International Research Journal of Humanities, Language and Literature
ISSN: (2394-1642)
Impact Factor 8.972 Volume 12, Issue 6, June 2025
Association of Academic Researchers and Faculties (AARF)
Website-www.aarf.asia, Email : editor@aarf.asia , editoraarf@gmail.com

The Cultural Crisis of the Anthropocene: Examining Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*

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Abstract: The Anthropocene epoch is an unofficial geological time unit to mark the most recent period in Earth's history. The term is popularly used to mark the profound and irreversible impact of human activities on Earth's ecosystem. While much scholarly attention has been given to the implications of the Anthropocene, the present paper attempts to explore the deeply rooted cultural crisis and highlights the failure of our stories to bring forth the unsaid truth. Drawing on Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable,* the paper examines how contemporary literature, specifically modern fiction, has failed to represent the scale and urgency of climate change. By analysing the intersections of climate, culture, and narrative, the present paper delves deeper into Ghosh's understanding of the cultural crisis in light of climate change and catastrophic events. Ghosh critiques the Western ideals of enlightenment and progress. He argues that the Anthropocene is the outcome of modernity and the colonial legacy. The idea of human exceptionalism promoted by Renaissance humanism aggravates the Western tendency to treat nature as a subject to be exploited. This philosophical degrading of nature further unfolds into cultural detachment from nature.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate, Culture, Crisis, Fiction.

The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable is a seminal nonfiction work by Amitav Ghosh. In this groundbreaking work, Ghosh laments the world under the climate crisis and holds literature, culture and politics responsible for the apocalyptic scenario. The book, divided into three sections, Stories, History and Politics, begins with the analogies of inanimate objects coming alive to outline the threat of ecological collapse looming over the world. Ghosh uses an analogy from *The Empire Strikes Back,* in which Han Solo believes he is landing on an asteroid, and realises that he has entered the gullet of a sleeping space monster. Similarly, the modern idea of development may be projected as an arrangement for a better life, but eventually it is leading life to the threshold of extinction and to this misalignment between the world we live in and the stories we tell about it, Ghosh calls the great derangement. Highlighting the failure of literature in presenting climate issues properly and adequately, Ghosh asserts that future generations will condemn the way contemporary literature, especially the literature since the end of the Romantic age, treats nature as negligible or of no value. "The humans of the future will surely understand, knowing what they presumably will know about the history of their forebears on earth, that only in one, very brief era, lasting less than three centuries, did a significant number of their kind believe that planets and asteroids are inert" (4).

Ghosh's nuanced and critical take on the Anthropocene places him among the leading writers to speak of the Anthropocene at a global level with incessant intensity. Environmental degradation and catastrophic events are the defining characteristics of the Anthropocene. Accelerating anthropogenic activities are directly proportional to the modification of culture. Machines were invented to make life easier for humans, but instead of using devices for their purpose, humans began to be consumed by the desire for more materialism. In line with the Buddhist teaching that desire is the root cause of all evil, Ghosh argues that the unquenchable human desire to have more than needed is causing the cultural crisis. "Indeed, this is perhaps the most important question ever to confront culture in the broadest sense— for let us make no mistake: the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the 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" (13).

The stark contrast between migration from one place to another, specifically from rural to urban spaces in search of more materialistic gains and forced displacement from home to away due to catastrophic events, is the prominent issue that Ghosh raises in light of the cultural crisis of the Anthropocene. Prehistoric humans had all day to wander and wonder, whereas modern humans, with all the advancement of technology at hand, are bound by their greed for more and often find themselves with no time to spare. The material culture is driving a large number of people from

rural areas to urban spaces towards adopting a lifestyle that puts them into a rat race of desiring more and having more. Consequently, metropolitan cities are being heavily overcrowded. Every geographical area has an intrinsic capacity to tolerate a specific amount of exploitation. Whenever an area is exploited more than it can offer to be exploited, consequences often include the loss of biodiversity, and in extreme cases, a climate catastrophe. Ghosh warns of overpopulated Mumbai, which is only 603.4 square kilometres in area and thronged by more than 21 million people. However, it is improbable for Mumbai to be hit by a scale 4-5 cyclone; nothing is impossible with the fast-changing climatic conditions, and if such a situation appears, devastation and loss of life can only be calculated, not negated.

