

# The Urgency of Ecological Consciousness and the Impact of Climate Crisis in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*

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**ABSTRACT** Environmental Humanities, a surging multi - disciplinary field unravels the entanglement between the human and the non- human, the material and the affective modes of ecological crisis. Geo - politics began with the history of colonial extraction across the world in the form of trade and exchange, adventure and globalization. The ruthless manoeuvring of nature and the environment in the name of anthropocentrism aroused a sense of social responsibility among environmental activists, social scientists, writers and nature conservationist to bring about an awareness among humans to insist on the importance of conservation and protection of nature and to acknowledge the presence of non - human life forms and the need to revert back to old ways of living in coexistence with other species around. Today Environmental Humanities seek to specify the multiple zones of conflicts and the legacies surmounting the planet and ventures to redefine ecosystems for the human and the nonhuman. In the history of environment, the attention to non-human organic presence has perpetually evaded the consciousness of humans particularly the modern digital generation. Crusaders and conservationists of environment has time and again highlighted on the urgency to ecological consciousness and the consequences to be faced by the upcoming generations who fail to realize the blunder inflicted on nature and other species.

Environmental Humanities today discourses on sustainability , ecological justice, bio-diversity, hydro - politics, petro - fiction', climate – Fiction and the like, The present paper attempts to explicate the different ways in which environmental studies is represented, understood and communicated in a particular socio-political set up and transports us to the world of Amitav Ghosh, who traverses multiple genres and territories and who savagely documents the geopolitics of climate change in his novel *The "Great Derangement"*. The paper also strives to apply the eco-critical environmental approach in reading this literary text

## **1. Introduction: Literature of Climate Crisis and the Anthropocene**

With changing cultural practices in the name of advancement there is a steady, arbitrary but seamless violence that humans have inflicted on the environment. The anthropogenic interventions pose a great threat to the ecological integrity.

The lives of the ancient humans who led presumably meaningful life in coexistence with nature juxtaposes with the life of the modern man living away from the ambit of nature. Climate crisis jeopardises everything: from non-human entities, landscapes, climate, to the elements of nature and the physical environment at large. As a response to this, climate narratives sought to examine and engage with the role of literature in nurturing a sense of responsibility and in advocating sustainable practices towards inclusion of all species and in the conservation of the natural resources for a prolific future.

In the 21st century there surged a new kind of fiction called as Climate change narratives well acclaimed today as “cli-fi”. The term cli-fi is popularized by journalist and climate change activist Dann Bloom. Dann Bloom came up with the word “Cli-fi”, hoping to convert the dull phrase climate fiction into something compelling. He wanted to come up with a catchy buzz word to raise awareness about global warming. According to Dann Bloom a central function of the climate novel is to examine the climate change debate at an emotional level. There are other authors of climate fiction from across the globe from Margarett Atwood to Barbara Kingsolver Paolo Bacigalupi, T. C. Boyle, Michael Crichton, Ian McEwan, Amitav Ghosh, Barbara Kingsolver, Ursula Le Guin, Lydia Millet, David Mitchell, Ruth Ozeki, Nathaniel Rich, Kim Stanley Robinson, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Marcel Theroux, have contributed to the efforts of such a novel genre of fiction in order to imagine the causes, effects, and feeling of global warming. Their fiction anchors in the illustrious themes of activist climate fiction that romantically and didactically captures man’s innate necessity to live in oneness with nature and to manifest a sustainable living for the future generations.

## **2. Intervention of humanities and social sciences in battling Climate Change: Novelists and their apocalyptic tone in fiction**

Literature has never been muted to natural calamities or catastrophes. Literary writings, arts, local films, art exhibitions, folklores and museums have showcased these catastrophic events since time immemorial. As literary critic prof. Pramod K. Nair in his introduction to *Vulnerable Earth* observes how Alex Wrights novel “the swan Book” (2001) talks about the change of timings where “mother Nature” would be reprehended as “Mother Catastrophe” and adopts a apocalyptic tone in his fiction. We have watched the apocalyptic movies like *Avatar* and the phenomenal *pandoras island* which have highlighted on the devastating effects of capitalism and human greed on a multiplanetary vision.

