



CLIMATE FLUCTUATIONS, DECAMPMENT AND SUBJUGATION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *GUN ISLAND: A CLIMATE FICTION*

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ABSTRACT:

Every book writers achieve decorative images and symbols from the beauty of climates like rain and spring. A text is not a one piece art. Every critical phase create a new genre in literature. The twenty-first century has a set of novelty writers and their school—climate fiction, a serious modern fiction. The aims of this narrative are to show the human concern for the future of the earth and to increase their socio-political consciousness. The contemporary writers merge the monotonous life of the protagonist with the outside environment to mark the effect of human activities upon the Earth. Every work of Amitav Ghosh is a literary report from the eye of the storm. His writing is a blend of family, history and science; which focus on the violent reactions of non-humans. *Gun Island*, the ninth novel of Ghosh starts with the mystery of Sundarbans and in contrast, ends with the enlightenment in Sicily. This paper reviews the origin and development of climate fiction and critically scans the adversities of non-humans due to climate emergency. The intensity of the article is to study the consequences of human actions during migration.

Keywords: Anthropocene Fiction, Global Warming, Colonialism, *The Great Derangement*, Animal Migration, Trafficking, and Promotions.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a growing art. It produces ample number of artistry in every span of time. The disciples bring out the expositions according to the need of the race. Climate is a synecdoche of Nature. Every book writers achieve decorative images and symbols from the beauty of climates like rain and spring. A text is not a one piece art. It encloses different forms, genres, styles and languages. Particularly in genres, the society and its realities decide the numbers. Every critical phase of the world create a new genre. On the note, the twenty-first century of literature has a set of novelty writers and their school—climate fiction, a serious modern fiction. The aims of this narrative are to show the human concern for the future of the earth and to increase their socio-political consciousness.

Climate Fiction is one of the accomplished genres of the past decade. It is also named as Anthropocene Fiction, which deals with the writings on climate change and global warming. Sometimes it is categorized under Science Fiction, because of the themes that highlight the future of Earth. However, it mainly focuses on the human's reaction to the climate breakdown. The main plot of this speculative fiction is to demonstrate the changed or changing environments due to human's unconscious impact on the sphere. Narratives are, likeably, to set in present day surroundings and major characters argue about the pros and cons of climate changing. The subjects of climate fiction are high temperature, melting of ice, typhoons, floods, drought and migration and extinction of species. Basically, it covers the five components

of nature i.e. Pritvi (Earth), Jala (Water), Tejas (Fire), Vayu (Wind) and Akasha (Space).

The term 'Climate Fiction' (in short, cli-fic) is coined by Climate Activist Dan Bloom while noting the articles from *Scientific American*. He observed that most of the popular science fiction novels concentrate on the rapid changing of weather. With his perception, many critics and writers contribute their ideas on this genre. Moreover, the process was started much a long time ago. In 1889, Jules Verne, Science Fiction novelist, published *The Purchase of the North Pole*. It is an imaginary concept dealt with the idea of changing climate due to the shift of Earth's axis. British Dystopian writer J.G. Ballard published *The Burning World* in 1964, talks about the climate catastrophe of the universe due to the industrial pollution. John Barnes' *Mother of Storms* (1994) highlights the impact of nuclear explosion. Because of discharge of clathrate particles from the ocean bed, the characters of the novel face a sudden contraction in weather.

After the millennium, most of the writers attempt the cli-fic in all literary forms. Urvashi Bahuguna's *Terrarium*, a poetry collection points out the environmental disasters; Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* paints the fear of humans to see their destroying world. Samanta Schweblin's horror novella *Fever Dream* sketches the environmental issues of Argentina. Nnedi Okorafor's short story "Spider the Artist" sets in a Nigerian village where robotic spiders protect the damaged pipeline. The story covers the themes of capitalism, social and environmental corruption.

The contemporary writers mix the monotonous life of the protagonist with the outside environment to mark the effect of human activities upon the Earth. Margaret Atwood's

dystopian novel *Oryx and Crake* (2003) depicts the city of "unsafe, populous, and polluted". Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) describes the imaginary planet Orbus. Like Earth, it runs of resources and people suffer from global warming. In course of time, the Inmates of Orbus seek the offerings from new planet, Planet Blue. Marcel Theroux's *Far North* (2009) portrays the world, which are no more places of human survivals due to high temperature of the universe. In *Solar* (2010), Ian McEwan shows the fighting of physicist against climate change, after formulated the power artificial photosynthesis. Kim Stanley Robinson, the famous Science Fiction novelist published the full-fledged climate novel *New York 2140* in 2017. It shows the positive spirit of the coastal inhabitants who adapt the new climate conditions of the Earth.

Pandemic climate changes are the main topic of climate fiction and it is not an easy-talk to depict those harsh realities through words. Amitav Ghosh who is the most prominent Indian writer, takes the handler. Every work of Ghosh is a literary report from the eye of the storm. His writing is a blend of family, history and science. Like other writers, his earlier phase of writings deal with human centered stories. However, his later phase of writings bring more laurels to him, which focus on the violent reactions of non-humans. The word 'non-humans' refer to river, sea, oceans, plants, animals, water, minerals, etc.

