

3

Handcuffed to Nature: An Ecocritical Approach to Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*

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Abstract

Nature has become a constant source of stimulation for the authors for generations. Numerous literary creations have been associated with the faultless natural ambience of the universe. But unlike environmentalists, the writers of literary texts have little or no scope to raise a protest against the degradation of the environment. Very few writers have been preoccupied with the thought of environment in their texts and that is the main cause of the existence of an insufficient number of literary texts having environmental issues. In the late 1980s in the United States and later on in the 1990s in the United Kingdom, an emergent movement has started to study the intrinsic relationship between literary texts and the environment. This study is defined as 'eco-criticism' or 'green studies'. Ecocriticism analyzes the role that the natural environment plays in the imagination of a cultural community at a specific moment. In this paper, I would like to focus on the ambience of the debate that propagated the acclaimed novelist Amitav Ghosh to write a new non-fictional work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* in 2016. This is a marvelous volume from Ghosh that evenly assesses and demonstrates the confines of human consideration when it comes to the apprehension of environmental disasters. This is a grave issue that reflects our 'deranged' manners of socio-economic as well as political matters through several themes like history, politics, and literature. Amitav Ghosh tries to answer the relevant questions: why is serious fiction reluctant to deal with climate change and environmental issues? If it does, then why is it immediately classified as science-fiction or

relegated to subgenre literature? Answering some of the assumptions implied in Ghosh's discourse, it is possible to situate his text and the relevance of climate change within our literary and philosophical discourse and to re-think our cultural and environmental policies and instructive engagement.

Keywords: Environmental Humanities, Eco-criticism, Eco-materialism, Fossil-fuel, Climate change, Biodiversity, Environmental Advocacy, Postcolonial, Anthropocene.

The term eco-criticism is derived from two Greek words, Oikos and Kritis. The meaning of "Oikos" is "household", a tie of three-nature, human, and spirit. And the other word, "Kritis" means to judge, "the arbiter of taste who wants the house kept in good order" (Howarth: 163). Basically, it is the interdisciplinary reading of a literary text relating to ecology and the environment. It is the scientific analysis of the environmental issues and to find out a possible way out for the development of the environmental ambiance. The term eco-criticism was first used by William Ruckerts. In the 1990s, two seminal books entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm and *The Environmental Imagination* (1995) by Lawrence Buell published and practically heralded the terminology 'Eco-criticism'. In America, Cheryll Glotfelty is the acknowledged proponent of Ecocritics. Ecocriticism has initiated the interest for the last three decades as it is coupled with the interrelations between human beings and the natural environment. But the last part of the twentieth century has aroused a new universal hazard that is green disparity and ruin. Ecocriticism is the result of this new idea and awareness that in the recent future there will be scarcely anything attractive in the natural world to converse about unless we are cautious, careful from right now about our mother earth.

Of late, earth is approaching a catastrophe as the spectre of the climate crisis is hanging over our head relegating all of us to a mode of emergency where the utmost criteria is to save ourselves anyhow from this ordeal. The flora and fauna on the earth are finding a massive setback as climate change has been approaching towards its acme which is irredeemable. Earth is slowly dying down as several species are going to be extinct, the temperature of both the air and the water is soaring day by day, plastic pollution has choked the throat of the environment and slowly and silently we are approaching in the

direction of another world war and that will be fought among us due to the dearth of water and other natural resources. Different species of the next generation will face an imminent crisis of survival. To gain profits, greed-mongering and politically motivated powerful business tycoons are bringing crisis by destroying the climate and this environmental slaughter has never been properly assessed.

Till now, the authors, novelists are not vocal about global warming and its impact on life on this planet probably because the authorial imagination doesn't capture the storms, thunders, cyclones, tornadoes, floods as because they don't make a plausible ground for the emotional endeavour. The stories of these natural calamities do not come into the periphery of serious literary fiction and are relegated to the other literary genres as fantasy writing and science fiction, rather the limitations of the 'literary novel' are to highlight 'individual moral adventure' thereby dissociating the mental state from the susceptibility of its physical state, as it hardly allows the climate to aggressively encroach upon the customary routine and normal concern of a human being it prefers to portray. Here the author contends that the contemporary novel by utilizing the narrow parameter of time and space which could rarely surpass more than a human's lifespan. But Amitav Ghosh is a distinguished writer and a climate change activist. He has got a different outlook and is seriously concerned about the imminent danger and his non-fiction *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) is proof of that. This entire work is concerned with climate change, the shocking effect of the changing weather patterns of the world and with a cutting insight, he analyses the limitations of history, politics, and literature to grab the magnitude of this climate change. This non-fiction *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) began as a collection of lectures in the name of the Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin Family Lectures and was delivered at the University of Chicago in 4 parts, starting from 29th September to 7th October 2015. Basically, the topic of degradation and destruction of the environment and the position of Asia in world history have woven the context of Ghosh's fiction. It concentrates on the nexus between economic imbalance and annihilation of the ecology and environment.

