

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 7. Issue.1. 2020 (Jan-Mar)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

CLIMATE FICTION IN THE ERA OF ANTHROPOCENE: A READING OF SELECT TEXTS OF
AMITAV GHOSH

MANEESHA K

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English & Comparative Literature, Central University of Kerala,
Kasargod, Kerala.



Article information

Received:22/12/2019

Revised & Accepted:
17/01/2020

Published online: 25/01/2020

doi: [10.33329/ijelr.7.1.20](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.7.1.20)

ABSTRACT

In the Era of Anthropocene, humans have become the geological agents who can alter the entire universe. They have altered the earth system, climate conditions, land surface and the lives on the planet, and that has resulted in the displacement of human and nonhuman species. Habitat destruction of biotic entities leads to species loss and it becomes very common in the era of Anthropocene. The discourses of Anthropocene started with the realms of physical and geological sciences, later reaching up to the domain of humanities, art and literature. Dipesh Chakrabarty talks about the conjointment of histories to address the climate catastrophe of the Anthropocene. Following that, renowned writer Amitav Ghosh focuses on the significance of portraying climate change in contemporary art and literature.

Keywords: Anthropocene, Climate Change, Habitat Destruction, Species Loss, Exile, Climate Fiction

Nobel Prize-winning, atmospheric chemist Paul J Crutzen defined this human dominated time as the Anthropocene Era. According to him and his fellow scientists,

The term Anthropocene suggests: (i) that the Earth is now moving out of its current geological epoch called the Holocene and (ii) that human activity is largely responsible for this exit from the Holocene, that is, that human kind has become a global geological force in its own right (843).

The era of Anthropocene is witnessing drastic shifts in climate, which ends in species extinction and habitat destruction. Species, both human and nonhuman, are forced to migrate from one place to another for their survival due to ecological catastrophes. As a preface to the UN Climate Conference held from 2 December to 13 December 2019, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said; "world's efforts to stop **climate change** have been utterly inadequate so far and there is a danger global warming could pass the point of no return."(<https://www.thehindu.com>) He opined that the increase in temperature and drastic shift in weather patterns affect humans and other species in an unprecedented manner. Contemporary fiction tries to address the ultimate problem, climate catastrophe. In this attempt, the writings of Amitav Ghosh hold a prominent position. This paper focuses on select texts of Amitav Ghosh such as his two works of fiction, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019) and nonfiction *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*(2016) and finds out how he responds to the contemporary climate crisis and species niche destruction.

The very recent wild fire in Amazon rain forests invited worldwide attention. In the last couple of years, frequent fires have been common in the Amazon and environmentalists share their anxiety of having a planetary crisis in the near future because

Spread over 5.5 million square kilometers, the Amazon is home to at least 40,000 plant species, 427 mammals, 1,300 birds, 378 reptiles, more than 400 amphibians, around 3,000 freshwater fishes and 100,000 invertebrate species. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, the Amazon holds over half of the terrestrial species of animals, plants and insects and is home to some 420 indigenous communities which play a key role in conservation. (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in>)

At this particular juncture of global warming, the Amazon has a major role in controlling the excess amount of CO₂ which is being absorbed by its vegetation. Now, on the contrary, the burning causes emissions of huge amounts of Carbon Dioxide and Carbon Monoxide. The excess amount of CO₂ in the atmosphere results in global warming. Planet Earth is warming more than ever and this causes changes in everything. Each species has its own ecological niche to live and evolve. The variations in climate due to global warming cause species extinction and habitat loss. WWF observes that "Global warming is resulting from human emissions of greenhouse gases. The consequences include habitat loss; shifts in climatic conditions and in habitats that surpass migrational capabilities; altered competitive relationships." (<https://wwf.panda.org/>)

One of the eminent subaltern historians, Dipesh Chakrabarty opined that even though global warming and globalization began at the same time in the 90's, globalization received immediate attention. Academics, literature, international politics, etc. neglected the slow pace of global warming. The situation began to change in the 2000s, when people started experiencing the warming in actual sense. Besides that, the indications of the climate crisis are already visible, such as wild fires, cyclones, melting of ice caps and rise in the sea level. There came a necessity to revise the existing theories, language, politics, economic policies and literature. Chakrabarty says,

As the crisis gathered momentum in the last few years, I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today. ("Climate of History, 199)

Cli-Fi as the Literature of the Anthropocene Era

Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) or the literature of the Anthropocene explores climate change and issues related with global warming. "Issues of global warming, the melting of glaciers, the depletion of ozone layer, and the exhaustion of natural resources, comprise the core concerns of Climate Fiction (Cli-fi), which bridges the gap between academic ecocriticism and environmental activism by foregrounding pressing environmental challenges through the trope of climate change" (Agarwall, 147). Climate Fiction, the term coined by Dan Bloom, a critic, clearly depicts its position, as distinguished from science and apocalyptic fiction.

"Cli-fi is a new genre term for novels, short stories and movies that stands for works of art and storytelling that deals with climate change and global warming concerns: "cli" stands for the first three letters of "climate" and "fi" stands for the first two letters of fiction."

