



## RE-THINKING CLIMATE CRISIS: SOCIO-ECO LOGICAL PERSPECTIVES IN IAN McEwan'S SOLAR

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### ABSTRACT:

Climate Fiction is a contemporary literary genre that deals with both global warming and climate change. This genre does not necessarily follow the speculative nature. Works of this genre may take place either in the present world or the near future. It is hard to alienate fiction from human life and their struggles. Man's life is inevitably linked with nature and environment. So writers of climate fiction show their deep commitment towards environment and society. This genre particularly highlights the result of abuse to social injustice and environment which leads to the deprivation of both social systems and ecology. Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010) describes global warming through the interior monologue of the anti-hero Michael Beard. But the heroic character, Tom Aldous devotes his life to climate sustainability. This paper highlights the struggle between climate change and mankind. In this article, Ian McEwan's *Solar* is critically analysed through the lens of Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.

**Keywords:** ecology, climate change, global warming, solar, environment.

### INTRODUCTION:

Climate fiction abbreviated as Cli-fi has its central focus on global warming and climate change. It is a sub-genre of apocalypse style narration. As a new genre its aim is not limited to conveying the experiences of subjectivity but also it involves the conceptual global forces and delineates the intricate spatiotemporal scales and multifaceted perspectives which also includes non-human. With its steadiness it is giving rise to the new ways of conceptualizing climate crisis and climate change. Damn Bloom as a climate change activist and journalist has popularized the term cli-fi with a hope of creating and bring up a new genre a wakeup call and to give warning about the global issue climate change. Since 1820's scientists have studied the earth's greenhouse effect but the term global warming come into effect only by 1970s. Svante

Arrhenius, a Swedish chemist in 1896 concluded that human activities like burning coal has resulted in greenhouse effect and it is danger to Earth and it also affect humans. Like the proverb "as you so you reap", if human beings with their greediness harms the Earth in turn they are going to suffer to the farthest.

Fiction is a depiction of human lives with imagination, so authors like Margaret Atwood, Barbara Kingsolver, Michael Crichton, Ian McEwan, Amitav Ghosh, Paolo Bacigalupi, Ursula Le Guin and Nathaniel Rich had given their contributions to this new genre which shows their deep commitment towards ecology and social systems. Their works describe the climate change with the imagination of past, present and the future. Climate change fiction has so many varieties that include science fiction, utopia, and dystopia and sometimes it

is speculative in nature. As a literature review the article proceeds with the above-mentioned authors and their contribution to climate fiction.

Margaret Atwood has written the trilogy *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *Madd Addam* (2013) in the concept of climate change and it is written as dystopian novel. The novel explains the social inequality, catastrophic climate change and also describes the polluted urban area of the working-class people. Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012) narrates global climate change through the activities of monarch butterflies. Michael Crichton in his techno-thriller novel *State of Fear* explains the danger of global warming through mass murder by eco-terrorists.

So, in this context presents the famous novel *Solar* (2010) by Ian McEwan. He is an English novelist and also a screen writer. *The Times* pictured him as the great British writer in their list of 50 best writers. He is a Booker prize winner for his book *Amsterdam* (1998). Michael Beard is the protagonist and considered as the antihero of the novel *Solar*. He is a recipient of the Nobel Prize for physics at the British forefront in order to find out the solutions on technological basis for the intertwined crisis between environment and energy. Though he has prestigious profile and first-class education, his personal life is full of mess and his inner world is filled with emotional turmoil and ethical dismay. The story begins with the breakdown of Beard's fifth marriage, due to this he distracted from his duties being a head of the 'National Centre for Renewable Energy'. In his life it was he who broke his previous affairs and marriage and Patrice is the first one who breaks the marriage between them and has a affair with

Beard's assistant Tom Aldous. Because of this the novel centers on Michael Beard's petty revenge, jealousy, seal-loathing and lust in spite of his dignified position. Followed by this there goes a non-violent confrontation between Aldous and Beard, where Aldous explains his breakthrough in solar energy, and he accidentally falls and hit himself on the coffee table and instantly he is killed. Beard realizes that he will be certainly accused of this murder, so he decided to flee from the scene, but before that he created evidence that will prove that Patrice's another lover Rodney Tarpin as a murderer. In the meantime, Beard gets the research paper of Aldous about Solar panel and he showed the world as his own research and he prepared to exploit them on the international market.

