

# An Ecocritical Analysis of Amitav Ghosh's The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable.

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## ABSTRACT

The creation of a utopian society free of corruption and pollution that jeopardises our planet Earth is unveiled in genuine writer's works. Amitav Ghosh is one such writer who voices his concern over climate change in his work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Ghosh's perspective calls for the collective responsibility of the government, people, and nations of the world to join in an interconnected effort to save the planet. In contemporary literature, the topic of non-human forces is extremely important and requires the utmost attention. Economic structures, particularly the carbon economy and capitalism, trigger the climate crisis. Decolonising the perspectives of Eurocentrism is the momentum towards de-escalating the climate crisis, which is the concern of writers. The negative impact of industrialisation and economic expansion is obvious in climate degradation, and the victims are people belonging to Asian countries. Identity issues precede global issues, of which the latter is to be carried out on a war footing. This paper attempts to underscore the genuine interest of the writer to unfold the causes of climate change, revoice, and call for the unified action of the artist and people to fight the problem of climate change by resolving individualistic differences for the betterment of the global community.

**Keywords:** Carbon economy, Capitalism, Individualism, Climate change, Decolonisation.

## INTRODUCTION

Literary writers are engulfed with a desire to educate the reader on social life issues and raise awareness about the ecological issues that are pivotal in the present age, driven by globalisation and artificial intelligence. Their perspective on the work of art differs from that of their predecessors in terms of the immediate surrounding environment. They were determined about the relationship between humans and non-humans, which is seen as essential because of the interconnected nature of both. Eco-critical writers didn't limit themselves to the appreciation of nature; their perspective shifted from appreciation to the conscious raising of environmental degradation. Peter Barry documents in *The Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, "For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironized as a concept by enclosure within knowing inverted commas, but actually present as an entity which affects us" (p. 252). Indian writers like Rabindranath Tagore enumerated the interdependence of human beings and nature in their writing, particularly in his literary works *Gitanjali* and *The Home in the World*. R.K. Narayan's novels, such as *The Man-Eater of Malkudi* and *The Guide*, revolve around the themes of the coexistence of rural people with the natural environment. Ruskin Bond's literary work, such as children's books and short stories, encapsulates the ecosystem of the Himalayas.

Literary writer Amitav Ghosh highlights the natural world's frailty caused by human actions that happen in the name of development and modernisation. His thematic concerns are environmental degradation, human encroachment on nature, concerns about depleting ecosystems, historical complexities, migration, the experience

of displacement, and the loss of human experience. Besides his fictional work, he attempts to display his environmental concern in his non-fictional work, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. His commitment to saving our planet with our noble actions of change is documented in his work. As Melanie Finn documents the views of Ghosh, "Ghosh challenges the writers amongst us to remember that throughout history we have dealt with the crisis by telling ourselves stories. Climate change might be our successor to the Black Death: We may have to use all our inventive ability, rational and magical, to think our way out of it" (p. 2). Ecocriticism attempts to look at the environmental crisis in an academic way. In the early 1990s, ecocriticism was established as a theoretical model to approach the environmental crisis through the publication of the *Ecocriticism Reader* by Glotfelty and Fromm in 1996. Despite its mark as a cultural and literary theory, it focuses primarily on ecological issues, which are a pressing concern in the era of globalisation and consumer culture. Initially, the priority of the first wave of ecocritical writers was to identify and celebrate the natural representation in literature, along with the interconnectedness of the human and natural world. Further, they were keen on the importance of conserving nature and sustaining its quality practices. The second wave of ecocriticism marks a shift from pastoral landscapes to urban areas, where the main issue is to portray environmental degradation, and it is socio-centric rather than an embodiment of aesthetics. Amitav Ghosh believes that, through the voice of speaking for nature, a collective consciousness shall be raised amongst the readers.

