

## **Climate Crisis and the Anthropocene: Assessing the Nature-Culture Debate in Amitav Ghosh's 'The Great Derangement'**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper primarily deals with the subject of climate change and attempts to analyse why despite so much of hue and cry over the past few decades pertaining to the detrimental effects it has unleashed in the form of unpredictable weather patterns, global warming, recurrent floods, earthquakes, tsunamis and cyclones, it has failed to attract the fancy of present day literary scholars and intellectuals and hence remains only on the periphery of the concurrent discussions of literature, culture and history. Drawing significant references from Amitav Ghosh's book of nonfiction **The Great Derangement** this paper explores how climate crisis forms an integral part of the South Asian experience as this region is not only in the midst of an ongoing transition in terms of mass industrialization and infrastructural development but also because of the potentially huge number of people who live in these countries and are directly under threat from the changes that are now under way across the planet. This paper also tries to highlight how it's high time that we need to come out of the historical precedents of Eurocentrism and Colonialism and realise that we as human beings too have played a pivotal role in worsening the situation and how collective prudence and planetary collaboration is the only way by which we can try to reduce, if not completely forestall the catastrophic exigencies that await us in the form of an incipient doom.*

**Keywords-** climate crisis, lack of imagination, improbability, Anthropocene, South Asia, uncanny, interconnectedness, cultural crisis, systematic derangement, sustainable development, collective responsibility.

“We do not inherit the planet from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.” –An American Proverb

The above lines very succinctly captures the seriousness of present day climate crisis- a phenomena that owes its genesis to mankind’s unprecedented historical mismanagement of nature and his inefficiency to grasp the severity and violence that may result out of such insensitive tampering .The most ironical aspect about this ecological disruption is that while all of us do concede that it’s an urgent issue that needs to be dealt with profound attention, most of us fail to comprehend the potential threat that looms large on our very existence, on account of historical frameworks that stand completely ineffectual in depicting a history of climate rupture. While the subject of climate crisis finds ample representation in the genre of science and fantasy fiction, esteemed newspaper columns and plenary lectures, national and international conferences and summits, in reality it remains only on the periphery – an abstract and elusive idea that evades any kind of authentic engagement especially in the realm of literary fiction. What makes the subject of environmental crisis so important in the context of South Asian Studies is its highly close connection with the daily lives of the people who inhabit these countries and have been the worst victims of several climatic disasters in the form of deadly hurricanes, tornadoes, cyclonic storms, earthquakes, landslides and so on in the past few decades. In his profoundly powerful and original piece of non-fiction ‘*The Great Derangement*’ Amitav Ghosh draws a significant parallel as to why he thinks climate crisis forms a very integral part of the South Asian experience.

“The lack of a transitive connection between political mobilization, on the one hand, and global warming, on the other, is nowhere more evident than in the countries of South Asia, all of which are extraordinarily **vulnerable to climate change**. In the last few decades, India has become highly politicized; great numbers take to the streets to express indignation and outrage over a wide range of issues; on television channels and social media people speak their minds ever more stridently. Yet climate change has not resulted in an outpouring of passion in the country, this despite the fact that India has innumerable environmental organisations and grass root movements. The voices of the country’s many eminent climate scientists, environmental activists and reporters do not appear to have made much of a mark either. What is true of India is true also of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal;

climate change has not been a 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 slow calamity that is quietly but inexorably destroying livelihoods and stoking social and political conflicts.”(Ghosh pg. 124, Penguin)

Ghosh concedes how South Asia’s centrality to the climate crisis dates back to the colonial policies of the English masters who initiated this whole chain of ecological damage out of their ubiquitous exploitation of indigenous resources to fulfil their motives of industrialising Britain at any expense. The after effects of such a continued historical practice of taking nature ‘for granted’ has started to show its ugly face in the form of global warming, heat waves, drought and forest fires, unpredictable cyclones, catastrophic floods and extreme weather patterns in different parts of the subcontinent-resulting in huge loss of life and property. But what is peculiar according to Ghosh is the inability and delinquent nature of mankind to anticipate the dreadful and cataclysmic impact of his actions in the face of an incipient doom that awaits us all. The systematic lunacy and ignorance inherent in our present world arrangements pertaining to the issue of climate change, manifests the limits of human thought beyond its visible parameters of judgement. This incumbent inadequacy of our present culture at the level of literature, history and politics to anticipate the scope of ecological calamities, Ghosh observes in his book, reduces its impact and renders climatic events as improbable thus **‘robbing them of precisely the quality that makes them so urgently compelling’**.

