
THE DEPICTION OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S WORKS

Dr. Rakesh Chandra
Academician

<https://doi.org/10.59009/ijllc.2025.0151>

Received Date: 3 September 2025 / Published Date: 12 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Amitav Ghosh is a renowned Indo-Anglian author who has won many laurels worldwide. He is arguably one of the few noted authors who have incorporated the theme of climate change and destruction of nature at the hands of humans in his novels and non-fiction works. Though he himself admits the fact that climate change receives little attention in the arena of literary fiction. In this context, his two books are worth mentioning here, namely *The Great Derangement-Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, and *The Nutmeg's Curse*. He structures his first book into three parts: 'Stories', 'History', and 'Politics'. In the 'Stories' part, Ghosh focuses on the role of literature, particularly fiction, in relation to climate change. Ghosh supports the view of other experts that capitalism is the major cause of climate change. Thus, *The Great Derangement* provides a much deeper understanding of the historic origins and current causes of climate change, together with possible avenues to address it.

His other book, *The Nutmeg's Curse-Parables for A Planet In Crisis*, is a work of fiction in which he has stated that before the 18th century, every single nutmeg in the world originated around a group of small volcanic islands east of Java, known as the Banda Islands. It was not long before European traders became conquerors. Ghosh argues that the nutmeg's violent trajectory from its native islands is revealing of a wider colonial mindset which justifies the exploitation of human life and the natural environment. This paper attempts to explore the varied nuances of these two seminal works of Amitav Ghosh and its probable impact on society's worn-out thinking process.

Keywords: Climate Change, Planetary Crisis, Omnicide, Carbon-based Industrialization, Parables.

1. INTRODUCTION

Climate change phenomena have affected human life in no uncertain manner. This is the burning topic of modern times. Its implications are far and wide. Still, a question raises its head time and again-who is going to chronicle the true dimensions and the frightening tales of climate change for the common man? Already, this subject is widely considered to be in the domain of scientists including botanists, zoologists, anthropologists, and other experts studying the phenomena. But there is hardly any narration of climate change for the masses in a simple and easy-to-understand language. In this context, the statement of the former United Nations Secretary General, U-Thant in 1971, is still relevant today. He said, "As we watch the sun go down, evening after evening, through the smog across the poisoned waters of our native earth, we must ask ourselves seriously whether we really wish some future universal historian on another planet to say about us: With all their genius and with all their skill, they ran out of foresight and air and food and water and ideas. ideas."¹ But the problem is that the historians base their narratives on crude facts and they do their job in a ruthless manner. So, for the

common man, unless the said narrative is written in the form of simple stories, the message and the grim reality of climate change will not percolate down below. Thus, we need storytellers or the literatures at large to propagate the climate change narrative to the common man in the form of stories, novels, parables and poetry. However, this is not being done presently by the writers, poets and authors in a sustained manner. Only a few writings appear sporadically on the literary firmament. Amitav Ghosh himself answered this dilemma in an article a few years ago. He has stated, "The climate crisis casts a much smaller shadow on literary fiction than it does on the world. We are living through a crisis of culture-and of imagination."² He further elaborates that "the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction. It is as though in the literary imagination climate change was somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel."³ One of the main reasons for this is the fact that the writers generally write by mining their own experiences which provides authenticity to their content. That is how topics such as storms, floods and unusual weather events or the likes appear in novels and short stories. At the same time, climate change is comparatively a newer, bigger and wider phenomena. Mostly, the writers have not fully grasped their ramifications. Resultantly, the literary output is meagre only.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the few writers of international repute who have delved into the realm of producing their works based on the exclusive theme of climate change in both nonfiction and fiction forms. The two of his books, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, *Parables for A Planet in Crisis* and *The Great Derangement*, *Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, are at the centre of this study.

