's use of myth and folklore facilitates a process of cultural 're-membering' for displaced subjects (Francis 22-35). Other critics, such as Neel Ahuja and Supriya Chaudhuri, have contextualised *Gun Island* within the broader tradition of postcolonial eco-criticism and explored transnational identities (Ahuja 243-259). This study draws upon these critical perspectives alongside foundational theories of memory (Assmann, Nora, Hall) to interrogate how Ghosh's novel addresses identity and belonging in an era marked by mobility and loss.

Cultural Memory: Theoretical Framework

To understand Deen's journey, cultural memory functions as a key interpretive lens. Jan Assmann describes cultural memory as a community's preserved past – its stories, rituals, and traditions – passed down through generations. This type of memory is not just a passive inheritance but also an active practice, maintained via commemorative ceremonies, storytelling, and cultural performances. Pierre Nora characterises memory through *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), symbolic elements – monuments, texts, rituals – that serve as anchors for communal remembrance in the face of forgetting. Stuart Hall posits that identity develops through ongoing interaction with cultural narratives, implying that subjectivity is built through engagement with shared symbols and meanings (Hall 1-17). Methodologically, this paper applies these frameworks to *Gun Island* to explore how Ghosh's characters negotiate their identities in relation to both inherited and reconstructed memory-sites. These theories reveal how Deen's revived memories guide his pursuit of identity, illustrating that memory serves as both a source of continuity and a trigger for change. The Manasa Devi myth, folk stories, and Bengali cultural traditions serve as memory sites that reawaken a sense of belonging and provide Deen with a framework for reimagining his place in the world.

Myth, History, and Identity Formation

Jan Assmann argues that memory is produced through socialisation and does not emerge in isolation from society. Although memory is experienced individually, its formation is fundamentally collective. It is exemplified in the case of Deen. He is a very significant character, even if not considered the protagonist, because there are many more characters, both human and non-human, in the novel (Hall 1-17). While physically distant from his homeland, Deen remains psychologically rooted in Bengal rather than in America. His sense of belonging is shaped not by geographical location but by culturally mediated remembrance. The novel clearly demonstrates that Deen's personal recollections come alive only through communication and social interaction, particularly through his engagement with characters such as Piya, Nilima, Tipu, Rafi, and the wider communal circle. These interactions activate memory as a shared and dialogic process rather than a private, autonomous one. Assmann further conceptualises memory as a reconstructive phenomenon, arguing that remembrance involves continuous reorganisation in response to changing frames of reference. Memory, therefore, is not a static retrieval of the past but a dynamic process shaped by each successive present. Deen's evolving identity in *Gun Island* emerges through this reconstructive movement of memory, in which past experiences are continually reinterpreted in light of present circumstances. The story of the Banduki Sadagar (Gun Merchant) intertwines with real-life cultural practices, becoming a driving force that compels him to re-evaluate his identity. Notably, when Deen listens to the recitation of the folk tale, He feels "as though some part of [him] had been waiting to hear these words all along" (Ghosh). This moment of recognition – an affective response to narrative – demonstrates how myth can awaken latent aspects of identity and belonging. Deen's academic circle, especially his connection with Cinta – a scholar on the subject – further shapes his understanding. Her insights encourage him to

reconsider myth, migration, and memory from new perspectives. Cinta's observation that "in every story, memory is never far from invention" (Ghosh) invites Deen to embrace the creative, reconstructive aspect of remembering. Past experiences, forgotten people, cultural symbols, and historical narratives all converge to reconstruct Deen's sense of self. Aashna Francis also explores this dynamic and presents an intricately interwoven plot which connects human and animal, past and present, natural and supernatural (Francis 22-35), in which stories serve to heal the ruptures caused by migration. Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* powerfully enacts Pierre Nora's argument that identity is built on the ruins of a lost past, demonstrating the shift from a living *milieu de mémoire* (Environment of Memory) to an anxious reliance on fixed *Lieux de Mémoire* (Sites of Memory). Deen Datta's anxiety – his feeling of being "dislocated" and "losing his location and Identity" – is the direct psychological fallout from the collapse of the Sundarbans, which served as his organic milieu, where memory and culture were spontaneously lived through an intimate bond with the environment. This geographical and cultural rupture forces the community to turn to symbolic anchors: the myth of the Gun Merchant is no longer a shared, living tradition but a *Lieu de Mémoire*. This story must be intellectually preserved and sought out in remote shrines or archival texts to provide a fragmented basis for identity. Similarly, Deen's profession as a rare book dealer, dedicating his life to preserving physical artefacts, highlights how modern identity substitutes the richness of continuous memory with the intellectual work of preserving material sites. Through this theoretical lens, the novel illustrates that the migrants' journey, tragically stripped of their original cultural environment, is defined by the desperate, ongoing effort to reconstruct a coherent self from the symbolic debris of a disappearing world. Stuart Hall explains that identity is not something we are born with, but something that is "produced" through representation, language, and cultural practices. It is always incomplete, always "in process" (Hall 1-17). His Bengali heritage does not fix his identity; it is constantly produced through his professional role, his use of English, and his intellectual distance from his past. His identity is not broken; it is simply *in process* and feels incomplete because the traditional cultural structures (the "roots") that should define him are no longer physically present or influential.