The objective of this paper is to make a detailed study of the ecocritical aspect of *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The analysis will focus on how Amitav Ghosh's eco-narrative portrays the description of "greening postcolonialism" as propounded by Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin in *Postcolonial Eco-Criticism*. This nonfiction highlights within the sphere of postcolonial eco-criticism and provided a different method of eco-narrative in contrast to eco-activism, eco-tourism, etc. Moreover, Material Eco-criticism focuses on the material phenomena which are tied to a great chain of profit-gaining business agencies and can be read and understood as forming a story or a narrative. "Developing in bodily forms and in discursive formulations the stories of the matter is a material mesh of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and non-human players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" (Iovino, 1-2).

Amitav Ghosh's non-fictional enterprise is certainly an example of post-colonial eco-criticism that concentrates on the preservation of the bio-diversity and the hypocritical hollow rhetoric of eco-business. It also "highlights how postcolonial literature is rich in discursive formulations and the stories of narrative matter replete with their material mesh of meanings that can serve as signifying forces" (Vincent 2). Amitav Ghosh reasserts a new space of postcolonial identity through eco-narrative. This nonfictional prose enables us to identify and articulate resistance against colonialist and materialistic power. Ghosh ponders over the fact that the present generation is deranged. Here the author has probed the incapability of the current generation to understand the extent and aggression of the climatic degradation and postulates that it should be mirrored in the current literary texts, politics, and history. Amitav Ghosh posits his ecocritical fiction on the face of natural peril and peculiarity of the weather and shows that fiction is the best medium to deal with the pressing task of our time troubling the issue of climate change out of its scientific arena of meteorological studies to much broader areas of human culture and studies. Amitav Ghosh delves deep into the snarled nexus of the carbon economy and unfolds the reason behind the climatic change as an over-dependence on fossil fuels. It's a kind of derangement for us to say we desire a new different world but hardly try to change the deeds to make it realised perfectly. As per

Ghosh, the 'derangement' alluded to in the title means an advancement towards climatic disaster without any attempt to mitigate it and we just can't imagine what the unprecedented future holds, some portion of the essay is devoted to the imagination with a connection of rationalistic approach of the twentieth century novel with a scientific temperament.

The first part is a long chapter entitled "Stories" where he indicates the literary community for their collective failure to claim the issue of climate change as the 'principal preoccupation' of serious novels. He assumes that global warming will affect in such a massive way that the sea level will rise and it will devour the Sundarbans and the low-lying cities like Kolkata, Bangkok. Today's unthinkable connoisseur of art and literature will have to face an entirely transformed world for the legacy of the inheritors. And failing to search those, he thought what could be their expressions; rather they would conclude that ours was a time when most of the art and literary forms were tied to the means of suppression and cover-ups that barred all of us from identifying the reality of the actual predicament. These folks, as per Ghosh's vision of the 'readers and museum-goers' looking for and to understand how the authors of today deliberately hide away from the realities that certainly led to their descendants' terrifyingly bleak and dreary planet. With this viewpoint, Amitav Ghosh investigates the 'customary frames that literature has applied to "Nature"' (32) and ended up with utmost sorrow, that events like the transformation of climate change are too powerful, uncanny, serious, and dangerous to vie with the refined and sophisticated fictional language. Moreover, the essential terminologies are uncouth to listen to. Vocabulary like 'petroleum', 'fossil fuels', 'bitumen', 'naphtha' and 'tar', evoke a kind of nauseating feeling. Ghosh's ultimate winding up is that a new fusion of literary style will materialize and that may change the very act of reading. Here his revelation is that like 'the vast majority of human beings,' (54) his life is steered not only by cause and motive but by 'the inertia of habitual motion (54).' Despite this, "Stories" is a captivating literary contemplation about the environment and the canons of literary and science fiction including western classics as well as less known works of art from around the world.