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction are subgenres of science fiction that are set in a time period where the earth as we know it is coming to an end. Post-apocalyptic novels almost always take place in the future, although some describe the end of past civilizations that no longer exists climate writers often stick onto an apocalyptic tone in order to understate the looming climate crisis that will devastate the world. Movie makers have already pitched up climate crisis in the most novel way in Hollywood movies with movies like *The Day after tomorrow* (2004), *Snow piercer* (2013), *Geostorm* (2017), *The Day the Earth stood Still* (2008), *Interstellar* (2014) *In to the Storm* (2014), *water world* (1995).

The issues pertaining to climate change are intrinsic and dynamic and hence involves a comprehensive and meticulous and hence engage with scientific, economic, social and political factors. This is where the intervention of cultural matrix comes into play. The world is literally battling with technological, economical and social progression on one hand in an anthropogenic manner and equally struggling to set right the havoc made in achieving this. The covid pandemic of 2019 to 2020 remains a grave example where the entire world was left in lurk and the global physicians and research labs were struggling to put an end.

An eco- critical analysis of literary texts brings to fore the power of literature in shaping our perceptions, in understanding ecology and in urging immediate action for climate justice. Climate justice is a socially conscious issue which examines concepts of privilege, power and oppression. Climate crisis produces a large impact on socio-economically marginalized communities than the privileged ones and its quite intriguing that the answers for a sustainable living and an eco- friendly vision comes from these affected communities. Climate narratives act as an immediate response to the current global environmental issues and examines the representation of these issues in varied genres of literature, historical periods and cultural contexts.

### **3. Beyond the scientific paradigms of carbon and fossil fuel: Analysing Climate crisis as a crisis of culture**

Investigating the literature of the Climate crisis in an age of Anthropocene poses ethical questions of man's existence we perceive that its not an isolated theoretical entity rather an entanglement of culture, history, philosophy and political embroil. Nor is this an ones mans project. There is a constant urge for awareness among all levels from the corporates to the layman. The present nonfiction delves into the multiple the potential future of the planet and the 'uncanny' events knocking our doors in the form of natural catastrophe now and then. Here Gosh talks about how with each passing day the impact seems to be a threat and understanding humanities through the ethical lens of literary reading is mandatory for an envisionable change. Global emissions rising sea levels

Climate fiction is not just about carbon emissions and researching on degradable plastics but rather the understanding of mans existence on earth and in leading a life in coexistence with all other species of the earth. Amitav Ghosh has dealt with climate crisis in his other novels such as *Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019), *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), *The Living Mountain* (2022) and *the Jungle Nama* (2021).

Fictions of Amitav Ghosh moves away from the old paradigm of locating climate crisis to a scientific one while neglecting the role of culture politics and power that act as potential agents of pollution in day today life. Furthermore, these fictions reiterate on how mankind experiences a standstill between a world they want and the world they create. It could be perceived as

an idealist search in a non-idealistic way. Changing cultural practices and sophistication in the name of globalization creates an urge among mankind in buying new cars, branded products, appliances and in constructing marvel architecture, all materialistic in interest leaves an indelible

### **4. Materials and Findings: The hydro - poetics and geognosy in the climate narratives of Amitav Ghosh**

Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide* is a stellar example of a climate narrative set in the Sunderbans. It is a forerunner to the kind of climate narrative set in the early 21st century dealing with complex ecological issues in a creative way. 'the science of climate change and

the Anthropocene in particular- which Eileen christ (2013) has noted is inflected heavily by western – centric value systems finds its way into the ecological conscious of the literary texts of the contemporary age. Hence literatures role today is not simply to stop with pitching and documenting the disasters resplendent in global history but to capture future disasters and the awareness to environmental ethics which is so usual of creative fiction today social responsibility of creative fiction: to inform and to appease. Even the most menial and neglected stuff like ‘garbage’ plays a significant research in studying our environment and climate crisis. The publisher’s blur describes it as a poem about ‘nature and mutability”