His first book, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, as the title name suggests, contains parables for a planet in crisis. The book is divided into nineteen chapters which are supposedly in the form of parables imbibing significant messages for a better tomorrow. The narrative of the book revolves around a village Selamon in the Banda archipelago, a tiny cluster of islands at the far southeastern end of the Indian Ocean. These islands are situated east of Java, Indonesia. Before the eighteenth century, these small volcanic islands were home to immensely valuable spices of nutmeg and mace. The traders of these islands were peacefully doing business with the traders reaching there from Europe and England, in particular. It was not long before European traders became conquerors making the indigenous Bandanese communities subservient to their wishes with the help of their muscle power. For more than hundred years, the Europeans-first the Portuguese and Spanish, and then the Dutch, insistently pursued the goal of establishing a monopoly over the islanders' most important products: nutmeg and mace. The most relentless of all were the Dutch who had sent the fleets to the islands again and again, with the intention of forcing treaties on the inhabitants.⁴ The most prevalent *modus operandi* of the colonizers, be it British, Portuguese or Dutch or any other for that sake, had been to "wipe them out (the native population), seize their land, and adept it for their own use."⁵ Following these buzzwords, the Dutch first exterminated the local Bandanese inhabitants, and then began to seize their precious land. This process of seizing their land and adapting it for their own use is known as "Terraforming", a term coined by the science fiction writer Jack Williamson, who used it in a novella published in 1942.⁶ It can be identified with "land-making" or "land-molding". This process of terraforming ensured that the large tracts of land were 'reengineered to resemble European models so that they would suit European ways of life.'⁷ Furthermore, the said European colonization everywhere brought 'environmental transformations' with rapidity which, undoubtedly, paved the way for the present climate change catastrophe in the colonies. In this context, Amitav Ghosh has a very interesting observation to make-"Though most human history wars have been fought between human adversaries, with human-made weapons. But

terraforming required a different kind of war in which ‘environmental interventions and nonhuman entities’ played a central part.” This aspect of colonial rule is also borne out in the early accounts of the European conquest.⁸ All this happened in the village Selamon and the whole territory of the Banda Islands under the close supervision of the Dutch conquerors. Their intervention brought about rapid destruction of the entire natural ecosystem which saved the native community from many disasters. The introduction of exotic varieties of flora and fauna into an alien land and in a changed ecosystem could only succeed in creating a new but hostile social and cultural set up for all the inhabitants. Ghosh has ably illustrated these phenomena by citing the example of native Americans who “did not immediately recognize that the settlers’ way of relating to the land-by clear-cutting trees, setting up permanent settlements, and building fenced enclosures-would make their own ways of life ecologically untenable. Only when the settlers’ ecological interventions began to disrupt their food chains did the Indians begin to see them “as sources of permanent disequilibrium.”⁹

Another significant aspect of this work is the interconnected relationship between colonialism and capitalism. Ghosh succinctly avers that any discussion of climate change is ‘dominated by the question of capitalism and other economic issues.’ So much so that ‘capitalism has come to be seen as the prime mover of modern history, while geopolitics and empire are regarded as its secondary effects.’¹⁰ He further states that “the history of the Banda Islands serves as an important reminder of the place of conquest and geopolitical dominance in the history of capitalism.”¹¹ Environmental destruction is the natural corollary of such growth of capitalism in the colonies where the primary purpose of the conquerors was to mint money by systematically exploiting indigenous resources and using them for making finished products in the international market. The Industrial Revolution in England, in particular, showed the way in a clear-cut manner. The exploitation of the precious natural resources of nutmeg and the mace by the Dutch presented a crude example of making money at the cost of native aspirations. “To this day Banda Naira is instantly recognizable, even from the deck of a ferry, as a miniscule “neo-Europe.”¹² Thus, the activities of the colonial powers not only destroyed the ecological and environmental fabric of the native societies but also adversely affected the cultural scenario which ultimately sapped their innate strength and driving force.

His next non-fiction work is *The Great Derangement, Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, published in 2016, and is divided into three parts, namely, Stories, History and Politics. Though the book is not a novel, it contains the basic ingredients of storytelling. He has successfully analyzed in this book, the “era of climate change.” Talking about the important feature of the book, author Elizabeth Kolbert has described the attributes of the book as such: “For a long time, we have been talking about climate change as a scientific question. In this magnificent book, Ghosh changes the conversation, moving it out of the narrow corridors of science and into the wide precincts of culture, politics and power. A clarion call not just to act on climate, but to think about it in a wholly new way.”¹³ That is so true about the book in which climate change has been discussed threadbare not only scientifically but also through the eyes of history and politics. The first part of the book is related to stories that make the subject of climate change interesting and worthwhile. Ghosh says that ‘the climate crisis asks us to imagine other forms of existence—a task to which fiction is the best suited of all forms.’ He further argues that future generations may well think, are we deranged? This is in tune with our inability to explain our imaginative failure in the face of global warming. Thus, in this book, Ghosh has done the roles of analyst and storyteller both.

