# Representation Of Human Induced Climate Change In Literature And Literary Studies: Reading Amitav Ghosh's The Great Derangement



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**Abstract**

In the last few years, human induced climate change has emerged as a significant theme in literature and also literary studies. It has gained popularity in the recent years in fiction and non-fiction giving rise to a new genre of literature called 'cli-fi', or climate change fiction. The genre of cli-fi gained momentum in the mid of 2000s when the critics started questioning as to why authors and artists in general are not actively speaking on human induced climate change. Thus, slowly many plays, short stories, poems and children's stories based on the themes of human induced climate change were actually composed with the hope that it might lead to a wider climate consciousness and thereby contribute to more progressive environmental policies and politics. This paper aims at reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) as a text that is more of a warning of an impending apocalypse, that it's time to understand the ramifications of large scale destruction of Nature and Ecosystem. It will also deal with an analysis of the text and how it successfully draws our attention towards urgent issues by reflecting on our culture, politics, society and the economic structures.

**Keywords:** Climate change fiction, cli-fi, Eco-criticism, Global warming, Culture.

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## 1. Introduction

*This readiness to assume the guilt for the threats to our environment is deceptively reassuring: We like to be guilty since, if we are guilty, it all depends on us. We pull the strings of the catastrophe, so we can also save ourselves simply by changing our lives. What is really hard for us (at least in the West) to accept is that we are reduced to the role of a passive observer who sits and watches what our fate will be. To avoid this impotence, we engage in frantic, obsessive activities. We recycle old paper, we buy organic food, we install long-lasting light bulbs—whatever—just so we can be sure that we are doing something.*

***-Slavoj Zizek***

Climate change activist Greta Thunberg, 16, in a speech delivered at the United Nation's Climate Action Summit in New York City, September 2019, expresses her deep fear and anger regarding the effects of human induced climate change on the world. She says:

My message is that we'll be watching you… You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tale of eternal economic growth. How dare you … You are generations are upon you. And if you fail us, I say: we will never forgive you. failing us. But the Young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future with these words she has provoked an entire new debate on how the anthropocene presents a challenge that is too difficult to handle without sacrificing carbon economy or the 'eternal economic growth.' In this era of human induced climate change where human beings have become geological agents in causing much destruction and derangement of

nature, literature and literary studies definitely have much to contribute. Unfortunately though writers and activists are vociferously predicting the future which is very uncanny yet their numbers are still limited to a very few.

In the last few years, the effect of human induced climate change has emerged as a major theme in literature and literary studies. Its popularity in fiction has given rise to a distinct genre called 'cli-fi', or *climate change fiction*. The term 'cli-fi' was coined by a journalist Dan Bloom. He said, "One very important thing we can do about climate change is to encourage more and more novelists to write cli-fi novels and cli-fi movie scripts… to nurture these authors and … this rising new literary genre." The term came into existence on April 20, 2013, National Public Radio on a Weekend Edition used the term to describe novels and movies that deal with human-induced climate change, and historically there have been many literary works that dealt with human induced climate change.

Authors in the past have been vocal and imaginative in expressing their concern over repercussions of climate change and human activities leading to carbon footprint like Jules Verne's novel *The Purchase of the North Pole* talks of climate change due to tilting of Earth's axis as early as 1889. In another work, *Paris in the Twentieth Century* (1883), he takes us into future. Set in Paris during 1960s, the author imaginatively portrays a condition in which the city experiences a sudden change in the temperature and it lasts for three years. Similarly, there are many authors who have expressed their fear and predicted a dismal future due to human induced climate change. British writer J.G. Ballard has also spoken of effects of human induced climate change related natural disasters in his works. Novels like *The Wind from Nowhere* (1961), *The Drowned World* (1962), *The Burning World* (1964) describe the effects on world due to human induced climate change in highly imaginative way. Another writer Susan M. Gaines's *Carbon Dreams* (2000) narrates a story of serious consequences of human induced climate change leading to a changed world. Margaret Atwood's *Madd Addam Trilogy* presents a future where climate change has resulted in catastrophic consequences. In most of the cases the work of these authors is labeled as sci-fi and set aside. But what is important at this point of time is to see and understand that what was believed to be science fiction and highly imaginative world prediction is a reality today. How human activities have damaged the planet, heated the atmosphere leading to melting of polar ice caps which are now irreversible, acidified the oceans and thus, we are fast moving towards mass extinction.