“Garbage” (1993) a poem by A.R Ammons identifies garbage as the central motif in everyday American life. A.R Ammon comes from the rich tapestry of creative genealogy like Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, and Robert Frost and Daniel Hoffman. Writing in the New York Times Book Review, agreed that Ammons’s poetry “is founded on an implied Emersonian division of experience into Nature and the Soul,” adding that it “sometimes consciously echo[es] familiar lines from Emerson, Whitman and Dickinson.”( <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/a-r-ammons>) Ammon throughout the poem draws upon the change that is happening both in nature and in everyday lives. Richard Hower explains further in *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States*. Wherein he describes how the shore the beach and the sea are not just landscapes but they act as mediators in the process of habitat derangement. Even in the poem “garbage” piles of trash stacked up as waste The Anthropocene is “the sign of power and also our impotence”(19,TVE) as critiqued in the climate crisis text. Significant data on atmospheric ozone pollutions shows how more than 1500 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide is that humans have spilled by burning coal and other fossil fuels. Attention to multi species, and interspecies interactions, landscapes, waterscapes as part of Environmental Humanities particularly the Earth’s atmosphere which is conceived as a ‘living tissue’ and other.

A kind of fiction that focusses on a crisis over water and how the corporatization of water stems from a colonial past and colonial greed, patterns of development which were handed over to the colonies. These sort of fictions deals with gradual events in the form of cultural practices that leads to a gradual environmental degradation. “As Novemi Klein and others are right to observe the currently dominant model of capitalism as one of the principal drivers of climate change” (TGD1333 Kindle). Likewise, capitalism and empire are dual aspects of the same issue.

Amitav Ghosh’s *Hungry Tide* Set in 2004 is an earliest creative fiction with lushy Sunderbans which an ecologically sensitive zone stretching across India and Bangladesh. It is a coastal forest ecosystem and delta region which is home to the world’s largest mangrove forests and a wide range of wildlife. Being a home to a large number of rare and endangered species, including the Bengal Tiger, estuarine, crocodile, Indian python, dolphins, water buffalos swamp deers, marsh crocodiles, hog deers and many more species are on the verge of extinction

Climate change as portrayed in the novel is inevitable real and honest and occurs through the dialogues of characters as casual remarks like “there isn’t as much water in the river nowadays and at low tide it gets very shallow (p25). though this sounds a very ordinary remark made by a character in the novel to an individual it claims an environmental change. Notions related to climate change are represented through local observations and subtle statements. In Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* he refers to the Sunderban’s history of colonization and the colonial illusion a that they could conquer the land” likewise the british had hoped to make Canning a thriving town, where many homes and hopes could be built (VE, 23). Yet, years later, ‘catastrophe.... [is still] .... a way of life’ here (79).

The novel opens with Piya, an American marine biologist who arrives in Sundarban for her research on Orcaella, an endangered river dolphin. On her way Piya encounters Kanai, an arrogant business man from Delhi. He arrived at Sundarban to collect the memoir of his

diseased uncle, Nirmal. Nirmal's story gives a historical, social and mythical account of the island. Fokir, an illiterate fisherman is a character who is in both the present and the past narratives about the island. Fokir and Piya develop a close bond though they share common language. The narrative ends in a massive cyclone that kills Fokir and inspires Piya to remain on the island and fully investigate the disappearing dolphins.

Climate change is presented through subtle local observations which a reader might experience and understand it. Nirmal's observance of the signs of death, he notices: "What was happening here... was that the wheel of time was spinning too fast to be seen. In other places it took decades, even centuries [...] could it be that the very rhythms of the earth was quickened here so that they unfolded at an accelerated pace?" Moyna's reference to the impending extinction of fishes due to the use of "new nylon nets" which are "so fine that they catch the eggs of all the other fish as well", Piya's feeling of "a smell or rather a metallic savor" in the waters, and Horen's experienced observance on the cyclone's coming "quicker" than he expected, are some hints at the crisis disturbing the surroundings.