Memory as the Pathway to Identity

Revisiting the past is not merely nostalgic; it is transformative. Deen realises that his identity has always been intertwined with cultural memory, which acts as both a foundation and a starting point for self-discovery. According to Jan Assmann, both collective and individual memory play vital roles in shaping personality, as they provide the narratives and reference points through which individuals interpret their lives. For Deen, returning to memories of Bengal enables him to rediscover his identity in the present, making remembering a form of self-renewal. This is evident when Deen reflects: "memory is a country from which there is no escape" (Ghosh), suggesting that the past is an inescapable companion in the migrant's journey. Ghosh's novel suggests that identity is not fixed but an ongoing process shaped by memory, migration, and the negotiation of multiple belongings. Deen's quest for identity is guided by his renewed engagement with myths, stories, and historical truths that anchor him to his cultural heritage while also enabling him to adapt to new realities. However, this process is not

without its challenges. Nayana K. and Manjula K.T. interpret the novel, saying that Ghosh highlights the struggles of illegal immigrants and refugees, particularly in Venice. This city has become a refuge for many despite its challenges. The migrants arriving on the Blue Boat symbolise the harsh realities of global inequalities and forced displacement. In this novel, Ghosh addresses the issue of remembering the past. He portrays that confronting painful histories and the risk of idealising the past reveal the ambivalence at the heart of diasporic identity formation. Piya, one of the novel's vibrant characters who influences Deen to revisit his cultural roots, is a marine biologist who represents an intellectual, systematic approach to preserving the memory of the environment. Here, she is the scientific archivist of the Sundarbans. She does not live the old memory but meticulously documents its present state, habitat, and species. Her research papers, recordings, and conservation efforts are specific *Lieux de Mémoire* – academic institutions designed to preserve the memory of a rapidly disappearing biological environment. Her identity is linked to this preservationist mission. Another significant character is Cinta, a historian of the Venetian archives. Her work is the pure intellectualisation of the past; her obsession with the historical links between Venice and the East affirms Deen's quest by proving that the Gun Merchant myth is not just a regional story but a historical point of convergence. Her presence affirms Nora's premise that the modern intellectual class is dedicated to preserving the past in formal, established sites of memory – the archives and libraries – which act as the last, desperate guardians of identity when culture is no longer fluid. Rafi and Tipu, the Migrant Youth, embody the most acute and painful consequence of the milieu's destruction, forced to forge an identity from trauma. Regarding *Lieux*, Rafi and Tipu's homeland is gone, and they cannot access the academic lieux of Pia or Cinta. Their identity is rooted in the shared narrative of their escape—the specific route, the suffering endured, and the xenophobia faced. This shared story becomes a symbolic *Lieu de Mémoire* – a traumatic retelling that forms their new diasporic identity. Their identity depends entirely on the continuous, conscious re-telling and defence of this shared story. The solidarity formed in transit and in the camp replaces the organic solidarity of the village. Their memory is neither comfortable nor nostalgic; it is a battleground where their very right to exist and their identity are challenged. This novel ingeniously addresses migration, illustrating how it disturbs both human and non-human beings (Priyadarshini and Ghosh).

Research Findings

The novel demonstrates a strong link between identity formation and memory, with both influenced by external environments and internal experiences. The findings reveal the inseparability of memory and identity, emphasising that shifting physical and psychological landscapes profoundly impact human selfhood.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Amitav Ghosh delineates in the novel that memory is a crucial force in shaping human identity, especially in a globalised and migratory world. Deen's journey reveals how personal recollections, cultural myths, and collective memories guide individuals in their search for belonging, and how remembering can become a survival and

adaptation strategy. Memory becomes a bridge between past and present, helping displaced individuals reclaim their sense of self and reconstruct meaning in unfamiliar contexts. Through Deen, Ghosh illustrates the intricate relationship between migration, cultural memory, and identity, suggesting that the stories we inherit and retell are essential for negotiating the challenges of displacement. The novel ultimately affirms that the quest for identity is inseparable from the memories — both cherished and forgotten — that define the human experience, proposing that every act of remembrance is also an act of self-creation.

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