



INTERROGATING THE POLITICS OF SINCERITY IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GREAT DERANGEMENT: CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE UNTHINKABLE*

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ABSTRACT



Climate change has become the most concerning issue of the Anthropocene age. In his work of nonfiction, *The Great Derangement Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh investigates the incapability of the current generation to understand the level of climate change in the realms of 'Literature', 'History', and 'Politics'. While interrogating the politics of climate change, this research article critically analyses how Ghosh's work calls for more cultural and imaginative forms of fiction and nonfiction that show resistance to materialism and political opportunism obliterating the entire globe. It will be explored as to how Ghosh makes a comparison between the Paris Agreement (December 2015) and Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* (May 2015) revealing that how these two texts are quite dissimilar in their discourses that deal with the same climate issue. Although the scientific communities have been well aware of the link between climate change and greenhouse gases for many years, the political leaders of the world have been sluggish and callous to respond and take practical measures to reduce the risks. The writer urges the people to find new political and artistic frameworks to recognise and decrease the impact of man-made misery of climate crisis, sharing his own discerning and thought-provoking perspective as a great scholar, nonfiction writer, and citizen of our climatically jeopardized world.

Keywords: Climate Change, Ecology, *Derangement*, *Politics*, *History*, *Literature*, Paris Agreement, Pope Francis' *Laudato si'*, *Greenhouse Gases*, *Global Warming*.

**INTRODUCTION**

Climate change, as everyone is aware, has become a ubiquitous and the most concerning issue of the Anthropocene age. It has turned out to be the subject of serious study by ecologists, academicians, and research and development organisations across the globe. As observed by the United Nations Organisations:

Climate change refers to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns. These shifts may be natural, such as through variations in the solar cycle. But since the 1800s, human activities have been the main driver of climate change, primarily due to burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and gas. Burning fossil fuels generates greenhouse gas emissions that act like a blanket wrapped around the Earth, trapping the sun's heat and raising temperatures ("What Is Climate Change? | United Nations").

The fact that how the patterns of weather change over some period of time is known as climate change. Due to this, there is an increase in average temperature that results in larger changes turning into alarming levels of temperatures, flooding, drought, increasing sea levels, hurricanes, communicable diseases, adverse effects on food production so on and so forth. Even though the scientific communities have been well aware of the link between climate change and greenhouse gases for many years, the political leaders of the world have been sluggish and callous to respond and take practical measures to reduce the risks. Scientists, research scholars, social and environmental activists, and other concerned people are criticising the lack of political will and conviction in effectively managing the climate issue. Despite several warnings over frightening levels of poisonous gases in the atmosphere and unprecedented variations in ecosystems, the emission of greenhouse gases has increased exponentially. As aptly explained by Nightingale et al,

The task of transforming economies and everyday practices has become more urgent than ever, and yet more daunting as attempts at behaviour change, regulations, and global agreements confront the realities

of material and social-political infrastructures that support the status quo. Indeed, it is at least in part this confrontation between climate responses and social-political realities that creates inaction. (Nightingale et al 343)

As the climate issue has reached dangerous proportions, there is a conspicuous global failure in terms of tackling it politically. The measures taken to resolve this problem are unsatisfactory, taking into consideration the tragic repercussions faced by every country. It is to be noted that climate change is not only an ecological or political crisis but also a cultural crisis, as it exposes a failure of the imagination. This sensitive issue remains very abstract and quite intricate to understand it imaginatively.

Amitav Ghosh is one of the most famous Indian diasporic writers of fiction and nonfiction. The picture of the Ganges Delta on the cover of his nonfiction book, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, captured by the satellite reveals how this delta region lays bare the water's convoluted patterns on the low-lying region. The reader of this book can understand that this low-lying region is always subjected to unexpected and unprecedented flooding. As it is a densely populated area, it poses many problems to its people and animals. Based on a series of lectures delivered by Amitav Ghosh at the University of Chicago, this nonfiction book is structured in three parts titled 'Stories', 'History' and 'Politics', which are placed on the contents page. As stated by Ghosh, the people of the Earth are presently living in an age called the "Great Derangement" (*Great* 124), and future generations will be bewildered at our sheer ignorance of the exceptionally significant issue of climate change, posing a serious threat to this planet. Julia Adeney Thomas et al note: "The brilliance of *The Great Derangement* lies in its persuasive revelation of how our modes of representation have derailed humanity, blinding us to our real condition" (Thomas et al 938).

DISCUSSION

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (hereafter, *Great*), Amitav Ghosh asks very important and pertinent questions: Are we deranged? How can we explain our imaginative



failure in the face of global warming and climate crisis? Amitav Ghosh, one of the most renowned Indian writers of fiction and nonfiction, mentions that the people of future generations may well think so about these questions. The last part of the book, 'Politics', has been selected for my study and drafting this research article. The opening lines of this part are noteworthy:

Climate change poses a powerful challenge to what is perhaps the single most important political conception 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" (*Great* 159).