## **5. The Urgency of Ecological Crisis and the need for action-based approach towards sustainability**

Climate change is undeniable in the novel. It is because of changes in the environment that rare species of dolphins and other fishes are dwindling, the population of the tigers is thinning day by day. The ecosystem of the area is on the verge of collapse. It is under threat because of drastic changes in the climate. Submersion of islands is not a fiction but reality. The water level in the Bay of Bengal is rising very rapidly. The ecosystems are very important aspects of the environment. [www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com) 128 *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* Vol. 8, Issue-VI, December 2017 ISSN: 0976-8165 Piya, a cytologist comes to do survey of the marine mammals of the Sundarbans. Her special interests are Gangetic Dolphins and Irrawaddy Dolphins. Once dolphins in the area were in abundance, but now it is very hard to find them. According to the Piya's hypothesis these fresh water dolphins are a kind of new Orcaellas, who adopted the tidal ecology. These unique Orcaellas are threatened and their existence is depended on the conservation of their natural habitat. Only few hundreds of them are left. The climate change has destroyed natural habitats of the fishes and they are dwindling day by day. Piya remembers a study which says that "there were more species of fish in the Sundarbans than could be found in the whole continent of Europe" (238-39) Once area was unpopulated and rivers and rivulets were in abundance in the area but now these are claimed by the civilization, causing great damage to the ecosystem.

A single problem in an ecosystem can start a chain of problems. The tigers in the area are also unique but their lives are also threatened. Water buffaloes, swamp deer, marsh crocodiles, hog deer and many more species are on the verge of extinction. The destruction of the mangroves of the Sundarbans, the natural defense system of the area, is causing great threat to the islands found there. The biodiversity of the area is also in danger. As Nirmal says "mangroves were Bengal's deface against the bay, he said - they served as a barrier against nature's fury, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges." (271) Small changes in the climate can create a chain of changes, and can bring great disasters. People and animals both are affected by climate change in the Sundarbans. The rare species of animals like Royal Bengal Tigers and Gangetic dolphins are on the verge of extinction. Floras found there are also in danger; thick mangroves are destroyed because of rising of the sea levels and colonization of the area. Occasionally tsunamis and cyclones cause destructions. The local people are adversely affected by conservation policies carried out by the government and international organizations, which creates conflicts between human rights and animal rights.

Environmental issues are the main focus of the narrative of *The Hungry Tide*. Yet it is always discussed in relation to real events and processes. The matter becomes more urgent because it is brought into a framework of meaning and relevance rather something separate, far off and unrelated. The form of the novel, *The Hungry Tide*, is its great success as an ecological text. The structure and the narration adapt the unique tidal landscape of the Sundarbans. Critic Jen Martin Gurr remarks how the environment in the novel functions as more than just setting but the central motif in which everything – content themes, characters, style- is organized around and influenced by: ‘The underlying deep structure of the ebb and flood, land and water, not only structures the text in terms of form, but is closely mirrored and echoed in the constellation of characters and also directly propels the plot’. The ecological world influences the characterization and forms part of the character’s identity, ‘rivers ran in our heads, the tide were in our blood’ (p164). The novel is divided into two parts ‘The Ebb’ and ‘The Flood’. These divisions are significant across the structure, theme, content, characterization and style of the novel. In the first part Ebb narration is clear and detailed like a receding tide. The narration is systematic www.the-criterion.com 129 Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* as a Climate Change Fiction and clear in its moves between different focalizations. Like the tide, the narration flows between Kannai’s, Piya’s Nirmal’s and Fokir’s perspectives. The style changes in ‘The Flood’. The perspective became gradually less distinct. The pace of the novel also changes with the incoming flood and storm. The novel provides lengthy geographical details and we gain through sense of the landscape and movements of the tidal community. Conversations between characters are also carefully narrated