## DISCUSSIONS

In the beginning, the writer explains the environmental surroundings in which his life came into being. Climate change is a real threat that our planet is facing right now, but the concern of literary writers is just to entertain the audience with the realistic portrayal of human lives, such as the predicament of society at the psychological level but the concept of climate change is not the subject of contemporary literary works. There is a catastrophic description of rivers, an integral part of human civilisation, which gave prosperity to mankind and is changing its nature. It is identified that nature changes into unnatural because of its disturbed ecosystem. The author documents his experience in the form of storytelling: "The story, as my father told it, was this: one day in the mid, 1850s the great river suddenly changed course, drowning the village; only a few of the inhabitants managed to escape to higher ground. It was this catastrophe that had unmoored our forebears" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 4). His ancestors were pushed to settle in Bihar beside the Ganges, due to the catastrophe that happened in the Padma River in Bangladesh around the mid-1850s. The allegory of the natural being of the planet talking to the author is documented by the writer himself: "When I look into my past, the river seems to meet my eyes, staring back, as if to ask, Do you recognise me, wherever you are?" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 4). Furthermore, it is inferred that the natural resources like Sundarbans, mangrove forests in Bengal saw significant changes despite their natural process of 'portent of cumulative and irreversible change . . . a steady intrusion of saltwater on lands' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 7).

The postmodern society, which is immersed in technology, is facing a crisis that denies recognition of the phenomena that are unfolding on the planet. Human identity will remain in the planet only with the process of identification that happens in the natural world by the activities of human being out of which Sundarbans ferocity in Bengal delta that "sometime taking house and people with it; but elsewhere a shallow mudbank will arise and within weeks the shore will have broadened by several feet" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 7). Further, it is observed that the present-day culture has failed to teach the climate crisis because "the wild has become the norm" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 10). The author suggests that the climate crisis is closely linked to the cultural crisis and argues that now is the opportune moment to address this issue within the realm of serious fiction. The present 'carbon economy' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 13), driven by consumerist culture, has its roots in the wider 'histories of imperialism and capitalism' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 13) that formed the basis for the creation of the modern world. It is observed from the author's perspective that there is a politics behind this carbon economy that resists the 'modes of cultural activity' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 14), such as literary activity of prose, poetry, and other branches of culture, to inculcate the climate crisis in their genre.

The writer documents his personal experience of a hailstorm in Delhi. Natural, unexpected occurrences are always taken in a lighter vein by society, unaware of their intensity due to climate change. Ghosh (2016) insists on the intensity of phenomena: "In that instant, gravity itself seems to have been transformed into a wheel spinning upon the fingertip of some unknown power" (p. 17). Furthermore, he shared his insights about the

unexpected Toronto in Delhi, which is uncommon in the Indian Subcontinent. “Something irreducibly mysterious, something quite apart from the danger that I had been in and the destruction that I had witnessed” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 4). The writer underscores that fiction as a genre should be different from the traditional European model of storytelling, but it should capture the essence of everyday life. It is observed that Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a Bengali writer, was able to move beyond the forms of fiction that followed the traditional pattern and create a trend of writing that is “a style of writing that would accord primacy to sketches of character and pictures of Bengali life” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 24). Bankim’s writing demonstrates the phenomenon of observation rather than what has happened. It is observed that Amitav proclaims and nullifies the notions in geology and fiction that nature is unchanging and remains the same. Ghosh (2016) defines the characteristics of the modern era, which are defined by the reality of events such as “flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, and spells of unprecedented heat . . . yes, freakish tornadoes (p. 32) and these phenomena should be included in serious fiction. Further, it is inferred that people in the societies of developed economies believe that climatic catastrophic events may not happen to them. It is observed that the modern age, which is characterised by global warming phenomena, must face unprecedented events. Ghosh (2016) documents, “The age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense: the weather events of this time have a high degree of improbability” (p. 35). Further, nature is represented as a horrific entity which brings devastation rather than the consolation that it once brought to maintain ecological balance. Ghosh (2016) describes the unexpected tornado in Delhi: “The tornado was about 50 meters wide and covered a distance of about five k.m in the space of two or three minutes” (p. 19).