In this article the novel *Solar* is critically attempts to view in the lens of Amitav Ghosh's non-fiction *The Great Derangement*. In his non-fiction Ghosh writes about the struggles being a climate fiction writer, he says that:

I have come to recognize that the challenges that the climate change poses for the contemporary writer, although specific in some respects, are also products of something broader and older; that they derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that come to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth. (Ghosh 9).

As mentioned in the above statement of Ghosh, here in *Solar* McEwan also describes the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere and he also represents it in a unique way in the contemporary literature. After reciting a formula on carbon dioxide and its reaction towards atmosphere, Michael Beard says, "so

come on. Tell me. Let's hear you apply Heisenberg to ethics. Right plus wrong over the square root of two. What the hell does it mean? Nothing!" (McEwan 106-107). This is certainly the outlook representation of the character Michael Beard, a Nobel prize winner and the protagonist of the novel. Here he mocks the novelist Meredith, who explains the formulae in an ethical situation, Beard satirizes the compatibility of scientific approaches to literary discourses and as well as ethics. So, this sentence is the evident of the theme of scientific approach and the formulae is about artificial photosynthesis. Here McEwan writes the novel in Beard's point of view in order to overthrow the pessimistic scientific belief in the superiority of science over literature in the terms of issues concerning the universe and also to insist on the ability of arts, though he represents in the satirical mood, to make the readers conscious about the man-made catastrophe to the environment. In most of McEwan's work comprises of scientific character and describes their worldviews are limited, incomplete and immature. McEwan explains scientific issues in his novel not because of his rational thought towards science rather he considers this kind of thematic role is capable of magnifying literature in man's life. So here as in the view of literature, the author connects society and ecology.

As Michael Beard steals the research information of Tom Aldous in processing artificial photosynthesis and the invention of solar panel may lead to destruction in global warming and hence there is a risk associated with climate change, further affecting the social systems. for instance, if a scientist in a country commits any mistake without proper

knowledge and exposure to gain awards, destruction may or may not take place in his own country, but there is a chance it may affect other countries. This concept is explained in *The Great Derangement* where Ghosh insists that:

When the monster cyclone comes towards Chennai or Mumbai, what are you going to say to it? No you are coming to the wrong person. You should go and attack the US. Frankly, the strange thing about the world around us is that it's neither good nor bad, nor does it care for you. It will crush you in the same way it crushes the rocks? This is a reality we've forgotten. (Ghosh 45).

So here McEwan depicts the failure of a scientist in competing against nature with his plagiarized artificial photosynthesis research, it spotlights the conceit behind the modernity and the new scientific belief which in turn imitate nature to stop its man-made destruction.

While considering climate change it is associated with both humanity and ecology, that is to say in ecology, there is a climbing number in temperature, and when it comes to humanity it has various side effects on mankind, and hence human lives are at risk. So, this is called as the risk narratives or the narration of climate change crisis. Though the novel *Solar* is not a dystopian or speculative in narration, it allegorically represents single man's destruction who exploits the nature. The novel tackles between the risk factors associated with humans and also the flawed character of Michael Beard which mirrors the course of action as an ecological and environmental politics.