This first part of this nonfiction engages on the motif of the climate crisis with the following views on non-human interlocutors like rising seas, storms, etc. Then these non-human aspects influence the thought process of the human beings which grows a massive interest to re-centre these non-human aspects. Then the uncanny intimacy of the humans with the non-humans is discussed, and then comes the instability of human existence. Then the author analyses the perplexity of the predator, the realisation of the European Enlightenment along with the middle-class expectations and revisions of thought process. Amitav Ghosh's contention is to analyse the conversion of the attitude towards nature and it is exemplified by the fact that human beings have started believing that planets and asteroids were inert merely three centuries ago. We are forced to awake "to the recognition of a presence" (6). It had moulded our lives. He writes that "the energy that surrounds us, flowing under our feet and through wires in our walls, animating our vehicles and illuminating our rooms, is an all-encompassing presence that may have its purposes about which we know nothing" (6-7). Awareness was forced upon us to be near to the non-human presences with the portents of alteration especially in the landscape "in the receding shoreline and a steady intrusion of saltwater on lands that had previously been cultivated" (7) or in the escalating level of toxic carbon in the air and atmosphere was "rewriting the destiny of the earth" (8) in this 21st century. Amitav Ghosh asserts that the landscape is "demonstrably alive" (7) as the protagonist in a "stage for enactment of human history." (8)

Part two of the book exemplifies the historicised psyche captured in a world that keeps on historicising itself, in this circumstance the past is persistently being outdated and human beings depend on the flawed technology to make out the sense of things. The historicised psyche naturally confesses the importance and priority to history and designates the superiority of historical division and knowledge. This has been exemplified by the terms which Ghosh uses like 'arc', 'trajectory', 'pattern' and 'process'. One has to remember how we came into existence and where we exactly are. In this part of the book, he tries to identify capitalism as a principal driver of climate change. Ghosh widens and intensifies the argument by staying away from the usual Eurocentricism with a

warning: 'the continent of Asia is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming: its causes, its philosophical and historical implications, and the possibility of a global response to it (87).' It directs us to a remarkably callous and inconsiderate situation including saline water having devoured up more than a million acres of fertile agricultural ground in Pakistan because of the massive exploitation of the Indus resulting in its obstruction and free-flowing to the sea. India is on the brink of disaster where the country's most fertile land of nearly six thousand square kilometers may be inundated due to the rise of the sea-water level resulting in the forced migration of about 50 million people and the same may cause havoc in Bangladesh as well resulting in the evacuation and resettlement of approximately 75 million people. Apart from these perils, another concern of desertification of the arable lands in India and China has been cited by the author. China has incurred an annual loss of \$65 billion due to the desertification of the fertile land (89). Moreover, the author emphasizes the acute and accelerating water crisis in the Asian continent as 47% of the world's total population resides here. Amitav Ghosh shows the essential disparity between the drying up of Ogallala Aquifer in the US and those that exist in north China and shows that only 2 million people depend on the Ogallala in the US, whereas the dependency of people in China is almost about 214 million. He not only mentioned the Water Diversion scheme from North to South but was designed to change the dependency on groundwater in the North and to lessen its dryness and barrenness. He referred to these statistics only to emphasize the comparative impact of the two dams as per dependency of the population.

These are a few instances of the crisis of global warming. Ghosh emphasizes by saying that only in the beginning of 1980s, Asia's swelling process of industrialisation 'brought the climate crisis to a head (91) [as] the only continent where the magnitudes of the population are such that they can move the planet (92).' The callous reality of Asia makes it plain and simple that:

"every family in the world cannot have two cars, a washing machine, and a refrigerator ... because humanity would asphyxiate in the process. Asia has also laid bare, through its silence, the silences that are now ever more evident at the heart of global systems of governance. (92)

In 1928, Gandhi also had anticipation of this and warned that if we had the three hundred million industrialised as the west has, then “it would strip the world bare like locusts (111)” again U Thant, the Burmese statesman, grieved over the fact that ‘smog across our poisoned waters’ since we ‘ran out of foresight and air and food and water and ideas [and] went on playing politics’ until the world collapsed (113). Ghosh is distressed and bewildered about the cultural world’s lassitude or incapability to bring in the limelight, the concern of the transformation of the climate, but he is fully aware of whom to lay blame for its happening. Every person who is ever born on this earth has a contribution to climate change which according to him is “the terminus of history”. The reasons for this climate change like hurricanes, floods, desertifications are ‘the distillations of all of human history: they express the entirety of our being over time (115).’ The author caught in between this historicised perception, employs the term ‘Anthropocene’ which means the ‘age of man’ as an idiomatic use to designate the annihilation of terrestrial and climatic disorders. This coinage signifies a new geo-historical epoch and by using it Ghosh assigns to an account of augmentation of human expropriation of this earth. Anthropocene is the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment. It is the latest historicisation that formulates the existence of humans as a thing of the past. “Anthropocene presents a challenge, not only to the arts and the humanities, but also to our common sense understanding and beyond that to contemporary culture in general” (135).