In the novel *Gun Island* by Amitav Ghosh The narrator of the story is Dinanath Datta. He describes his strange journey which was launched by a word *Bundook* which means gun. The narrator is a Bengali .He is called as Deen by his friends and relatives .When the journey began there was not even a rifle in sight nor did the word intend to mean as weapon. What caught his attention was not the weapon but *Bonduki Sadagar*, which could be translated as ‘the Gun Merchant. The Gun merchant entered into his life in Calcutta. Kolkata was a refugee from the solitude of his personal life. He felt desolate when a promising relationship with a woman came to an abrupt end. He is an antique dealer. As he was approaching his sixties, he felt lonelier and therefore visits Kolkata during the winter season. He attends the wedding reception of cousin’s daughter. He meets a distant relative Kanai. Kanai was able to charm women with his good looks. He lived in Delhi .H established himself as darling of the media. Whenever kanai meets the narrator, he had the habit of tripping him up. Kanai calls the narrator by his child hood name Dinu. Kanai also confirms whether he is an expert in Bengali folklore. Sea tales were the prominent features of Begali folklore. Kanai asks Dinu whether he had heard of a figure name *Bonduki Sadagar* which meant Gun Merchant. Kanai meant folk heroes such as *Dokkhin Rai*, or *Chand Sadagar* . . .’The name *Bonduki Sadagar* was new to Dino. The most famous of the Bengali folklore was the legend of the merchant named *Chand Sagar*.

Through the character of Kanai the author points out the significance of Sundarban forests. Kanai says ...The Sundarbans are the frontier where commerce and the wilderness look each other directly in the eye; that’s exactly where the war between profit and Nature is fought... (Page no 14in PDF).

Kanai and Dinu discuss about *Bonduki Sadagar*. From the latest information that Kanai gathered from his aunt Nilima Bose *Bonduki Sadagar* has gone out of Bengal. He passed through Sundarbans where he built a shrine in swamp. Nilima Bose has visited the shrine in Sundarbans. She is in her late eighties. She is bedridden but her mind is sharp as ever. Nilima wants Dinu to visit her. She wants to talk to him about the shrine.

Nilima defied the family by marrying an impoverished school teacher. After the marriage, Nilima had moved with her husband to *Lusibari*, a small town on the edge of the Sundarbans.

A few years later she founded a women's group that had since grown into the Badabon Trust, one of India's most reputed charitable organizations. The trust now ran an extended network of free hospitals, schools, clinics and workshops. Dinu kept a track of Nilima's contribution through a chat group for extended family members. From personal acquaintance and sometimes he would come across her in family gatherings, during his adolescence period.

Kanai scribbles a contact name Piya Roy and her contact number. Piya Roy is A Bengali American, teaches in Oregon. She visits Kolkata during winter season and stays with Nilima Bose. She is currently in Kolkata and if he wants to visit Nilima Bosa, Piya Roy will make the necessary arrangements. It was Piya marine biologist who takes care of the trust. She spends most of her time in Sundarbans. She comes to India during summer and winter. She has adopted wife and sons of Sundarbans villagers. Especially those villagers who assisted her in her research at Sundarbans.

Dinu immediately contacts Piya and decides to visit Nilima on morning. He goes to the ancestral home of Nilima Ballygunge place. The old house was gone and it was replaced by modern apartment block. Nilima narrates to Dinu the account of storm which hit West Bengal.

On 20th November 1970 Nilima first heard of the Gun Merchant. Eight days before 12th November 1970 category 4 cyclone had torn the Bengal Delta. This cyclone hit the Indian province of West Bengal and the state East Pakistan. The cyclone was named as Bhola cyclone. Half a million of people were affected by the cyclone (Page 19 in pdf). The impact of cyclone hit the Sundarbans.

She learns from a young fisher man of her acquaintance, Horen Naskar who was there in the sea. He had witnessed the devastation with his own eyes. This prompted Nilima to bring a team of volunteers. She and the volunteers provided emergency supplies to the villages near the coast. While they supplied emergency supplies they came across

“...Lusibari, the island where Nilima and her husband lived, suffered a great deal of damage: a large chunk of the island was ripped away by the storm surge, houses and all...” (page no 19 GI).