Ghosh in his book questions the contemporary writers and literary intellectuals as to why the subject of climate change does not feature in their fictional writings and why despite so much of hue and cry on matters concerning the nature-culture debate present day scholars and intellectuals have tried to distance themselves from a scientific and rational assessment of its gradually increasing intervention in our day to day lives, when fiction is considered to be a potentially viable medium to make readers imaginatively engaged with this overarching crisis. The function of writers is crucial to the management of the climate crisis as the very onus of answerability to the next generation lies on their heads, as when the future generations will look back in retrospect they will definitely blame the leaders, politicians and

most importantly the intellectual community at large for having failed miserably in charting out a way through which the catastrophic exigencies could have been lessened if not fully forestalled. Amitav Ghosh comes as a highly acclaimed and influential voice in the South Asian Canon whose works have not only tried to confront the spectres of climate change but also to provide the much needed historical context that was missing in the whole debate concerning this issue, that of the **Anthropocene**. The **Anthropocene** is basically used as a colloquialism to refer to climatic crisis and terrestrial destruction by mankind's undeterred expropriation of the planetary resources since the dawn of civilization. To pit the whole discourse of Anthropogenic climate crisis renders Ghosh to locate the oft ignored knowledge that human beings have been on the earth since millions of years and the present situations cannot be understood without taking recourse to the historical precedents that paved way for the unfolding environmental disasters of today. In his own words "the events of today's changing climate in that they represent the totality of human actions over time, represent also the terminus of history. For if the entirety of our past is contained within the present, then temporality itself is drained of significance."(Ghosh, pg.115 Penguin)

Ghosh's harking back to history is also laced with his pursuit to understand the collusions and conspiracies of culture, politics and imagination and how the present was unconsciously shaped out of these encounters. He contends that Anthropogenic thought has persistently tried to exclude climate change from the concurrent stream of fiction and have tended to impart it a quality of improbability- a concept which he thinks is very crucial to understand the apparent complacency and scepticism that marks our general attitude towards implausible weather events especially those like earthquakes, volcanoes or tsunamis. To attest his claims with a degree of authenticity he cites the example of Hurricane Catarina which hit Brazil in 2004 and how many people then, out of their sheer disbelief that a Hurricane would ever hit Brazil did not take shelter in safe places. What followed post that is a woeful saga of death and misery. Ghosh takes a stringent jibe at the smugness and inebriety that characterises our thought processes, we often tend to believe that losing one's life to earthquakes or hurricanes is something that happens in faraway places and hence relegate highly improbable events of environmental crisis as something which does not belong to the world of reality but rather to the self-fabricated world of fantasy. He attributes our failure to "...an aspect of the uncanny

in our relations with our environment. Recounting some cataclysmic events in his childhood Ghosh feels that there are "...moments of recognition, in which it dawns upon us 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 own purposes about which we know nothing". (Ghosh, pg.10 Penguin)

The very notion of our individual detachment to occurrences that challenge the very epistemic precincts of our inherited order of the world tends us to be oblivious of the bitter realities that grapple the present. Such patterns of evasion to seemingly uncanny climate changes are intrinsically rooted in mankind's latent refusal to associate himself to ever being in such an unimaginable situation and hence the mere thought of it, triggers a sort of unconscious denial a kind of imaginary revulsion/rejection of its probability. Ever since the publication of his novel '*The Hungry Tide*' in 2004, Amitav Ghosh has been a fervent advocate of climate change and how collective effort and political hindsight is a pre-requisite to counter the catastrophic advances of modernity's mordant disavowal of ecological entities under the vanguard of development thus paving way for Nature's backlash. But what remains central to our discussion of the climate crisis and the perils it might unleash is the largely Eurocentric discourse around which the whole issue revolves- thus failing to recognise many of the threats and impacts that characterize the South Asian experience. Ghosh outlines that "Asia's centrality to global warming rests, in the first instance upon numbers. The significance of this is more readily apparent in relation to the future; that is to say, if we consider the location of those who are most at threat from the changes that are now under way across the planet, the great majority of potential victims are in Asia. In terms of numbers the consequences are beyond imagining; the lives and livelihoods of half a billion people in South and Southeast Asia are at risk."(Ghosh pg.91 Penguin)Ghosh further states that the vulnerability of Asia's populations is only one aspect of their centrality to global warming. The reality is that the continent has also played a pivotal role in setting in motion the chain of consequences that is driving the present cycle of climate change. In this story too, numbers are critical for it was the rapid and expanding industrialization of Asia's most populous nations, beginning in the 1980s that brought the climate crisis to a head. (Ghosh pg. 94 Penguin)