In the last part, numbered III, “Politics”, Amitav Ghosh again mulled over the shocking reality of apathy by the creative community to introspect on the imminent danger of earth and atmosphere, we are already put in. Only a handful of writers like Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing, Barbara Kingsolver, Mc Carthy, Boyle have evoked something about the world environment. Amitav Ghosh sensed this apocalyptic doom and includes himself among this category of writers. With a morose heart, he observes that the issues relating to religion, gender, caste have been taken up for discussion with priority but the issue of environmental disaster has been relegated to the rear as a political issue in South Asia. He questions whether the reason is for individual concern rather than the collective moral

adventure. Ghosh uses the word 'trapped' (135) in an individualizing imaginary as we are the dwellers of the Great Derangement. Here, the prevailing importance of numerous politicians is given to connect strategies to control or to wage a war against climate change as an assault on 'our way of life' (137). The crazy happening continues with endless consumption of oil as fuel making the debate more political than realistic. Present-day politics has almost no command to duly address 'the commonweal and to preoccupy in joint action for the sake of humanity's survival. According to him, 'extreme weather events (floods, droughts, heave waves) will increasingly disrupt food and energy markets, exacerbating state weakness, forcing human migrations, and triggering riots, civil disobedience, and vandalism' (140).

Ghosh cites that only America's military front which is the single biggest consumer of fossil fuels is now vigorously seeking and searching for an alternative energy route. Perhaps, Ghosh tries to point out if the army front has considered all aspects of the transformation of climate activism and appropriated its strategy to form a policy of action by using vigorous campaigning to bring about ideological change regarding climate, then why not we? Moreover, in this calamitous condition, "Ghosh finds a ray of hope and, astonishingly, it is Pope Francis' letter, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, which he contrasts favourably with the Paris Agreement on climate change. Both are published in 2015 and are grounded in an acceptance of the science of climate change" (Abbott 371).

Climate change is wearing away conceptions of indisputable human authority over the earth and propelling us to mete out the possibility of universally achieving the belongings of materialistic middle-class life. 'This conception of human flourishing into which we have been beguiled is consuming itself' (Leskanich). In this part, Ghosh condemns the narrow opinion of political concern and Ghosh doesn't merely advocate a technocratic 'fix'. In searching for a vague hope in the 'sacred', he thinks that the 'religious world views' might inspire mass movements and will subsequently rise above any individual and nation-state. One may understand that Amitav Ghosh is entreating a hidden God, *Deus absconditus* to scoop us out of the prison.

In all his writings, Amitav Ghosh explores the challenge that civilisation is confronting in the age of Anthropocene, a new geological era that dawns on humanity a new role to play for reshaping and reorganizing the globe and preserving it for the generations to come. According to him, human beings as ecological agents change the most basic physical processes of the Earth and at the same time, Anthropocene presents a challenge to our commonsense and understandings. Still, we find it hard to deal with climate change. Amitav Ghosh argues that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of the culture and that of the imagination”. He desires that the authors of the present generation should discover fresh types of literature and art that divulge the dilemma at hand. Ghosh while presenting his understanding and experience says, “..... these are, of course, nothing other than instances of exception.....it is through this mechanism that worlds are conjured up, through everyday details, which function ‘as the opposite of narrative’” (183) and again he is reminded of the fact that “we are confronted suddenly with a new task: that of finding other ways in which to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era” (197). Ghosh’s literary output is related to the schemes of environmental and social advocacy and serves as “a catalyst for social action and exploratory literary analysis into a full-fledged form of engaged cultural critique” (Huggan and Tiffin 12). *The Great Derangement* tells us about our relationship with the earth which cannot be entirely and truly described within the traditional western scientific paradigm. We, as the readers meet an array of voices that articulate the troubles and tribulations that the globe is confronting today and determine an abundance of topics that vociferates the urgent need to emphasize and implement a “green” paradigm free of racial and social prejudices and injustice. This attempt to mingle up environmental advocacy and aesthetics of imaginary fiction is one of the attributes of the postcolonial eco-criticism that looks for an endorsement of environmental and societal integrity and justice in the postcolonial world today. This non-fiction is an anxious and upsetting reminder that without a pressing, sustained, and universal change in human attitude and behaviour, we, the ill-fated species on the earth will be doomed and will be the survivors with immeasurable horror and dismay. Amitav Ghosh envisions the “postcolonial Green” that

campaigns for the transformation from 'red' to 'green' politics and the need to play the role of responsible inhabitants with a belief in global justice and sustainability on our planet.

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