Due to human activity, our environment has changed. It is inferred that our era is very distinct from our previous generation. Ghosh (2016) defines our era “precisely by events that appear, by our current standards of normality, highly improbable: flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, spells of unprecedented heat” (p. 32). Literary writers have a huge responsibility to portray the reality of human existence, as the realistic novel attempted by Bankim and Flaubert, but beyond social issues and human predicament, they were not able to portray climate change in the contemporary novel. It is also observed that there is a lack of belief among people about the improbability of events. Ghosh (2016) documents the notes of Sobel that it was the attitude of people that “losing one’s life to hurricanes is... something that happens in faraway places” (p. 34). Another similar attitude opined by the author in the country of Brazil, “when Hurricane Caterina struck the coast in 2004, many people did not shelter because they refused to believe that hurricanes were possible in Brazil” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 34 - 35). Even though the art form of the novel did not document the climate crisis, Poetry as a form have a connection with the climate events, as Ghosh (2016) points out ideas of Geoffrey Parker that John Milton's world was a “universe of death” (p. 35) where he composes his poetry in extreme weather conditions of cold and heat. The words of Dana Philips (2003) in the book *Truth of Ecology* augments the idea “Ambiguous spaces - desert wastes, baren shores, howling wilderness — are said to inspire revelations requires us to be circumspect as possible, even if that means retreating behind closed doors so that we can mull things over in deep abstractions and giving free reign to our power of doubt”(p. X)

All these phenomena of the Sudan deluge, unprecedented storms, and the quality of the Sundarbans have a highly probable effect on global warming, particularly in this age driven by the carbon economy. The author put forth his perception that “improbable events that are beating at our door seem to have stirred a sense of recognition . . . that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own” (Ghosh, 2016, p. 41). The writer recognises the mysterious effects of environmental mystery that are unfolding in our modern age, which are different from the mysterious nature of the supernatural. The authors deduce that this might be due to collective human action on the planet Earth. “This is that the freakish weather events of today, despite their radically non-human nature, are nonetheless animated by cumulative human actions”(Ghosh, 2016, p. 43). The consequences of globalisation are enormous, and it was identified in the Mumbai floods as a result of the downpour in 2005, where the city is not able to withhold the catastrophe that ‘inundated 2.5 million people’ (Ghosh, 2016, p. 61). The author highlights that the emergence of cities around the world, whether it is Mumbai, Chennai in India, or New York, Boston, fostered economies at the cost of human life by making construction in coastal areas, which is considered to be the colonial ideology of expansion. The author attempts to highlight that colonisation by the Western powers was ignorant of the impact of moving near to waters by establishing their business establishment. The danger of catastrophe that might fix about doomsday was envisioned by the creative writers in the ‘Biblical and Quranic images of

Apocalypse', 'tales of pralaya in Sanskrit literature' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 74). Despite their warning, the perpetrators of colonisation further developed this into globalisation. It is observed that the age of global warming is shaped by unseen forces of nature, as the author proclaims, "animated by forces that are nothing if not inconceivably vast" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 83). The consequence of climate change has its impacts on the vulnerable members of society: 'Climate change has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those on the margins are now to first experience the future' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 84). It is inferred that literary movements should come forward to address the issue of climate change and its repercussions.

It is the right time to ask ourselves whether enough space is provided to consider the issue of great importance in the modern novel by devoting it as too much importance to human beings only. The author opines that 'the period in which human activity was changing the earth's atmosphere that the literary imagination became radically centred on the human' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 88). Further, it is inferred that there is a gulf between nature and culture, which was once undivided. As Kathleen R Wallace and Karla Armbruster opine in Introduction: Why Go Beyond Nature Writing, and Where to? "We believe such an expanded sense of environment and of the potential topics for ecocritical analysis will help ecocriticism grapple with one of its central conceptual challenges: understanding nature and culture as interwoven rather than a separate sides of dualistic construct" (P. 4). The author provides reference to this act by citing the words of Bruno Latour: 'Nature is consigned entirely to sciences, remaining forever off limits to culture' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 95). It is inferred that the condition of the contemporary novel failed to focus on the immediate concern of climate change, even in the new genre of 'climate fiction or cli-fi' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 97), and it focuses on the disaster that is expected to happen. The concern of collective humanity is lacking in the genre of modern fiction writing, and the author cites that 'contemporary novel has become ever more radically centred on the individual psyche while the collective – 'men in the aggregate'- has receded' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 105), which results in individual isolation coupled with modern economic systems. The author desires that global warming and climate change, which are collective problems in this modern age, take up less space in economics, politics, and literature, which are the pillars of modern society.

