

A Study of Seneca's 'Negative Visualization' in Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island*.

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Abstract

This study delves into a reading of Amitav Ghosh's novel "*Gun Island*." in terms of Seneca the Younger's concept of 'Negative Visualization.' Seneca the Junior of Ancient Rome advocated for the practice of imagining worst-case scenarios to cultivate gratitude and resilience. In *Gun Island*, Ghosh weaves a narrative that follows the journey of the protagonist, Deen, who navigates through themes of climate change, migration, and human interconnectedness. Through the analysis of key moments in the novel, this study examines how Deen encounters adversity that prompts him to engage in a form of 'Negative Visualization,' leading to personal growth and a deeper understanding of the world around him.

Keywords

Negative Visualization, Climate change, Disaster, Displacement, Seneca the Younger, Stoicism.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c.1 BC–AD 65) was born in Corduba (Spain) and educated in rhetoric and philosophy in Rome. Seneca had a highly successful, quite dramatic, political career and was a major philosophical figure of the Roman Imperial Period. As a Stoic philosopher writing in Latin, Seneca made lasting contribution to Stoicism and shaped the understanding of Stoic thought. The writings that we shall primarily be concerned with are: *Moral Letters to Lucilius (Ad Lucilium epistulae morales)*, the *Moral Essays*, and *Codex Ambrosianus*.

Seneca talks about managing uncertainty thus, "*Until we have begun to go without them, we fail to realize how unnecessary many things are. We've been using them not because we needed them but because we had them*" (Seneca). As readers reflect on the disappearance or survival of the natural world, they are forced to assess the value of environmental protection and

sustainable living choices. They may comprehend that overindulging in modern comforts and luxuries damages the environment and that many of them are not essential for survival and wellbeing.

‘Negative Visualization’ is a technique for contemplation or, also known as *futurorum malorum praemeditatio* ("pre-studying the bad future"), which is based on visualizing the worst-case scenario. The phrase ‘Negative Visualization’ originated in Latin and the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca the Junior highlighted its use as a technique to face future events with ‘perseverance’ and ‘gratitude’. He felt that we could better appreciate their presence and get ready for hardship by thinking about the loss of the things we hold precious. Seneca often counsels his readers to face their concerns and envision the worst-case situations. He encourages people to let go of worldly belongings and transient joys and instead embrace the certainty of change and loss. One can achieve inner peace and be freed from the dread of losing something by doing this. He teaches us to be grateful for life's blessings and to find joy in small things through “Negative Visualization.”

Amitav Ghosh published his novel *Gun Island* in 2019 which intertwines themes of mythology, migration, and climate change. The narrative centers on Deen, a dealer of rare books, who, upon learning of a Bengali tale and a legend about a gun merchant, finds himself drawn into an enigmatic journey. On his journey from Kolkata, Deen visits the Sundarbans, where he sees firsthand the effects of climate change. He makes strange friendships with a wide range of people along the route, such as an Italian scholar and a local fisherman. As Deen explores the mythical links further, he faces issues of belief, truth, and the persuasiveness of narrative. Ghosh skillfully combines environmental issues, history, and culture into a gripping drama that examines how humans and the natural world interact and affect each other.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the term ‘disaster’ refers to an event causing great harm, damage, or suffering. ‘Climate Change’ refers to significant and lasting alterations in global or regional climate patterns over an extended period, typically decades or longer, resulting from human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial processes. Climate change leads to various environmental impacts, including rising sea levels, more frequent and intense extreme weather events. Over the few decades since the birth of year 2000,

there has been a faster rise in the water level. The daily high tide caused by altered ecosystems, precipitation patterns, and biodiversity loss is widely recognized. The combination of increasing sea levels, altered tide patterns, saltwater intrusion, and extreme weather events brought on by global warming can exacerbate small islands' vulnerability and eventually cause them to vanish. A few locations that are significantly impacted by sea level rise are Marshall Island, Kiribati, the Maldives, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, the Solomon Islands, Samoa, Nauru, and Fiji Island.