With the rising probability of improbable events in recent times, a debate among geologists and scientists around the globe is catching attention on whether such events are sudden catastrophic phenomena or the result of a long, gradual process. Ghosh has also stressed gradualism versus catastrophism in light of the unprecedented event of hurricane Sandy that struck New York in 2012. This part of the Atlantic had never witnessed a sea storm of such strength. The mammoth size and might of that superstorm exceeded all previous records of such a phenomenon, thereby making it a highly improbable event. There are adequate similarities between New York and Mumbai that prompt Ghosh to think, what if such an improbable event occurs in the Arabian Sea and a similar powerful cyclone strikes Mumbai? He delves deeper into the probabilities of such an unlikely event and discovers that catastrophic events are not always sudden accidents. As the occurrence of unprecedented events is rising sharply, Ghosh notes that the Anthropocene will be marked by the flurry of such events when he states,

> "And it appears that we are now in an era that will be defined precisely by events that appear, by our current standards of normalcy, highly improbable: flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, spells of unprecedented heat, sudden landslides, raging torrents pouring down from breached glacial lakes, and, yes, freakish tornadoes."(24)

As per a report published in The Times of India, "Currently, about 55% of the global population resides in urban areas, and the United Nations anticipates that this number will rise to 68% by 2050, equating to approximately 2.5 billion additional people living in cities" (Top 10 Fastest-Growing). Contrary to the rural-to-urban migrants striving for better opportunities, Ghosh raises the plight of climate refugees, who are forced to leave their homeland. Ghosh expresses his longing for a place on the bank of the river Padma in Bangladesh, where his ancestors used to live. Recalling childhood memories of journeying through the mighty river Padma, he feels a certain animism and connection to the river. Although Amitav Ghosh was born in Kolkata, India and has

never lived in his ancestral village, which is now in Bangladesh, this inherited sense of belongingness still strikes him. “When I look into my past the river seems to meet my eyes, staring back, as if to ask, Do you recognize me, wherever you are?” (9). Ghosh was told by his father that his ancestors were forced to move to Bihar from Bangladesh due to their village being drowned in the catastrophic floods caused by the river Padma in the mid-1850s. Through his personal feelings and experiences, Ghosh highlights the plight of millions of climate refugees who are displaced by the catastrophic events occurring due to changing climatic conditions and environmental degradation. “According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 65.6 million forcibly displaced people in the world today. And this number will grow as distorted economic ‘development’ and wars over resources intensify” (Shiva 28). Failing to diagnose the severity of the climate crisis and taking strong actions to curb Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, the number of catastrophic events and climate refugees is expected to only rise at a higher rate. “The Ecosystem Threat Register (ETR) released in September 2018 by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), an Australian international think tank, points out that at least 1.2 billion people could be displaced by these threats by 2050” (Ida).

Ghosh stresses that people living at the seashore line or river banks are most likely to encounter uncanny and improbable events. It also becomes imperative to point out that humans are not the only species to suffer the rage of human-induced catastrophic events. Often, our data and analysis remain restricted to the human loss in an ecosystem collapse, but there are many other species of flora and fauna that bear the brunt of anthropogenic activities. Formed by the confluence of the Ganga, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, Sundarbans is one of the most extensive single tracts of mangrove forests. Along with four million humans, it is home to a wide range of fauna, including endangered species such as the Bengal Tiger, Irrawaddy Dolphin, Estuarine Crocodile, the Indian Python and over 250 bird species. It is a complex ecosystem situated mainly in Bangladesh and partly in India. If the present trends of global warming are to continue, the rising sea levels will soon engulf Sundarbans, and it will displace not only millions of humans but also put endangered species to extinction. “For instance, it has been estimated that a 28-cm sea level rise above levels of the year 2000 would result in a 96 per cent decline of the Bengal Tiger’s habitat in Bangladesh. These threats are increasingly worrying as the rise in sea level is currently 3.2 mm per year” (Sundarbans).