The authors have already warned of these impending disasters.

The genre of cli-fi gained momentum in the mid of 2000s when the cultural critics started asking why authors and artists in general were not actively speaking on human induced climate change (Mckibben). A decade later, number of writers, authors and artists started expressing their views on climate change openly. This was because the harmful effects of climate change were seen around the world. Thus, the plays, short stories, poems and children's stories based on the themes of climate change were actually composed with hope that it might lead to a wider and deeper climate consciousness and thereby contribute to more progressive environmental policies and politics (Mayerson, 2018). This paper aims at reading Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) as a text that is more of a warning, that it's time to understand the ramifications of large scale destruction of Nature and Ecosystem. It also deals with an analysis of the text and establishes how Amitav Ghosh has successfully drawn our attention towards urgent issues in human induced climate change by reflecting on our culture, politics, society and the economic structures.

## 2. Analysis of the text

Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate and the Unthinkable* (2016) belongs to the genre of climate change literature that aims at bringing about awareness regarding the catastrophic effects of human induced climate change. As a prose piece it has raised some extremely serious and thought-provoking questions like: Why many literary writers are not focused on including climate change in their fiction? Why more of non-fiction is written on climate change whereas serious fiction lacks mention of human induced climate change or introduced obliquely? How can literature contribute in raising awareness regarding effects of human induced climate change? How capitalism and imperialism have aggravated the situation specifically for the Asian countries? How material culture is

responsible in increasing the effects of global warming and carbon footprints and what about our future on this planet?

*The Great Derangement* is an interesting non-fiction text that deals with the causes and effects of climate change, global warming and also what lies in future for us. The book is divided into three sections namely: Stories, History and Politics. In the first section, Amitav Ghosh has focused on the role of literature in bringing about awareness regarding human induced climate change and its disastrous effects on human and non-human. He begins by lamenting the present condition where very few writers have come on the forefront to speak of global warming, carbon footprints and collapse of ecosystem in their fictional works. Most of the writers prefer to introduce themes of human induced climate change in non-fiction writings including writer and activist Arundhati Roy (Ghosh, 2016; 11). Ghosh emphasizes on the duty of writers and activists to expose the happenings around the world and the impending doom due to human induced climate change. Further, he elucidates the significance of literature as:

In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sunderbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York and Bangkok uninhabitable, when readers and museum goers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first, and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they—what can they—do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to known as the time of the Great Derangement (Ghosh, 2016; 15).

Thus, it is important for an author to remind readers of the severity and seriousness of climate change by allowing them to imagine environmental futures and consider the impact of climate change on both human and non-human life. Writers should focus on developing heightened consciousness level among readers and reveal the hidden impact of human induced climate change. A noted eco-critic, Antonio Mehnert, writes on how literature can contribute in creating awareness regarding human induced climate change as:

It gives insight into the ethical and social ramifications of this unparalleled environmental crisis, reflects on current political conditions that impede action on climate change, explores how risk materializes and affects society, and finally and active part in shaping our conception of climate change (2016; 4).



In a similar tone climatologist Judith Curry has also mentioned the role of literature in enhancing awareness regarding human induced climate change and its detrimental effects on nature and ecosystem. She says that, "while scientists and other people are trying to get their message across about various aspects of climate change issue… fiction is an untapped way of doing this—a way of smuggling some serious topics into the consciousness of readers." (Evancie). Thus, literature can be used as a powerful tool in creating awareness and consciousness regarding harmful effects of human induced climate change.

Amitav Ghosh finds Nature to be mysterious and 'uncanny'. He says fictional depiction of nature by noted authors as:

'Commonplace?' 'Moderate'? How did Nature ever come to be associated with words like these? The incredulity that these associations evoke today is a sign of the degree to which global warming has already disrupted many assumptions that were founded on the relative climatic stability of the era that nourished human civilization: the Holocene. From the revised perspective of our time, the complacency and confidence of the emergent bourgeois orders appears as yet another of those uncanny instances in which the planet seems to have been toying with humanity by allowing it to assume that it was free to shape its own destiny (28-9).

Ghosh cites many examples in text to prove that Nature is 'uncanny' and highly unpredictable like the Hurricane Sandy that struck New York in 2012. Similarly, when a hurricane *Catrina* struck the coast of Brazil in 2004, people refused to find safe places because they never expected hurricane in Brazil. He gives his personal experience of a tornado hitting Delhi in March 1978. All these instances prove unpredictability of nature.