Ghosh remarks that the political leaders of all nations have failed miserably to address the issue of climate change. Lacking in collective political conviction and wisdom, the political leaders have not shown any interest in providing a feasible solution to climate change that has been described as a moral problem by a large number of people across the globe. The haunting questions obsessed with many thinkers and writers of the twentieth century have been specifically those that related to the modern leaders and thinkers. "Jawaharlal Nehru's passion for dams and factories and Mao Zedong's 'War on Nature' had their counterparts also in literature and the arts" (*Great* 161).

In many Anglosphere countries like the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia Canada, and New Zealand global warming or climate change is regarded as a "moral issue" (*Great* 177), which leads to polarisation as some national leaders disregard climate change completely, and the political leaders of other nations firmly believe in imminent disaster and speak out determinedly in favor of climate change. It can be observed that the "yardsticks of morality are not the same everywhere" (*Great* 179).

Ghosh thinks that the issue of climate change is getting reduced to individual measures rather than a collective solution. So, the writer aptly raises his doubt and questions the "politics of sincerity" (*Great* 178). If this global issue of climate change is to be understood from the viewpoint of the individual ethics and morality, then consistency and sincerity

will inexorably be converted into the touchstones by which political positions and functioning will be evaluated. "The public politics of climate change is itself an illustration of the ways in which the moral-political can produce paralysis" (*Great* 171). The writer investigates the realm of politics and the power dynamics, which turn the fight against climate change into utter hopelessness.

While making a comparison between the Paris Agreement (December 2015) and Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* (May 2015), Ghosh reveals that these two texts are quite dissimilar in their discourses that deal with the same climate issue. These two documents make the reader understand that "the earth's climate is changing and that human beings are largely responsible for these changes. The documents can therefore rightly be seen as a vindication of climate science" (*Great* 202). The notion of "miraculous interventions" (*Great* 205) is conspicuous only in the Paris Agreement, which "repeatedly invokes the impossible: for example, the aspirational goal of limiting the rise in global mean temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius—a target that is widely believed to be already beyond reach" (*Great* 205).

The writer emphasises that the Paris Agreement uses corporate jargon that caters to the political power dynamics to tackle the issue in a way that does not in any way bring down the existing state of political affairs. He asserts: "When future generations look back upon the Great Derangement, they will certainly blame the leaders and politicians of contemporary times for their failure to address the climate crisis. But they may well hold artists and writers equally culpable—for the imagining of possibilities is not, after all, the job of politicians and bureaucrats" (*Great* 181). On the other hand, the Pope's encyclical letter emphasises social and climate justice that goes beyond individualistic interests, and a collective mindset is needed to serve the purpose. As climate change is a national as well as an international problem, it, by no manner of means, can be solved individually. "What we need instead is to find a way out of the individualizing imaginary in which we are trapped" (*Great* 181). Ghosh asserts that this issue of climate change can be solved only



with the collective wisdom and efforts of political leaders.

Throughout the Anglosphere, predominantly in the United States of America, the tension between all-pervasive denialism and dynamic activism now defines the public politics of climate crisis. As performativity and identity are now central to public discourse, climate change also has become intertwined in the politics of self-definition. When Australian and American politicians speak of “climate change negotiations as posing a threat to ‘our way of life’, they are following the same script that led Ronald Reagan to speak of the reduction of the use of oil as an assault on what it means to be American” (Great 183).

In Kenyan Review, Nathan Jandl reviews on *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Ghosh that

In his final section, “Politics,” Ghosh parallels the enduring ideology of capitalist growth with the unsettlingly similar literary impulse to pursue the next avant-garde. These cultural trends, Ghosh suggests—which are compounded by the “politics of sincerity” and the “politics of self-definition,” both individualizing impulses susceptible to co-optation by climate change deniers—have snarled our capacity for collectivity (Jandl).

The issue of climate change has the potential of considerably restructuring the worldwide distribution of power and wealth. This is due to the carbon economy which is such that power is mostly dependent on the using up of fossil fuels. The world’s most powerful nations are oil states too. Timothy Mitchell—a British-born author, political theorist, and historian—remarks that their present forms of economic and political cannot exist if they do not derive energy from oil. Further, he states that they will not be in a position to maintain their current positions in the global power ranking. It is certainly to be noted that the increase in the use of fossil fuels in India and China has brought about a huge change in maintaining their international relations. “These realities cast a light of their own on the question of climate justice. That justice should be aspired to is widely agreed; it could hardly be otherwise since this

ideal lies at the heart of all contemporary claims of political legitimacy” (Great 191).