## **6. Recalling the time when man was in harmony with the environment around: The Great Derangement as a testimony to the fall of Mankind**

In 2016 Amitav Ghosh came with his non fiction *The Great Derangement* in (2016) *The Guardian* critiques *The Great Derangement* as “climate is, therefore, also a crisis of culture, one in which writers’ fears of improbability, of depicting apocalyptic fractures of history and geography within the confines of a story expected to take its metre from the scale and scope of human lives, have resulted in evasion” (*The Guardian*, *The Great Derangement* addresses the power of the uncanny in a political, social and economically deranged set up. The Non fiction holds three Parts 1. Stories 2. History 3. Politics. Climate crisis is used in a metaphorical way as ‘the uncanny’. The non fiction begins with the question of why climate studies are always considered a metonym for science fiction as if it’s an imaginary unrealistic zone. He also discourses on how climate fiction only finds it’s ways to the fringes of the literary domain.

In part one ‘stories’ Ghosh traces the connect he has with the beautiful landscape of the Sunderbans. The pictorial description of the landscape and the nostalgic revisiting to good old days where his ancestors whom he addresses as ‘ecological refugees’ geognacy. A generation that lives in the banks of the river is slowly evicted due to the overflow of the river. Their ancestors experience a massive change in the verge of a natural disaster. Ghosh talks to his elderly mother who lives in a flood-prone area. Would his relatives consider leaving the family home and moving to safer ground? Of course not. “To abandon the homes

that have given our lives roots, stability and meaning, is nothing short of unthinkable”. And that is true of countless coastal communities, including the Sundarbans, that are right in the teeth of climate change. Ghosh describes the conversation with his mother, and decides he cannot press her on it, recognising that “contrary to what I might like to think, my life is not guided by reason; it is ruled, rather, by the inertia of habitual motion.”

He describes in detail the elements which have unearthed his ancestors from such an idyllic place and examines the geognacy of the landscape with such keen observation and insight.

## **7. Coping with modernization through Sustainable Practices**

The non – fiction unravels not just the events of disasters underlying a particular incident but rather different aspects of environmental issues observed as ‘the triple planetary crisis (Nair Foreword V.E)). It deals with the loss of species, habitat and climate injustice. The contamination of air too as he remarks “as the inhabitants of new Delhi and Beijing know all too well when inflamed lungs and sinuses prove once again that there is no difference between using and being used” (146, GD kindle).

The Great derangement as a nonfiction has three parts which examines the entanglement of stories, histories and politics which intertwine and run as a comprehensive thread and could never be understood in isolation with each other. Part one is a critique on how literary fiction finds it difficult in addressing climate change and the lack of awareness of the immediacy on one hand and the inability to identify such a crisis as ‘reality’ becomes the handicap in conceiving climate fiction. For instance, in Part Two wherein he talks about how there is a need to revamp historical way of approaching climate crisis.

Attention to a seminal essay on “The Climate of History” by Deepesh Chakravarthy in the Great Derangement reflects on the essential change that historians will have to make in their outlook towards climate change. In the words of Ghosh “historians will have to revise many of their fundamental assumptions and procedures in this era of human-induced climate change in which humans have become geological agents. changing the most physical process of the earth.”(209,GD, Kindle edition)

Yet another major theme dealt with in the non – fiction is the universalization of western models of development and as opined by Ghosh ‘technological diffusion that radiates outs from the west’ (1427, GD, Kindle edition). Colonization, imperialism and Industrialization not only paved ways for trade but also remained key agents of geological destruction. The British not only colonized the land but also the ‘minds of the colonized’. He compares the western ways of settlement moderns which stand in stark contrast to indigenous ways of living. ‘A concrete road jetting through a deep forest’, a construction that is scenic facing the seashore, a resort built under the foothills of a water fall, are all western ways of settlement. Ghosh highlights on how when the cyclone just wiped away the entire settlements of Nicobar settlements adjoining the sea shore and overstates the survival of the indigenous communities who withstood such a disastrous tragedy. Conclusively it could be summed up that Ghosh is literally a crusader of the planetary consciousness and calls for humanity to look back to sustainable ways of living and to give due justice to the other species and environment around us. This research is purely academic but what is required is an action- based approach in dealing with climate crisis.

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