In the second section of the book entitled: History, Amitav Ghosh goes on to unearth the historical accounts leading to the present climate crisis. He asserts that the 'dominant model of capitalism' is more of less responsible for climate change (2016; 117). Further, he points out that not only climate change "global warming is that of equal importance: empire and imperialism. While capitalism and empire are certainly dual aspects of a single reality, the relationship between them is not, and has never been, a simple one: in relation to global warming…" (117) He says, "Asia is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming: its causes, its philosophical and historical implications, and to the possibility of a global response to it." (118)

Amitav Ghosh presents an in-depth study of how technological importation in India and other Asian countries have resulted in the advent of 'carbon economy.' He says the carbon economy developed not only because of the machines that were produced during Industrial Revolution, but the reason is somewhat deeper to understand:

What determined the shape of the global carbon economy was that the major European powers had already established a strong (but by no means hegemonic) military and political presence in much of Asia and Africa at the time when the technology of steam was in its nascency, that is to say, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From that point on carbon-intensive technologies were to have the effect of continually reinforcing Western power with the result that other variants of modernity came to be suppressed, incorporated and appropriated into what is now a single, dominant model (145-46).

What he tries to point is that the process of imperialism actually delayed the onset of climate crisis in the colonized countries. 'The Great Acceleration' of the economies of Asian and African countries actually began during the period of decolonization. Thus, in a way the process of colonization delayed the onset of climate crisis.
Imperialism was not the only factor that delayed industrialization. The indigenous resistance to rapid industrialization was also seen in almost all countries. He mentions Mahatma Gandhi's vociferous opposition as, "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. If an entire nation of 300 millions [sic] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.' (150). By renouncing on behalf of India the kind of affluence and power that industrial civilization promises, he was setting an example as he clearly understood the impact of industrial civilization. In a similar fashion within the Taoist, Confucian and Buddhist traditions too, there was resistance as they too understood the implications of large-scale modernization. However, these voices only delayed the process of large-scale industrialization but could not stop it.

The Cornucopian position is equally important to take cognizance of at this point. While on one hand, scientists and environmentalists warn of the environmental threats posed by the modern civilization on the other hand there is a counter argument that these dangers are illusory or exaggerated. Free market economists and demographers are generally the ones who express deep confidence on the dynamism of capitalist economies which will generate solution to these environmental problems as they arise (Garrard, 2012; 19). The key argument put forward by the cornucopian is that human welfare is the most important thing which is measured by statistics like life expectancy or local pollution, has demonstrably increased along with population, economic growth and technological progress (Garrad, 2012; 19).

In the third section: **Politics,** Amitav Ghosh writes on the role of writers and artists can play by speaking about the future 'Derangement.' He says:
That artists and writers are able to look ahead, not just in aesthetic matters, but also in regard to public affairs. Writers themselves have embraced this role with increasing fervor through the twentieth century, and never more so than in the period in which carbon emissions were accelerating. (2016; 162)

Constantly writers and artists have had political engagement. For instance, during the First World War writers spoke on industrial and military activities extensively, "the First World War would represent one such escalation, the rise in industrial and military activity being mirrored by an enormous outpouring of literature, much of it

explicitly political" (2016; 163). Not only this later on during the interwar time too writers were "increasingly visible involvement of writers with political movements such as socialism, communism, antifascism, nationalism and anti-imperialism: Lorca, Brecht, Orwell, Lu Xun and Tagore being cases to point" (2016; 163).

He further adds that it is really surprising that very few literary novelists are engaged in narrating stories of 'changes in environment':

It is when I try to think of writers whose imaginative work communicated a more specific sense of the accelerating changes in our environment that I find myself at loss; of literary novelists writing in English only a handful of names come to mind: J.G Ballard, Doris Lessing, Cormac McCarthy, Ian McEwan and T. Coraghessan Boyle. No doubt many other names could be added to this list, but even if it were to be expanded a hundredfold or more, it would remain true, I think, that the literary mainstream, even as it was becoming more engage on many fronts, remained just unaware of the crisis on our doorstep as the population at large. (167)

Ghosh points out categorically why climate change is not a critical issue in Asian countries:

What is true of India also of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal: climate change has not been significant political issue in any of these countries, even though the impacts are already being felt across the Indian subcontinent, not only in the increasing number of large-scale disasters but also in the form of a slow calamity that is quietly but inexorably destroying livelihoods and stoking social and political conflicts (2016; 169).