The unnamed narrator of the novel specifically narrates the character of Beard and his

thoughts towards climate change are known through his stream of consciousness, that is, “Beard was not wholly skeptical about climate change. It was one in a list of issues, of looming sorrows, that comprised the background to the news, and he read about it vaguely deplored it and expected government to meet and take action” (McEwan 15). So this shows that climate change is just news for humans and as it is an allegory we can represent Beard to the common public, so most of the people doesn't care ecology or nature, it is just sensational news for them and they are not fully aware of the risk associated with it. In the same Amitav Ghosh implies to mankind that, “climate change is not something that will happen in our children's generation, it is happening now” (Ghosh 33). To further read Beard's character, his selfish attitude even though he is a scientist and very well know the facts and risks, he is not concerned about nature, his stream of consciousness continues,

He knew that a molecule of carbon dioxide absorbed energy in the infrared range, and that humankind was putting these molecules into the atmosphere in significant quantities... and he was unimpressed that some of the wild commentary that suggested the world was in 'peril', that humankind was drifting towards calamity, when coastal cities would disappear under the waves, crops fail, and hundreds of millions of refugees surge from one country, one continent, to another, driven by drought, floods, famine, tempests, unceasing wars for diminishing resources. (McEwan 15)

On the perspective of socio-ecology the above quotation clearly explains the risks and facts due to climate change and global warming. Man cannot live without air, water and food.

Man being a social animal, instead of caring the ecology he is destroying the atmosphere with the emission of carbon dioxide for a luxurious life. But he forgets that natural calamity can bring a huge destruction and there is a great chance that he will suffer in obtaining necessary products for living.

The end of the world was never pitched in the present, where it could be seen for the fantasy, it was, but just around the corner, and when it did not happen, a new issue, a new date would soon emerge... death to the unbelievers! And for the Soviet communists – death to the Kulkas... and then truly to the democratic contemporary equivalent, an all-out nuclear war – death to everyone! Any other overwhelming concern beyond boring, intransigent global poverty, the apocalyptic tendency had conjured yet another beast. (McEwan 16)

So here the author explains the basic knowledge on the consequences of climate change and about the climate change crisis. It also describes how the whole society will disastrous due to global warming. But these thoughts are from the mouth of a renowned scientist, which shows the mindset of the people living in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The author mocks the scientific researches with the help of a selfish character Beard.

There is another instance where Beard does not care about predictions regarding environment and the lives of human. He never cares about the future of the humanity. Without any pity he simply quotes the fear of everyone:

The Gulf stream would vanish, Europeans would freeze to death in their beds, the Amazon would be a desert, some continents would catch fire, others would drown, and by

2085 the arctic summer ice would be gone and the polar bears with it. Beard had believed these predictions before and believed none of them. And if he had, he would not have been alarmed. A childless man at a certain age at the end of his fifth marriage could afford a touch of nihilism. (McEwan 75)

Climate change crisis is very well explained in the above quoted statement, McEwan writes the risk that the world will face sooner or later. These are thoughts of Beard when he went for expedition to the North Pole. Here the writer approximately mentions the year 2085 in order to make the readers anxious about the risk factors associated with climate change. He also insists that certain species would be endangered. So climate change is a serious consequence of global warming, at first it destroys animals and further it destroys humans. Though it is not a dystopian novel, the writer clearly exhibits the crisis of climate change and the actions preceded by it. In *The Great Derangement* Amitav Ghosh sarcastically portrays climate change crisis and climate catastrophe comparing with literary fiction, he says:

In the era of global warming nothing is really far away; there is no place where the orderly expectations of bourgeois life hold unchallenged sway. It is as though our earth as become a literary critic... mocking their mockery of the prodigious happenings... the first of many ways in which the age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense. (Ghosh 74)

McEwan in his writings mocks the researches and the greedy thoughts of human being with his protagonist Michael Beard whereas in the same way Ghosh narrates the catastrophic events and explains the risk of global warming

with the help of literature itself, though both of their concerns are similar.