The author deals with history in the second part, where he traces the roots of the present-day climate crisis to colonialism and a desire to promote capitalism at the cost of exploiting the natural resources of the world. One of the many reasons for the detrimental process of climate is the 'dominant model of capitalism' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 117). Asia is one of the prime targets of the expansion of the empire, promoting the model of capitalism that triggers the carbon economy. The aspect of climate gives a direct challenge to the continent's interior parts, which triggers flooding, modulation in weather conditions and droughts. The author opines that "24 per cent of India's arable land is slowly turning into desert, and a 2-degree Celsius rise in average global temperature would reduce the country's food supply by a quarter" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 120). Global warming triggered by climate change not only affects the interior of the continent but also accelerates the water crisis due to the melting of Himalayan glaciers.

The Eurocentric model of living that is replicated by a small population across the globe will not be viable for Asia. Ghosh (2016) opines, "the patterns of life that modernity endangers . . . Asia's historical experience demonstrates that our planet will not allow these patterns of living to be adopted by every human being" (p. 124). The concept of modernity has been acquired by Asia after the post-industrialised scenario, which originally erupted in Europe. This paved the way for the nations, particularly Asian countries, to embrace the carbon economy. The author delineates 'non-western world was slow to enter the carbon economy' (Ghosh, 2016, p. 125). Modernity is, in the sense, an economy-driven mode of living that keeps human beings at the centre of attention over non-human entities. This revolution is "a process of technological diffusion" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 126), which has made the non-Western countries enter into a carbon economy-driven model. Ghosh (2016) documents the words of historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam: "modernity was not a 'virus' that spread from the west to the rest of the world. It was rather a 'global and conjunctural phenomenon', with many iterations . . . in different parts of the world" (p. 129). It is observed that global warming has its roots in the above. The economy is always related to power. Ghosh (2016) opines, "imperialism actually delayed the onset of the climate crisis by retarding the expansion of Asian and African economies? 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would have been crossed long before it actually was? (p. 147). The economic development of Asia has delayed the climate crisis. Moreover, inequalities across the nations are created. Carbon economies are created particularly



in poor countries where they do not have access to the resources of carbon to compete with European powers in the expansion of the imperialistic project.

Advancements in technology, by the exploitation of natural resources, take us to a pathetic future. The author documents the present state of derangement in this way: "we are mired in the great derangement of our lives and our choices are enframed in a pattern of history that seems to leave us nowhere to turn but towards our self-annihilation" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 149). Despite the great leaders of India's resistance to the 'industrial capitalism'(Ghosh, 2016, p. 150), triggered by the consumerist culture of the West, particularly the natural resources, the political coalition put forth progress in terms of relentless industrialisation, which Gandhi was not in favour of. Ghosh (2016) opines, "This coalition came to power by promising exactly what Gandhi had renounced: endless industrial growth"(p. 151). When observing history, dissent was carried out in parts of Asia, China, particularly with the greatest philosophical thinkers, "industrialism and consumerism faced powerful resistances from within the Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist traditions"(Ghosh, 2016, p. 151). Ghosh (2016) envisions 'Politics as a moral journey'(p. 173) to tackle the problem of global warming that culminates in the climate crisis. Dissent to greenhouse gases as a measure to protect our environment in the public sphere is not only enough because the political reality is altered. It is observed that Ghosh (2016) desires a 'politics of moral sincerity'(p. 181), which is a shift from the Western industrial model of economy to an economy that is generated from sustainable practices that minimise the negative effects of our climate. Further, it is observed that the anglosphere has a prominent responsibility in tackling the challenges of climate change. Mere activism will not become the agent of change because of its dual nature: "the tension between these polarities - widespread denialism, on the other hand - now defines the public politics of climate change through the Anglosphere" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 183).