In the first part of the book, *Stories*, Ghosh delved deep into the patterns of the growth of modern literature and highlighted its important features. He has come up with a theoretical observation that “climate change resists literary fiction lies ultimately in its resistance to

language itself.” He further says that “then it would seem to follow that new, hybrid forms will emerge and the act of reading itself will change once again, as it has many times before.”¹⁴ This sounds true and realistic on two counts: first, like any other muse, literature also evolves itself with the passage of time, Secondly, the gravity of climate change has slowly but surely seized the thought- process of intellectuals and the literary people alike. Hence, its reflection in their writings is inevitable. Previously, the description of hurricanes, storms, flash floods etc. have found place in the literary writings. But climate change phenomena as a whole, in its varied dimensions, is yet to be a part of literary writing. Alexandre Leskanich has well-articulated the situation in his book review as such: “Ghosh contends that the contemporary novel, using narrow scales of time and space that rarely exceed more than a human lifespan, is not only neglectful of climate change but is partly complicit in the dissociation of the mind from the vulnerability of its corporeal situation, since it rarely allows the climate to violently intrude upon the habitual routines and ordinary concerns it prefers to portray. He therefore calls for a heightened imaginary response to climate change....”¹⁵

The second part of the book is titled ‘History’ in which the author of the book has traced the origin of ‘carbon economy’ or the climate crisis in the world. It is generally believed that the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century England later ushered in an era of global warming and climate crisis. This is majorly true also. However, Ghosh opines that “to look at the climate crisis through the prism of empire is to recognize, first, that the continent of 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.it.” He further says that the ‘discourse on global warming remains largely Eurocentric.’ He has further carried on the debate in detail focusing on ‘Asia's centrality to the climate crisis.’ He has drawn his conclusions on his studies based on Burma, India and China. He has marshalled his facts in a logical and convincing manner. It makes an interesting reading to know about Asia's role in the growth of global warming and climate crisis. He conclusively observes that “In any reckoning of climate justice, this history needs to be taken into account: that in both India and China, the two nations that are now often blamed for precipitating the climate crisis, there were significant numbers of people who understood, long before climate scientists brought in the data, that industrial civilization was subject to limitations of scale and would collapse if adopted by the majority of the earth's people.”¹⁶ Prophetic words, indeed! The hard fact is that ‘every human being, past and present, has contributed to the present cycle of climate change.’

Here, it is noteworthy that scholars like Naomi Klein and others have ‘identified the currently dominant model of capitalism as one of the principal drivers of climate change.’ However, Ghosh observes that this narrative overlooks the equally important aspects of global warming-empire and imperialism. While capitalism and empire are definitely dual aspects of a single reality, the relationship between them is not simple in relation to global warming.¹⁷ Ghosh has clearly demonstrated this in the subsequent chapters of this part, History.

One of the most important purposes of politics is, undoubtedly, governance. Political masters are primarily responsible for looking after the welfare of the citizens. As a natural corollary to this dogma, the burning issue of climate change naturally comes into the domain of politics, and the political class as a whole is fully responsible for making laws and implementing them for the upkeep of nature in its pristine form so that the inhabitants could get free and pure air, water and a pollution-free atmosphere. But in practice, this is rarely brought into practice by the politicians. After the advent of the Industrial Revolution in Europe and its fall out in the Asian subcontinent, money-making and power games have been the most favourite pastime of the political masters all over the world. That has resulted in the gradual and systematic destruction of nature out of insatiable greed of the nations ready to grab any

opportunity to become richer and richer in due course. The phenomena of climate change had started long back but it could not find place in any political discourse, anywhere in the world. As of now, Ghosh says: "Climate change poses a powerful challenge to what is perhaps the single most important political concept of the modern era: the idea of freedom, which is central not only to contemporary politics but also to the humanities, the arts and literature."¹⁸

India, which is now an independent country, witnessed a lot of political activities in the past and the process is still continuing with more vigour. But the proper discourse on global warming and climate change is somehow lacking. Lacking. Ghosh has aptly summarized the situation by observing as such: "In the last few decades, India has become very 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 organizations and grassroots movements."¹⁹ He further points out: "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."²⁰ This is highly disturbing in the light of the fact that India ranks within the top three countries in the world who are considered to be notorious for carbon emissions. One more surprising fact is that climate change, global warming or increasing pollution do not find place in the electoral agendas of any political parties during elections.