The situation becomes clearer upon a historical detour of the devastating calamities that have struck the South Asian region in the past two-three decades. The live visuals of the Uttarakhand flash floods which hit the state in 2013 leading to innumerable loss of human lives and property sends a shiver down the spine even today. It inundated twelve out of the thirteenth districts of the state and was one of the worst climatic disasters in the living memory of the hilly region. More than 1 lac pilgrims were trapped in the Kedarnath shrine struggling between life and death for weeks. The Indian army and the NDRF teams were on alert mode carrying out the evacuation work but not all were fortunate enough to return safely among their loved ones. The Kashmir Flood disaster of 2014 was another testament of Nature's fury put to test - torrential rains over the past few days led to the swelling of the Jhelum River and water entering almost every residential village in the Kashmir region wreaking havoc in the lives of the villagers. The flood not only battered the Kashmir region of India but had enormous repercussions on Pakistan administered territories of Gilgit-Baltistan and the province of Punjab. More than 2500 villages were directly affected by this disastrous flood resulting in huge economic losses for both the sides. The Bihar flood disaster of 2007 too cannot skip a mention as it was one of the most harrowing experiences that the people of the state had to encounter on account of excessive rainfall that broke all meteorological predictions affecting 19 districts, ravaging 4822 villages and approximately one crore hectares of agricultural land. The United Nations too called it as one of the most cataclysmic occurrences in the living history of the state.

Ghosh talks about how his visit to the coastal island region of Sunderbans while writing his novel *The Hungry Tide* instilled in him a sense of interconnectedness and association that we, as human beings share with the world of non-humans, though we have always desisted from acknowledging it. By referring to non-human entities Ghosh intends to throw light on the extremely familiar yet uncanny modes of conversation that the earth has always tried to forge with the human world. For example the sea waters that constantly hit the coasts in Sunderbans have the intensity to alter the shapes of the islands and that is an everyday phenomena. The symbol of water both as a means of sustenance and destruction is very aptly used to convey the mutability of human efforts in face of natural events like storms and earthquakes which have the potential to shatter all human fixities in seconds. The storms that

perennially hit the islands serve as potential reminders that the non-human is, and has always been around us, and our denial of it does not obliterate its significance in any way. He states that the uncanny and improbable events of today that have turned up as wake up calls at our doors, seem to “have propelled a sense of acceptance, an awareness that we always have been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own: the capacities of will, thought and consciousness”(Ghosh, pg.35). Ghosh draws a parallel to how anthropogenic factors have contributed to the ecological degradation and climatic vulnerability of the Sunderban Delta that not only hosts the largest estuarine mangrove forest in the world but also is a home to a wide variety of flora and fauna including a large population of tigers. With rising sea levels due to global warming large tracts of the island are on the verge of getting completely submerged with the livelihoods of its inhabitants at stake. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami whose epicentre lay off the west coast of Sumatra had a tremendously devastating impact on the natural ecology of the place that not only affected the luxuriant biodiversity of the archipelago but also had destructive ramifications for the aquatic life that forms an integral part of the place. The Tsunami was one of the most powerful incidents in human history leading to profound casualties totalling about 2.30 lac. The Gujarat Earthquake of 2001 measuring 7.9 on the Richter scale too cannot be forgotten when talking about climate crisis in the South Asian context. Not only did it amount to the deaths of more than 20 thousand people but also rendered lakhs injured, homeless and destitute at the mercy of governmental support and rehabilitation.