Ghosh holds that contemporary literature, specifically novels, has failed to portray the cultural crisis responsible for the climate crisis. Climate fiction is treated as non-serious or categorised as science fiction, but this does not change the reality that the crisis is for real. Ghosh believes that realising the presence of a threat and choosing to ignore the problem because it is more convenient will not bring the solution. He stresses the need to present nature and climate change as

central themes of fiction stories. Calling for a transformation in storytelling, Ghosh urges writers to make fundamental shifts in narrative frameworks and develop cultural consciousness. Manolis Dafermos, in an article, "Discussing the Concept of Crisis in Cultural-historical Activity Research: a Dialectical Perspective", also makes a similar observation, "By historicising the concept of crisis, dialectical thinking provides a fruitful methodological framework for discussing deep and urgent social and ecological problems. The work of historicizing concepts and social practices invites a closer examination of the complex, dynamic interplay of past- and future-oriented temporalities" (288). As literature is predominantly defined as the mirror of society, it becomes imperative for the writers to present deeply rooted cultural issues of our society and their consequences in the form of climate change. Instead of relegating climate fiction to science fiction or non-fiction narratives, literature should be used as a powerful means to fight climate change issues.

Ghosh uses the theories of gradualism and catastrophism to highlight the urgency of fighting climate issues and the complacency that climate change can be tackled slowly. Catastrophists emphasize the suddenness of unprecedented catastrophic events and all such natural disaster phenomena. To them, the present landscape of Earth is the result of short-lived, sudden, violent, accidental events.

> Baron Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), a French zoologist and naturalist, postulated the doctrine of catastrophism, which states that the physical and biological Earth was shaped by sudden, short-lived, and widespread or global catastrophes and disasters, in 1810. He wanted to explain what caused Earth's large geological and biological changes. Later, in 1832, William Whewell called this doctrine catastrophism." (Mcnair)

Cuvier opposed the theory of gradual transformation of one form into another, proposed by his contemporaries Geoffroy Saint Hilaire and Jean Baptiste Lamarck and proposed that the present geological conditions are developed by cataclysmic events. The central principle of catastrophism is that each geological epoch begins and ends with abrupt and violent catastrophes such as major floods or meteorite strikes. Therefore, all five major mass extinctions, including the extinction of dinosaurs, were the result of accidental catastrophic events. Cuvier's theory of Catastrophism was ruled out by Charles Darwin. In his groundbreaking work *On the Origin of Species,* Darwin laid out the principles of gradual evolution through natural selection. Gradualists are of the belief that there is a long process before any geological event.

Although Ghosh does not explicitly promote any of the theories, he leans more towards catastrophism in the context of climate change. Emphasising the abrupt and unpredictable nature of climate events, he criticises the complacency of leaders and policymakers in treating ecological

depletion as something that will happen to others at some other time. He raises the alarming concern of rapidly increasing the probability of improbable events, thus highlighting the catastrophism theory. Instead of the slow and linear progression of cataclysmic events, Ghosh, through his arguments, seems to advocate for sudden disruptive events and their consequences. There's an emergency need to address the improbable catastrophic events. He emphasises that the Anthropocene is not simply an environmental crisis but rather a profound cultural rupture. It is the outcome of a deeply rooted Western belief that humans are superior to all other species and, thus, hold the right and power to exploit natural resources at will with no regard to nature. Our mainstream narratives, especially in literature and politics, have failed to acknowledge the urgency and scale of the environmental crisis. Salman Rushdie, a popular Indian-British novelist, also underscores the importance of storytelling, "We need stories, we need stories to understand ourselves. We are the only creature that does this unusual thing of telling each other stories in order to try and understand the kind of creature we are" (MasterClass 0:00-0:12). Thus, to better address the scale of the climate crisis and to be able to mitigate the intensity of it the onus is on contemporary novelists and storytellers to address the cultural crisis of the Anthropocene.

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