(<https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/>)

J.G Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), Arthur Herzog's *Heat* (1977), David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Margaret Atwood's *Year of the Flood* (2009), Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2010) Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019) are some of the widely known works of climate fiction. From the end of the twentieth century onwards, climate fiction came into the spectrum of literature. Cli-fi offers an important role for writers, movie makers, artists and also common people at this particular critical juncture. The literary, artistic and filmic platforms can be used wisely to project the contemporary climate crisis.

Climate Change in Amitav Ghosh's Writings

This paper deals with select writings of Amitav Ghosh, a writer of the Global South. The selected texts are Ghosh's two novels, *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island*, and the nonfiction *The Great Derangement: Climate change and the Unthinkable*. The nonfiction positions itself between the fictions *The Hungry Tide* and *Gun Island* as a link to connect both. Amitav Ghosh was largely concerned about the denial of climate crises by artists and writers all over the world. According to him, the crisis of climate is nothing but the crisis of culture itself. Being a post-colonial subject, Amitav Ghosh engages with the current climate catastrophe of the global south and seeks how it alters the lives of humans and non-humans there. Beginning with the novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Ghosh expounds his concerns over the environment in the nonfiction *The Great Derangement* (2016) and later, in the climate fiction of the time *Gun Island* in 2019.

Ghosh was actually addressing the era of Anthropocene in his nonfiction *The Great Derangement* and it problematizes the prevailing domains of literature, history and politics with the intensity of his convictions about the nonhuman agencies. It wonders why contemporary literature is not capable of thinking of climate change.

In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York and Bangkok uninhabitable, when readers and museum-goers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first, and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they – what can they – do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight. (*The Great Derangement*, 14-15)

Most of the climate fiction come under apocalyptic fiction, in which Extraterrestrials and inter planetary travels are there to confront the issues of climate change. Most of the apocalyptic fiction is settled in the distant future and Ghosh says that the time is up. Global warming or climate change is not a future phenomenon as it is happening now. Most of the literature narrates the story of human life within a limited time and space. As the Anthropocene demands deconstruction of our norms of time and space, contemporary literature and art can propagate the uncanny face of environmental catastrophe in an effective manner.

The novel *The Hungry Tide* was written in 2004 and Ghosh was not conscious of the environmental degradations faced by his home land. Despite being unaware of the extent of the atrocities meted out by climate change while writing *The Hungry Tide*, he happened to depict the historical and geographical peculiarities of the Sundarbans.

There are no borders to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea. The tides reach as far as three hundred kilometers inland and every day thousands of acres of forest disappear under water only to re-emerge hours later. The currents are so powerful as to reshape the islands almost daily—some days, the water tears away entire promontories and peninsulas; at other times it throws up new shelves and sand banks where there were none before (*The Hungry Tide* 7).

In the novel, Ghosh loses himself in a swirl of ideas like destruction of eco-systems, species loss, conservation of tigers, disposable poor humans and the negligence and double standards of the authorities. It engages with nonhuman entities like tide, flood, cyclones, tigers, dolphins, etc. While writing the novel, he might not have been aware of the often-discussed topics of today like climate change, global warming, etc. The term Anthropocene may not have entered his domain. Perhaps, the text bears his anxieties regarding the changing climate, in its own way. Being unaware of the peculiarities of the era of Anthropocene, Ghosh elaborated things in a prophetic tone.

With the publication of *The Hungry Tide* in 2004, the same year the tsunami hit the southern coasts of India, he enters into a serious observation of natural disasters and environmental catastrophes. He studied the effects of the tsunami on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and wrote a series of articles for *The Hindu*. During this phase, he noticed that cities like New York, Hong Kong, Singapore, Chennai, Kolkata and Mumbai were ravaged severely by tsunamis and storms because these cities are directly open to the sea. And a decade later,

in 2016, with the publication of *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Ghosh takes the narratives of the Anthropocene and climate change from the domain of science, and places it in the suburbs of history, culture, literature, and art. Naomi Oreskes in her article highlights how Amitav Ghosh uses this issue, where he extends this discourse beyond the scientific limits. He is “moving it out of the narrow corridors of science and into the wide precincts of culture, politics, and power”. After the tsunami, he came to know that his hometown Kolkata is most at risk from climate change. While writing fiction based on his perceptions of such calamities, the scope of these hazards seemed limited to the pages of the book, as he was not cognizant of their true implications then. Now, according to him, these calamities, which are accelerated by global warming, seem to have more wide-ranging consequences for human life.