The mass media play a pivotal role in shaping the minds of people, whether for good or for worse. Ghosh (2016) opines that "The situation is further compounded by mass media, which has generally underplayed climate change" (p. 184). But the comforting news is that superpowers have started to acknowledge the climate crisis, particularly "the Pentagon devotes more resources to the study of climate change than any other branch of US government" (Ghosh, 2016, p. 186). To make a sustainable future, it is the right time to observe the commitment that is shown by the US military to invest in renewable energy initiatives and its investment "heavily in biofuels, microgrids, electric vehicles and so on"(Ghosh, 2016, p. 187). The climate crisis creates a multidimensional negative impact that not only results in extreme weather conditions but also poses a threat to food security. Ghosh (2016) highlights James Clapper, the intelligence official in the US, "extreme weather events... will increasingly disrupt food and energy markets, exacerbating state weakness, forcing human migration, and triggering riots, civil disobedience, and vandalism"(p. 187). Humans irresponsibility over the climate crisis, despite its multidimensional effects, is like a battle waged against oneself and bringing disgrace to its own residence. Ghosh (2016) opines, "humanity has not only declared a war against itself, but is also locked into mortal combat with the earth"(p. 192). It is observed that the thirst for domination of others could be a potential reason for the project of imperialism, therefore culminating in the expansion of the empire. Due to capitalism and empire, the carbon economy expands. Ghosh (2016) opines that "the distribution of power in the world therefore lies at the core of the climate crisis" (p. 196). Expansion of the military and capitalism would act as a hindrance to the climate crisis. Absence of community networks played an important part in getting affected by the climate crisis, which was evident in the European heat wave in 2003, 2010 heat wave in Russia, the 2015 heat wave in South Asia and the Persian Gulf. Hence, it is observed that the citizens of the world living together is considered to be a mitigatory action against climate change.

It is further inferred that 'politics of attrition'(Ghosh, 2016, p. 197) could be a potential cause for taking mitigatory actions against climate change, which is a delusion that poor and developing countries have the capacity to absorb stress. Further, it is suggested to give up 'the quest for western style prosperity'(Ghosh, 2016, p. 199). It is observed that two significant changes occurred in 2015 while battling the climate crisis: "Pope Francis's encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* . . . Paris agreement on Climate change"(Ghosh, 2016, p. 201). Further, it is observed that a thirst for exponential growth with little concern for ecology is the reason for the present predicament that humans are facing. Ghosh (2016) highlights that "It returns to this theme repeatedly insisting that it is because of the 'technocratic paradigm' that 'we fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological growth'(p. 206) and in the Paris agreement,

there is a call for 'common concern for humankind'(p. 207) which is not much emphatical than the Kyoto Protocol. Laudato Si's calls for an ecological approach are justified when it is combined with the social approach by giving importance to alleviating poverty and disseminating justice. Ghosh documents the idea in the treaty, "it must integrate quotations of justice in debates on the environment"(p. 211). It is observed that to tackle the climate crisis, there should be a social awareness across the globe since it is the responsibility of progressive Governments and religious establishments. The common man must be informed about this 'great derangement' and make him dissent and form a 'neo - liberal frontier'(Ghosh, 2016, p. 209), over carbon emission and less reliant on the carbon economy. To take part in the management of the problem of this climate crisis: "The human world can respond in three ways to signals that resource use and pollution emissions have grown beyond their sustainable limits. One way is to deny, disguise, or confuse the signals . . . A second way to respond is to alleviate the pressures from limits by technical or economic fixes . . . the third way to respond is to work on the underlying causes, to step back and acknowledge that human socio - economic system as currently structures is unmanageable, has overshoot its limits, and is headed for collapse, and, therefore, seek to change the structure of the system"(Meadows, 2005, p. 236).

Ghosh (2016) opines through the text of Laudato Si' "the role of professionals, opinion makers, communication media and centres of power[who] being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with the problem" (p. 208). Ghosh underscores that there is hope in the battle towards climate change by identifying the reliance on the 'emergence of alternative solutions'(p 213) by activism across the globe, and it is a welcoming gesture that the religions of the world join their hands together to address the climate crisis.

## CONCLUSION

It is inferred from the reading of *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* that the collective responsibility of the individual and society is pivotal in facing the crisis of climate change. The hope dawns when religious establishments join hands with secular activist movements that advocate dissent in the carbon economy. It is high time to renew our relationship with the planet by reducing emissions and creating narratives that unleash awareness about the climate crisis. It is concluded that we should redefine our perception of the planet Earth for our survival and, at least, for future generations. Further, it is a call to carry out the politics of ecological sustainability, which is promising for global citizens and to reframe our global political framework.

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