Amitav Ghosh declares that many activists and 'concerned people' have started declaring climate change a 'moral issue' (177) and this has certainly invoked a 'politics of sincerity' (178). The question that is now raised in this context is how far activists have gone to sacrifice their personal needs for climate change.

I saw a particularly telling example of this in a TV interview with a prominent activist after the New York climate change march of September 2014. The interviewer's posture was like that of a priest interrogating a wayward parishioner; her questions were along the lines of 'What have *you* given up for climate change? What are your sacrifices? The activists in question was quickly reduced to indignant incoherence. So paralyzing is the effect of the fusion of the political and the moral…the scale of climate change is such that individual choices will make little difference unless certain collective decisions are taken and acted upon (2016; 178-9).



Climate change issue is indeed a serious issue to deal with and morality alone cannot solve the problem. This is because the greatest challenge today is that we are so deeply engaged in our daily activities that it is almost impossible to notice the subtle ways in which each one of us is contributing towards degradation of environment. Amitav Ghosh points out this in a very subtle way in the text:

Climate change is often described as a 'wicked problem.' One of its wickedest aspects is that it may require us to abandon some of our most treasured ideas about political virtue: for example, 'be the change you want to see.' What we need instead is to find a way out of the individualizing imaginary in which we are trapped (181).

Again and again Ghosh focuses on the duty of artists and writers to create awareness and their silence at this point of time will make them accountable to the future generations:

When future generations look back upon the Great Derangement they will certainly blame the leaders and politicians of this time for their failure to address the climate crisis. But they may well hold artists and writers equally culpable—for the imagining possibilities is not, after all, the job of politicians and bureaucrats (181).

Ghosh goes on further to include the relation of climate change with world politics and how it is going to affect the world:

… climate change is not a danger in itself; it is envisaged rather as a 'threat multiplier' that will deepen already existing divisions and lead to the intensification of a range of conflicts. How will the security establishments of the West respond to these threat perceptions? In all likelihood they will resort to the strategy that Christian Parenti calls the 'politics of the armed lifeboat', a posture that combines 'preparations for open-ended counter-insurgency, militarized borders, [and] aggressive anti-immigrant policing.' The tasks of nation state under these circumstances will be those of keeping 'blood-dimmed tides' of climate refugees at bay and protecting their own resources: 'In this world view, humanity has not

only declared war against itself, but is also locked into mortal combat with the earth.' (192)

What Ghosh has predicted for future is a very serious situation. If it is still not taken seriously and acted upon, then the 'derangement' is inevitable. The current situation, Covid-19 pandemic and how the world has responded to it is certainly a glimpse of what is about to happen in the future. A new virus has created an unprecedented situation and it is worth reflecting: Are we really prepared for such catastrophes in future? The most unfortunate aspect of this whole situation is that the developing and underdeveloped countries have received hardest blow and have suffered both economically and socially.
Amitav Ghosh has concludes the essay with a hope and vision for future.

The struggle for action will no doubt be difficult and hard fought, and no matter what it achieves, it is already too late to avoid some serious disruptions of the global climate. But I would like to believe that out of this struggle will be born a new generation that will be able to look upon the world with clearer eyes than those that preceded it; that they will be able to transcend the isolation in which humanity was entrapped in the time of its derangement; that they will rediscover their kinship with other beings, and that this vision, at once new and ancient will find expression in a transformed and renewed art and literature. (2016; 217)

## 3. Conclusion

In the twenty first century climate change literature holds a promising future. It can certainly bring about a greater engagement of readers with climate change related issues. Literary theories dealing with environment such as eco-criticism is helping to shape a canon of climate change literature that aims at bringing about awareness. The rise of pandemic Covid-19 is one such event that has changed the world drastically. The world is no longer as it was in the beginning of 2020. More than suffering and deaths globally, it has been instrumental in making us understand that we have a duty and responsibility. Amitav Ghosh's text is like a prophecy for the upcoming difficult times. It is a wakeup call and time to take some hard decisions by the political leaders around the world if we want to leave something for our coming generations.

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