With the disruptions of global climate change beginning to cast their impending threat on mankind what needs to follow is a recourse to collective action and a common consensus on issues of mitigation, preparedness and resiliency. This is where the aspect of culture comes to the centre stage. Meera Kumar in her review of Ghosh's book states that how the writer has pointed out the inability of contemporary culture to assess the issue of climate change because of the acceptance of one singular paradigm of European modernity which has thus become the standard of development. To come out of this one sided aspect of the story is to warrant a close attention to how globalisation and mankind's increasing fetishization for modern day commodities have accentuated the trajectory of ecological crisis. Ghosh states that “climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and thus of imagination. Culture generates



desires -for vehicles and appliances, for certain kinds of gardens and dwellings that are among the principal drivers of the carbon economy. A speedy convertible excites us neither because of any love for metal and chrome nor because of an abstract understanding of its engineering but it evokes an image of a road arrowing through a pristine landscape ....This culture is of course intimately linked with the wider histories of imperialism and capitalism that shaped the world"(Ghosh pg.15)

The colonial hangover of a world order and patterns of existence have added to more woes for the Third World Countries whose very identity is under the danger of extinction. Imperial cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras are prime examples of how a colonialist idea of the globe in which proximity to the water was attributed as a status symbol, a mark of affluence and aristocracy has continued to be a part of our conscious selves even today. Colonialism is a thing of the past now but it's spectres continue to find cultural recurrence in our daily lives-how often do we come across lucrative real estate advertisements on the front page of popular English newspapers of the metropolitan cities that promise us a 'sea view' apartment and a lot more of amenities that come with such an exclusive sea side location .What oft gets ignored is the fact that these megacities which represent the epicurean fantasies of the urban middle class are under extreme threat of getting submerged due to their geographical closeness to the sea.Be it the natives of Sunderbans, the slum dwellers of Dharavi or the profusely rich and elite celebrities, politicians and sport stars who possess luxurious properties in these cities, climate change will impact one and all alike, irrespective of their differential status in life. The rapid pace of industrialization and urbanisation in the past few decades has come at a huge environmental cost leading to indiscriminate cutting of trees, excessive burning of fossil fuels, over reliance on coal and petroleum and large scale pollution of air, water and land resulting in several health problems and chronic diseases for the young and the old alike. As we discuss the ruinous implications of climate change most states of the country are witnessing sweltering heat waves, the severity of which seems to increase year by year leading to a surge in the demands of ACs, coolers and refrigerators fomenting the carbon crisis. At the same time many districts of Assam have received incessant rainfall leading to severe flooding in multiple areas and people getting evacuated by the Disaster management teams. While the Indian state of Rajasthan is seeing temperatures



close to 50' C, that has augmented the water crisis with people having to walk kilometres to fetch a jar of drinking water, coastal states like Bengal and Orissa have seen a major spurt in cyclonic storms and rainfall patterns over the past few years. And who can better understand the magnitude and propensity of natural calamities than those who witnessed it in person. The Super Cyclone Amphan which lashed the state of West Bengal in the year 2020 is one such harrowing experiences from the recent past, the mere remembrance of which is sure to incite a sense of morbid dread and apathy. As a personal witness of the momentous cyclone that came barrelling down on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May and left a trail of destruction and unprecedented damage for the state of West Bengal, I can say with utmost conviction that there could not have been anything more lethal than that. The entire city of Calcutta along with its adjoining districts seemed to be on the forefront of natural fury and vengeance in its most deadliest and ugly form. While the death toll was not very high the economic losses were irreparable. Lakhs of people became homeless, thousands of trees got uprooted, roads and infrastructure damaged, innumerable electric poles and overhead cable wires crammed the roads for weeks making it a Herculean task for the state administration to restore things to normalcy. Electricity connections got disrupted and the residents were left to bear eight hours of torrential rain and apocalyptic storm with a wind speed past 180 plus km/hr. It seemed Nature was in its fiercest mode, as if trying to convey some potent truth, of making its presence felt to the world of humanity, a reminder to reassess the ecological damage that they have inflicted on account of their capitalistic creed.

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty in his seminal essay '*The Climate of History*' observes that the onus of climate activism and awareness lies in revising many of the fundamental precepts that have been disseminated by historians about human induced climate change and acknowledge the role of human beings as active agents in the discourse of planetary crisis. What Chakrabarty intends to convey is that the problem of climate crisis cannot be solved only at the level of historical precedents but at the level of culture- of making human beings aware of the fact that their actions have a direct bearing on the unfolding of present incidents and hence they need to take cognisance of the adverse consequences that may arise out of it. Rather than blaming the West for the catastrophic occurrences of the present times, humanity needs to ponder what can be done to halt the pace of climate change and biodiversity loss.

What we do between now and 2030 will determine whether we slow the rate of warming to 1.5 degree Celsius- the level scientists agree will avoid the worst impacts of impending ecological upheavals.