Amitav Ghosh explores the interconnectedness of climate disasters on a global scale in the novel *Gun Island*. The novel discusses natural disasters like cyclones and droughts followed by pollution as the greatest causes of harm to the Asian continent. Amitav Ghosh portrays the real disaster account of the Bholia cyclone of 1970 in the novel *Gun Island* through the character Nilima Bose. The Bholia cyclone, the sixth and strongest cyclone storm, struck what is now called Bangladesh erstwhile Pakistan and the Indian state of West Bengal from November 12 to November 13 in 1970. It is considered one of the deadliest tropical cyclones ever recorded, with estimates of casualties ranging from 300,000 to 500,000 people. It caused widespread flooding and the destruction of homes, which later led to displacement of both humans and nonhumans. Nilima talks about the ways in which the cyclone has impacted the lives of those residing on Gun Island, including property loss, eviction, and loss of employment, how this cyclone serves as an indication for more significant environmental problems like sea level rise and global warming.

In Chapter Three of the novel, Tipu, the villager, discusses about the severe cyclone storm Alia, the second-named tropical cyclone of 2009. This cyclone makes the fertile land swamped by salt water which leads to mass immigration. Moyana, mother of Tipu, discusses various aspects of the drought affecting the Sundarbans and tells of the havoc it leaves in its wake. It was such a severe drought that the storms, rivers, and ponds dried up, and farmers fled the area because the soil was too fragile, which caused the locals to starve to death. Poverty forced parents to sell their kids. This pitiful situation was much exploited by the manipulative traffickers, who played an important role in the migrations.

The sixth chapter of the novel, titled "Brooklyn," discusses anthropogenic pollution and how it affects marine life. It also discusses rising sea levels, beaching, change in fish breeding season due to altered water composition, residues from chemical fertilizers that wash into the sea, and the sea's transformation into an oxygen-dead zone. Excessive nutrient runoff from

agricultural fertilizers, sewage, and industrial waste can lead to eutrophication in coastal waters. This influx of nutrients, particularly nitrogen and phosphorus, fuels algal blooms. When these algae die and decompose, the process consumes oxygen, leading to oxygen depletion in the water and the formation of dead zones where marine life cannot survive. Next major impact is habitat destruction, dredging, bottom trawling, coastal development, and other human activities have the potential to physically harm marine habitats and impair vital ecosystem processes. The loss of habitat can worsen the resilience of marine ecosystems to environmental stresses, such as those that result in the establishment of dead zones, and contribute to the decline in biodiversity.'

A wildfire has shattered the American continent; the narrative has given a separate chapter titled 'Wildfire.' The term 'wildfire' refers to an uncontrolled fire in a forest, grassland, brushland, or land sown to crops. Deen discusses wildfires in Los Angeles; wildfires are common in Los Angeles County and can harm communities near and far. Smoke from wildfires can drift hundreds of miles, and some people, like those living in urban areas, are more likely to experience poor health on smoky days. Wildfire had been ranging around Los Angeles for several days which delays the narrator's flight resulting in the change of the conference venue. Thousands of acres of land had been incinerated, and dark smudges appeared all over the area. Tree trunks and branches were blackened with ashes. In the Los Angeles conference, speakers discuss on the topic "Climate and Apocalypse in the 17th Century" and convey a warning about such catastrophes.

In Chapter Six of the second part of the novel, titled "Warning," the city of Venice is portrayed as particularly vulnerable to both heat waves and floods due to its unique geographical location and the ongoing effects of climate change. 'Ecoalterity' is a concept that extends the idea of "alterity" (altering or modifying) to ecological systems. It involves altering or modifying human interactions with ecosystems. Heat waves lead to a type of 'ecoalterity' with which insects like spiders become more and more venomous. The occurrence of partial flooding, a geographical pattern, is the reason for the city's sinking. "While the acqua alta had receded, the sky had turned dark. Banks of cloud, of many shades of color, ranging from silvery to almost black, were scudding and whirling across the heavens, swept along by fierce and changeable gusts of wind" (245).describes the sight of submerged piazzas and passageways, the sound of water lapping against old buildings, and the sense of moisture in the air as the city struggles with

rising tides. These descriptions are primarily based on how severe floods destroy homes, infrastructure, and historical sites. Furthermore, the heightened occurrence and intensity of floods due to climate change may cause disturbances to everyday routines and jeopardize the city's long-term sustainability. The narrator uses parallelism to depict the environmental degradation at a global scale – environmental hazards threaten the survival of both Venice and the Sundarbans. Climate change has made erosion and rising sea levels more dangerous for Venice, whereas cyclones, saline intrusion, and erosion in the Sundarbans are threats brought on by both human activity and climate change. Venice and the Sundarbans both exhibit resilience and adaptation in the face of hardship, despite the challenges they encounter. To adapt to environmental changes and maintain their way of life, local communities in both regions innovate and modify traditions. The novel illustrates how people work to adapt and live in the face of natural disasters, whether it is the Venetians using creative flood defense systems or the Sundarbans residents creating adaptable farming and fishing practices.