He opines,

But when it came to translating these perceptions into the medium of my imaginative life – into fiction, that is – I found myself confronting challenges of a wholly different order from those that I had dealt with in my earlier work. Back then, those challenges seemed to be particular to the book I was writing, *The Hungry Tide*; but now, many years later, at a moment when the accelerating impacts of global warming have begun to threaten the very existence of low-lying areas like the Sundarbans, it seems to me that those problems have far wider implications. (*The Great Derangement*, 8)

He imagines his new novel named *Gun Island* as an extension of *The Hungry Tide* clarifying all his concerns on climate change and its representations in fiction. The novel is unquestionably a work of climate fiction which elaborates how the current climate crisis would affect the humans, nonhumans and the whole earth system. The setting of the novel extends from the Sundarbans to Brooklyn, New York, Los Angeles and Venice, following the human-nonhuman link. A Bengali rare book dealer, Dinanath Datta, originally from the Sundarbans but settled in Brooklyn comes to his homeland in search of the history behind the myth of the Gun Merchant and Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes. Piya, the protagonist of the novel *The Hungry Tide*, pursues her journey of life and research in *Gun Island* also. Kanai Datt, Tipu, Horen, Moyna and Nilima are the characters from *The Hungry Tide* who appear in this novel also. Cinta, an Italian celebrity academic, her relatives, Rafi, a village boy from the Sundarbans and many migrants from all over the world meet together in *Gun Island*. And of course, the dolphins, crabs, snakes, spiders, worms, cyclone, water, wild fires, etc. too find a space of their own in the novel.

The boundaries made by the humans and the one originally designed by the environment are always in conflict with each other in the novel. The novel elaborates the exile or migration of humans over the continents on the one hand and the same by the nonhumans on the other hand. Snakes, spiders, dolphins, birds, fishes are migrating to other places due to the challenges in their habitat. In the same way, humans from climate-threatened areas are also forced to migrate to Europe or the American continents in search of a better life. He narrates how the right-wing nations turn their back on these poor humans. Ghosh opens up his novel for generating more discussions in the policymaking for better living conditions for humans and nonhumans by world nations in the era of Anthropocene as we are undergoing severe climate catastrophe. Amitav Ghosh talks about the necessity of the emergence of new planet humanism and species thinking.

Gun Island can be termed a story of exile or migration of humans and fellow nonhumans due to several ecological, social and personal inconveniences. The novel narrates the journey of Dinanath Dutta from Brooklyn to the Sundarbans, then to Venice, Los Angeles, etc., the journey of the Gun Merchant in the 16th century to all over the world to escape from the clutches of Manasa Devi, the Goddess of snakes, the exile of Professor Cinta from Venice to America after the death of her husband and daughter, the migration of Tipu and Rafi from the Sundarbans to Venice and also the exile of thousands of migrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, etc. to various European countries in search of a better life. On the other hand, the novel portrays the journey of several nonhuman biotic and abiotic entities by crossing the boundaries made by humans. In such a way, the whole novel deals with the exile of humans and nonhumans mainly due to ecological crisis. The novel clearly depicts how climate change results in habitat destruction and displacement of both human and nonhuman species.

Amitav Ghosh himself said in an interview that “if we cannot curb the problems that are causing man-made global warming and runaway climate change, then cities will have to be abandoned and climate refugees will have to seek food, shelter and fuel in northern areas of the Arctic.” (<https://electricliterature.com/>) For more than a decade he has been analyzing climate change and its effects on culture, politics, human life and literature, and documents those findings in his writings successfully. It should be acknowledged in literature and art that climate change causes niche destruction and species loss in the Era of Anthropocene.

Works Cited

- Agarwal, Pooja. “Cli-fi as the literature of the Anthropocene: An analysis of T.C Boyle’s *A Friend of the Earth*.” *Humanities Circle*. Volume 3, Issue 2. Winter, 2015. Print.
- Bloom, Dan. Interview by David Thorpe. “Dan Bloom on Cli Fi and Imagining the Cities of the Future”. Web. December 02, 2019. <<https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/ex/sustainablecitiescollective/interview-dan-bloom-clifi-and-imagining-cities-future>>
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses”. *Critical Inquiry* 35(2009): 197-222.
- Das, Snigdha. “Why fires that scorched the Amazon are a planetary emergency”. September 30, 2019. Web. November 22, 2019. < <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/natural-disasters/why-fires-that-scorched-the-amazon-are-a-planetary-emergency-66982>>
- Ghosh, Amitav. *Gun Island*. India: Penguin, 2019. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. Interview by J.R. Ramakrishnan. “‘Gun Island’ is a Surreal Novel about Climate Change and Migration”. September 10, 2019. Web. December 02, 2019. < <https://electricliterature.com/gun-island-is-a-magical-realism-novel-about-climate-change-and-migration/>>
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate change and the Unthinkable*. India: Penguin, 2016. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. UK: Harper Collins, 2004. Print.
- Guterres, Antonio. “UN chief warns ‘points of no return’ on climate change.” December 02, 2019. Web. <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/un-chief-warns-of-point-of-no-return-on-climate-change/article30135171.ece>>
- Will Steffen, Jacques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen and John McNeill. "The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives." *The Royal Society A* 369 (2011): 842-867.
- WWF. “A Growing Need for Species to Adapt to a Changing World”. Web. November 22, 2019. < https://wwf.panda.org/our_work/wildlife/problems/climate_change/>