The novel *Solar's* satirical nature is shown in many incidents; that is the novel itself does not believe in global-warming related policies and summits reproving them for being originated from the national or individual interest in the profitable aspect of the problem. Beard being a scientist he is always money minded, his speech explains about his plan to get money with his artificial photosynthesis instead of helping the nation, that is:

We either slow down, or then stop, or face an economic and human catastrophe on a grand scale within our grandchildren's lifetime... and this brings us the central question, the burning question. How do we slow down and stop while sustaining our civilization, and continuing to bring millions out of poverty? (McEwan 206)

Boot room incident in the novel describes the mentality and uselessness of the renowned scientists. As the boot room suffers through disarray, and everyone runs out of the room leaving and stealing others hats and clothes, Michael Beard remarks this incident as "how were they to save the earth... when it was so much larger than the boot room? (McEwan 109). So this shows the false promises of the international scientists to control global-warming with the simple incident of a boot room and their capabilities. To this relationship Jones refers it as, "perhaps the answer to the boot room/climate-change conundrum is to accept that short-term self-interest will always defeat any altruistic attempt to take the long view, and instead of trying to make people be good, look for ways to turn their badness to the planet's advantage"

(Jones 20). The boot room is same as like inter-subjective space where a man can interact with other man, it also reflects the idea of McEwan which he mentioned in a program with Mike Brown: “there is something comic about idealism, and our capacity for rational thinking and gathering data and evidence on the one hand, on the other these little worms of self-interest, laziness and innate chaos” (2010).

In the novel *Solar* McEwan does not create anxious among readers by showing false status of the climate change, that is to say author explains reality rather than preferring myth. In order to write the reality in fiction McEwan coordinates the complete reality of the United Nations Climate Change Conference held in 2009 presents in the end of the novel. Being an environment journalist of the report the *Guardian*, David Adams describes McEwan as, “watched the outcome of the Copenhagen Summit in December very closely and with some despair and then went back to his novel *Solar*, to rewrite a section a few pages from the end” (2010). Adams again insists that, “had the summit produced a successful deal as McEwan wanted, Beard and his failures would have not fitted in” (2010). When the novel *Solar* is closely read, it can be understood that it explains the failure of the Climate change conference and hence the author describes the failure of Beard in the novel by using the methods of satire, mockery and allegory.

Beard participates in a debate with Susan Appelbaum, also shows that the novel is a satire. In cognitive psychology as a lecturer of academics, she is the counterpoint of Beard. Being a psychologist she is like a committed scientist whereas Beard as not: She was an objectivist in that she believed the world

existed independently of the language, that described it, she spoke in praise of reductionist analysis, she was an empiricist and by her own proud admission, an ‘enlightenment rationalist’” (McEwan 192). By swapping of roles writer traces the fact of failures of the scientists in the modern problems of the environment because of their distrust in an objective reality.

Finally there is yet another incident in which Beard stands behind the curtains which indirectly refers to the greediness and hollowness of the climate change and global warming policy makers, Beard behind the curtains where actually eating salmons instead of concentrating on the serious issue. And also he replied to the invitation of the conference with the list of food items that has to be delivered for him, he orders, “orange-coloured cheese, dipped in batter, rolled in breadcrumbs and salt and deep fried, with a creamy dip of pale green” (McEwan 381). To show the macrocosmic disaster of the ecology, the writer describes the microcosm disaster of Beard’s life. From the year 2000 to 2009, Beard has the doubt that whether he is contributing for global warming, instead he is living a luxurious life. As he is immensely fat, he has developed a skin cancer called melanoma which has its roots in the serious growth of global warming. On the observation of his cancer doctor told Beard that, “won’t go away because you don’t want it or are not thinking about it” (McEwan 328). So the doctor’s comment actually indicates that the terrible climate change will result in destruction hence the public should think about nature and ecology.

To conclude that McEwan’s *Solar* is a novel which narrates the reality and that fiction can



take up socio-ecological perspectives, Ghosh quotes it as, “the great irreplaceable potentiality of fiction is that it makes possible the imagining of possibilities” (Ghosh 55). Beard’s monologue on climate change, plagiarizing someone’s research, accessing money in the name of science describes eventually that human’s preference to luxury rather than for the friendly attitude towards ecology. It clearly shows the deprivation of moral and social systems. It insists the emergence of action needed to save the world from global warming and the crisis associated with climate change.

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