A warning is something that is said or written to tell people of a possible danger, problem, or other unpleasant thing that might happen. A legendary folktale featuring a guy by the name of Gun Merchant is used by Ghosh to highlight the warning signs of climate change. In *Gun Island* climate disasters are depicted in various forms. By providing a narration induced with natural calamities, anthropogenic impacts, migration and displacement, heritage threat, ecological resilience and human adaptation, this novel underscores the urgency of addressing climate change and fostering a sustainable future. In the novel *Gun Island*, one might find different categories of disasters which can be related to the concept of 'Negative Visualization.' In chapter two, Cinta claims that “foreknowledge – what they call precognition nowadays. Knowing that something will occur before it does” (37) She also makes a reference to predictions made by Aztecs contemplating the apocalyptic scenarios, how individuals would prepare themselves mentally and spiritually for the upcoming worst-case scenarios and lead to the appreciation of present moments. “People think that knowing the future can help you prepare for what is to come - But often it only makes you powerless” (37). The narrator uses the phrase "but often makes you powerless" to erase the terrifying experience that followed learning about the worst-case scenario. One must embrace and contemplate Negative Visualization with all their might and power, and they must form ideas and strategies to overcome the difficult reality of the feared-to-come events.

The novel highlights climate-change-induced environmental disasters, biodiversity loss, habitat loss, displacement of both human and nonhuman populations, and threats on a global scale. One ought not to view these incidents which were referred through narration as merely conveying a straightforward message. By applying negative visualization in the story of "*Gun Island*," it may inspire readers to consider their own lives and recognize their countless blessings even in the face of adversity. It emphasizes how crucial perspective, gratitude, and perseverance are for overcoming life's challenges.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the term 'perseverance' means "the quality of being someone who continues to make an effort to achieve their aims, even when this is difficult or takes a long time." Throughout the novel, perseverance is exemplified through the characters' resilience in the face of challenges and their unwavering determination to pursue their goals. Deen embarks on a quest to uncover the truth behind a mysterious legend involving the Gun Merchant. Despite encountering numerous obstacles, including skepticism from others and physical dangers, Deen perseveres, driven by his curiosity and a deep-seated desire to unravel the mysteries of the past. Pia, another character in the novel, exhibits perseverance in her dedication to environmental activism. Despite facing opposition and setbacks in her efforts to protect the natural world, Pia remains steadfast in her commitment, tirelessly advocating for conservation and raising awareness about environmental issues.

Both Tipu and Rafi are aware of the unlawful journey. Tipu had previously discovered the plight of the migrants through browsing social media. However, he and his travelling companion, Rafi, set out after receiving such details. It is possible to argue that Tipu's optimistic outlook helped him withstand the impending worst. The term 'gratitude' refers to a strong feeling of appreciation to someone or something for what the person has done to help you. The theme of gratitude is woven into the fabric of the narrative through various characters and their experiences. One significant example is the protagonist, Deen, whose journey prompts him to confront his own ingratitude and ultimately embrace a more appreciative outlook.

We can analyze Deen's transformation as a case under scrutiny. In the beginning of the novel, Deen is portrayed as somewhat disillusioned and disconnected from his surroundings. However, as he embarks on his journey and encounters challenges, he begins to reflect on the

value of the people and places in his life. Through moments of ‘negative visualization,’ such as when he faces danger or loss, Deen learns to appreciate the simple joys and connections that he had previously taken for granted. His evolving gratitude is depicted through his interactions with other characters and his inner reflections. Pia, a character who accompanies Deen on his journey, serves as a catalyst for his exploration of gratitude. Her presence encourages Deen to see the world through a different lens and to appreciate the beauty and complexity of life. Through their shared experiences and conversations, Pia helps Deen recognize the importance of gratitude in finding meaning and connection amid uncertainty. Throughout the novel, Deen encounters various communities and individuals who embody gratitude in different ways. From the villagers who share their stories and traditions with him to the migrants seeking refuge and connection, these characters demonstrate resilience and gratitude in the face of adversity. Their examples serve to highlight the universal nature of gratitude and its ability to transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. Overall, *Gun Island* portrays ‘gratitude’ as a transformative force that shapes the perceptions and experiences of the characters. Through their journeys of self-discovery and connection, they learn to cultivate gratitude as a source of resilience, empathy, and understanding in a world filled with challenges and uncertainties.

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