In his scholarly chapter titled *Writer as a Commentator of Ecological Issues: A Thematic Study of Amitav Ghosh’s The Great Derangement Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Arabati Pradeep Kumar remarks:

Climate change, without a shadow of a doubt, is the greatest challenge the world is facing today. It is affecting every human being on the earth irrespective of his geographical region or economic and social status. An enthusiastic follower of climate justice, Ghosh states that the nations like China, India, and the western nations are adopting methods and policies for their development which are creating the problem of the climate crisis. He also maintains that these countries should come out of the carbon-intensive and consumerist economy. Climate Justice involves investigating the dilemma of climate change from a political and ethical angle. (Kumar 46)

It is to be acknowledged that the issue of climate change is probably the most politicised and alarming in the world. “The reason for this is simple: the basic building block of these structures is the nation-state, inherent to the nature of which is the pursuit of the interests of a particular group of people” (Great 214). A powerful international organisation like the United Nations Organisation (UNO) appears to be helpless in tackling this globally challenging problem. This is partially due to power politics and rivalries noticeably observed in geopolitics. It may also be because climate change poses an insoluble problem for modern nations with regard to their “biopolitical mission and the practices of governance that are associated with it” (Great 214).

In Asian countries, several events have been initiated to publicise the issue of climate change as a mere deceptive trick done by well-developed Americans and Europeans. What the writer tries to drive home the point is that this kind of selfish politics of climate change has disastrous repercussions on the very survival of our planet in not-too-distant-future. Therefore, he makes an earnest appeal to all political leaders of the world to



join hands together and provide a feasible solution to the climate crisis. Adedeji et al remark:

One tries to find the solution in sustainable development, tackling social, economic, and ecologic problems at one time. A similar attitude requires quite a co-ordination and close collaboration between regional, national and international bodies, but environmentalists are not convinced that the political will to take measures is strong enough to turn the tide" (Adedeji et al 121).

No doubt, Ghosh's nonfictional narrative has proved to be instrumental in heightening the awareness of climate change in the public sphere. Leiserowitz aptly states that people's consciousness of climate change and its consequent issues is pivotal to providing a solution to the climate issue because it is people who can apply political pressure on political leaders of every country. "Public opinion is critical because it is a key component of the socio-political context in which policymakers operate. Public opinion can fundamentally compel or constrain political, economic, and social action to address particular risks" (Leiserowitz 3). If nation-states understand the impact of the climate crisis with a political will and humanitarian spirit, it will reshape global politics decisively. But, as of now, it appears to be a wild goose chase in our collective imagination.

Be it as it may, the national and international communities of military and intelligence of these countries firmly believe in the wonders of science and work in the direction of providing possible solutions only with regard to maintaining their positions of political power. Ghosh rightly regards the work of these organisations as the "politics of the armed lifeboat" (Great 197). He explains that these solutions provided with ulterior political motives are only meant for proclaiming their supremacy without sparing any thought to the potential sufferers of climate change. Some developing nations like India in South Asia implicitly lean towards the "politics of attrition. The assumption underlying this is that the populations of poor nations because they are accustomed to hardship, possess the capacity to absorb, even if at great cost, certain shocks and stresses that might cripple rich nations (Great 197)".

Especially in poor nations, even the people belonging to the middle classes are habituated to managing scarcities and discomforts of all kinds. Getting used to difficult conditions may create certain types of resilience, particularly regarding extreme heat that is one of the most abrupt consequences of global warming. Therefore, for example, 46,000 people died in 2003 because of the unbearable European heatwave, while, approximately, 56,000 people died in 2010 because of a severe heatwave in Russia. The figures of the death toll due to the heatwave in 2015 are far more in South Asia and the region of the Persian Gulf, which staggeringly recorded the readings of heat index as much as whopping 72.8 degrees Celsius. Amitav Ghosh remarks:

One of the reasons why climate change is a 'wicked' as opposed to a 'normal' problem is that the time horizon in which effective action can be taken is very narrow: every year that passes without a drastic reduction in global emissions makes catastrophe more certain. It is hard to see how popular protest movements could gain enough momentum within such a narrow horizon of time: such movements usually take years, even decades, to build. And to build them in the current situation will be all the more difficult because security establishments around the world have already made extensive preparations for dealing with activism. (Great 214-15).

CONCLUSION

In his *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh affirms that it is our collective failure to engage with the climate crisis in a meaningful way. "He argues that the climate crisis is at its core a crisis of the imagination, presenting our failure to recognize human impacts on the environment as rooted in our difficulty imagining the sheer scale and urgent nature of the problem" (Poray-Wybranowska and Ball 1)

Ghosh asserts in *The Great Derangement* that more and more environmental and social activists are protesting against climate change. People are looking for alternative energy sources Yet, the amount of time left to think and act is very short. The disruptions and derangement of global climate are



about to reach dangerous proportions. The writer remarks that politics has become a matter more of individual moral reckoning than a collective act. He urges the people to find new political and artistic frameworks to recognise and decrease the impact of the human-induced climate crisis, revealing his own discerning and thought-provoking perspective as a great scholar, nonfiction writer, and citizen of our climatically jeopardized world.

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