In a recent interview given to the Indian Express Ghosh states that ‘In general, when we think about climate change or the planetary crisis, we always think of it in terms of the future, we think of ourselves as being in a completely new era, But in fact, this era is completely rooted in the past. The continuities are clear going as far back as the 17th century’. Ghosh condemns the market oriented nature of the human race and terms it as the primary reason for the current state of the planet. One needs to pay heed to his exhortations when he states that mankind has to relinquish the very idea of survival for the sake of profit and come out from the shadow of capitalism that enforces upon us such modes of thinking. One significant aspect of the Nature-Culture debate pertaining to planetary crisis is about its alleged forms of perception that is strikingly different for those who were the colonisers and the colonised.

For South Asian countries climate change is always a phenomenon that is rooted in the past, in the discriminatory and selfish policies of the British Empire that not only robbed the Third World Nations of their precious natural reserves, but also damaged the sensitive ecology of these regions. For the West, climate crisis is a scientific problem and hence it is through the prism of science and technology that possible solutions or reparations could arrive. These ideological binaries need to collapse in favour of a common agreement on climate crisis. The West always trying to throw the onus of reducing carbon emissions and setting numerical parameters that need to be adhered to, by the Third World Nations in order to curtail global warming and greenhouse effect cannot be a viable way out of the crisis. In fact the West needs to share the responsibilities and commit itself towards sustainable development goals because the Earth doesn't know the concept of demarcated borders and territorial divisions and hence it's through a planetary collaboration that this alarming situation must be addressed. Now voices across the world have amplified their support to the cause of climate change, particularly the Greta Thunberg incident which spread like a massive wildfire with people and youth joining the movement in large numbers rendering it a forceful momentum that was never seen before. Climate activists and organisations too, have tried to reinforce the

point that if human civilization does not take a serious note of the climatic conditions, one should be prepared to face the threat of damnation.

Ramachandra Guha in his 1997 book '*Varieties of Environmentalism*' too critiques the very notion that climate preservation is a task that should be carried only by the rich and powerful nations of the west and their elite and affluent class. He contends in fact that ecological preservation is a joint venture that requires global agreement and mutual consensus on how to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems. Time is running out and there is no option than making sustainable living the default option. The role of politics and a strong leadership too, turns out to be an essential factor in mitigating the risks because without a serious political engagement and foresight of the gradually worsening scenario no constructive measures can be undertaken to reverse the accelerating pace of global warming. Given the profound risks at stake, governments must set sustainable development goals and build a cohesive rapport and agreement with other countries as well committing them to slow the alarming levels of temperature rise, loss of species and safeguard the people from the disastrous effects of this crisis particularly the ones who live near the coast and areas which are highly vulnerable to climatic occurrences. Cutting down on carbon emissions, switching to clean forms of energy, supporting renewable energy, large scale afforestation, conserving critical forests, grasslands and other habitats rich in carbon and biodiversity, preserving fresh water lakes, reducing water pollution, shifting to energy efficient appliances, promoting and developing alternative forms of energy like solar, tidal and wind should be the major prerogatives before the global community. The fight against global warming and climate change cannot be merely won by convening global climate summits and setting Millennium Development Goals and global agendas that stand in tune with sustainable growth. What is urgently needed is a call to unified action coming out from the confinements of our smaller homes because without our larger home our little homes will have no identity and importance of their own. The stakes are high and this calls for enormous prudence and prompt leadership so that the world can jointly and collaboratively find ways to deal with this crisis. To quote UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres "the climate emergency is a race we are losing, but it is a race we can win."

This crisis is one of humanity's most challenging and dangerous confrontations with the elemental powers of the Earth and the possible ways of resistance and resolution lies only in our reconfiguration of the imminent risk in terms of collective imagination. Ghosh very aptly has given voice to the alarming scenario through the medium of his fiction expressing the necessity for change and adaptation. Ghosh's work helps us to envisage new vistas of adapting to the crisis and be sensitive to the interconnectedness between the human and non-human entities that have been made invisible and oblivious on account of mankind's over indulgence with a life steeped in materiality and worldly fetish. Climate change should not be seen as a problem bereft of humanistic connotations but as a problem that defines and shapes our very existence on this planet. For as Ghosh observes in one of his recent interviews to the Telegraph: "Earth will survive. It has been through much worse. It is really us who will suffer unimaginable pain."

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