Ghosh has also discussed the Paris Agreement of 2015 in detail and focuses on the fact that even in this landmark Agreement amongst the nations, no straight talking has been done and the real situation causing the present state of climate change has been put forth in simplified words. He quotes an example by referring that the climate treaty, Kyoto Protocol, made a reference to "market imperfections". But the Paris Agreement only acknowledges that 'climate change is a common concern for humankind.'²¹ This is an open secret that politics plays an upper hand during such conferences on climate change and related issues. The most powerful countries like America, Germany, France, China etc., who are incidentally the biggest culprits in the growth of climate change, dominate such events and not a single harsh word can find place in the final document of the treaty or agreement. Even the recently concluded COP29 Conference at Baku repeats the same story where no consensus could be evolved on climate funding. Ghosh has expressed the reality so eloquently in these lines: "In the text of the Paris Agreement, by contrast, there is not the slightest acknowledgement that something has gone wrong with our dominant paradigms; it contains no clause or article that could be interpreted as a critique of the practices that are known to have created the situation that the Agreement seeks to address. The current paradigm of perpetual growth is enshrined at the core of the text."²² It is a common knowledge that the President-elect of the U.S.A, Donald Trump is very much against the terms and mandate of the Paris Agreement, and the present stalemate at the Baku Conference had his spectre looming over the conference.

2. CONCLUSION

In both of his *Avant Garde* works, Amitav Ghosh has lifted the discussion on climate change from the realm of science and carried it further to the domain of art and literature, history, culture and politics. He has, at length, dwelt upon the causes and reasons for the present crisis and reached the conclusion that climate crisis is a reflection of multiple factors including cultural and literary failure to make a timely wake up call for the people, the crucial role of industrialization, the rapid growth of capitalism, and lastly, the insipid and selfish role played by the political class. In fact, he has spared nobody coming on the way to the sudden spurt of climate crisis affecting the globe. For creating his unique narrative, he has used his favourite

storytelling technique which sustains readers' interest till the end. His detailed and meticulous research has definitely lent credence to whatever he says. His narrative is thought provoking and suggestive of future actions. It also comes as a warning signal for those who are still oblivious of the impending catastrophe. Naomi Oreskes, author of *Science on a Mission*, has aptly stated about the concerns raised by Ghosh as "we will never resolve our planetary crisis until we acknowledge that the 'great acceleration' of the past fifty years is part of a larger historical pattern of omnicide."

REFERENCES

Book Review, *The Great Derangement-Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Ghosh, by Noel Corkery, available at <https://worldlandscapearchitect.com/book-review-the-great-derangement-climate-change-and--the-unthinkable/?v=3a1ed7090bfa>, accessed on 8.9.2024.

Amitav Ghosh: where is the fiction about climate change? *The Guardian*, 28 Oct 2016, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/28/amitav-ghosh-where-is-the-fiction-about-climate-change->, accessed on 8.9.2024.

Ibid.

A Lamp Falls, The Nutmeg's Curse, Amitav Ghosh 13, Penguin Random House, 2021.

Terraforming, The Nutmeg's Curse, 54.

Ibid. 53.

Ibid. 55.

Ibid. 55.

Ibid.65.

Ibid. 116.

Ibid.119.

Ibid.245.

Naomi Oreskes, author of *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future*.

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 113.

Book Review: *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Ghosh, LSE Review of Books blog, available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2017/07/20/book-review-the-great--derangement-climate-change-and-the-unthinkable-by-amitav-ghosh/> accessed on 8.9.2024.

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* 153.

Ibid.117.

Ibid.159.

Ibid.169.

Ibid.

Ibid.207.

Ibid.206.