The award winner of nine novels and four non-fiction, Ghosh proclaimed in one of the interviews in Toronto, "artists and writers respond to the realities of the world around them...I wouldn't even call it climate; I would just say the realities of today. We can't just shut our eyes to something like Hurricane sandy or Hurricane Maria". According to the writer, climate changing

is the serious business of the present day and literary writers should have responsibilities to convey the issues among the people. Ghosh, the cli-fic writer, wrote many novels with the backdrop of climate change and global warming. Some of the masterpieces are mentioned below:

The Hungry Tide is the sixth novel of Ghosh, published in 2004. It sets in Sundarbans, the mangrove forest of Bay of Bengal. Here, the life of settlers is 'threat', 'uncertain' and 'rugged'. On one side, they are often attacked by the deadly tigers. On another side, floods are their frequent visitors. The author portrays the incidents realistically in the novel. "The Town by the Sea" is an essay from *Incendiary Circumstances*. Published in 2005, it is a narratorial report on 2004 Tsunami in Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Here Ghosh contempts the owners of rich house who build their home near the sea areas. Obviously, sea takes back its home through global warming and rise of water level. *Sea of Poppies* is 2008 novel of Ghosh and it is the first of Ibis trilogy. The characters often observe the impact of colonialism all through the novel. The writer notices that the colonization is one of the reasons for the climate change. For instance, a term 'antidote' is introduced which refers to the air conditioner. The colonizers create an antidote to fix the countries' hot summer.

The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable is Ghosh's literary treatise on climate diversity and climate fiction. It is 2016 non-fiction. The author starts his career as a novelist. Here and there, he spreads the emergency of writer's role to bring public consciousness among the countries. However, this book is the vital space for the writer to show his concern on nature and non-human beings; and also he thinks it is the high time for the Indians to check their relationship with Mother

Earth. Unlike the westerners, who focus on the future of the humankind, Ghosh along with other writers concentrates the present time of the world. He believes that present is the future. As Poe applied "The Philosophy of Composition" to "The Raven" and Wordsworth referred *A Preface to Lyrical Ballads* to his nature poems, Ghosh correlated *The Great Derangement* with his new and ninth novel *Gun Island* (2019).

Gun Island is a memoir of *The Hungry Tide*. Like the latter, the novel starts with the mystery of Sundarbans and in contrast, ends with the enlightenment in Sicily. Ghosh develops the world in which every major character escape from one disaster to fall in another disaster like the gun merchant of seventeenth century who elopes from the trap of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snake. Totally, *Gun Island* is a combination of myth, fantasy, history and science.

The protagonist Dinanath Datta, "rational, secular, scientifically minded" (*Gun Island* 35), in short Deen comes to Calcutta to spend his winter vacation. His causal visit to the shrine in Sundarbans changes his whole life in the novel. Ghosh creates Deen, in the place of Gun Merchant of seventeenth century. Deen follows the footsteps of the old hero and then find out the connection between the past and the present. Ghosh remarks in *The Great Derangement* that there are some causes for the present day climate change that have started in seventeenth century. He has mentioned some sources of human activities during those times--World War II, Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century and colonization of Europe authorities around the world. Because of the unconsciousness of humans, many changes are happening in the land and in the sea. Floods, storms, cyclones, wild fires, earthquakes, tsunami are all the results for human's

exploitation of nature. Ghosh presents *Gun Island* with the backdrop of climate changes of the world. The characters witness the disasters in the novel.

Nilima Bose is the aunt of Deen and founder of Badabon Trust, the charity organization. She is the one who finds out the “Bonduki Sadagarer dhaam” (13) during the Bhola Cyclone which happened in the 1970 in Sundarbans, “hitting both the Indian province of West Bengal and the state that was then called East Pakistan” (13). It was the heaviest natural disaster till now. Many were lost their life. Moreover, Bose along with her acquaintance, Horen Naskar observes the dreadful scenes: “...corpses floating in the water, half eaten by animals; villages that had lost most of their inhabitants. The situation was aggravated by a steady flow of refugees from East Pakistan...now the flow turned into a flood, bringing many more hungry mouths into a region that was already desperately short of food” (14). The second cyclone was hit the same place in 2009, called “Cyclone Alia” (48). But this time, people have prepared in advance and faced the situation cleverly. Hence, the death rate was minimum compare to the previous cyclone. However, during the course of the novel, the shrine that is famous for its history is ruined by the bad storm. Even Sundarbans lost most of its flora and fauna.

Deen comes to know about Piya Roy through his cousin Kanai. Ghosh shifts Piya Roy from *The Hungry Tide* to *Gun Island*. The Marine Biologist stays in Oregon and visits the Sundarbans during the winters, like Deen. She takes care of the adopted family-Moyna Mondal and Tipu. She is the first one in the novel, notices that humans are the major source for the harsh changes of weather. Because of the rapid climates, she clears that not only humans are affected but

also, animals are also suffocating: “As sea levels rose, and the flow of fresh water diminished, salt water had begun to intrude deeper upstream, making certain stretches too saline for the dolphins...some had been ensnared by fishermen’s nets and some had been hit by motorboats and steamers” (92).

Through Piya, Ghosh points out that the chemical fertilizers that humans are using can reduce the oxygen level of the water. The small organisms in the different water bodies cannot survive with low oxygen. Hence, mass number of water organisms would die and also the whole areas would affect the ocean, that becomes “Oceanic dead zones” (95). Like humans, animals and other organisms too undergoes heavy depression because of the sudden climate changes. When Piya finds out that Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*) is missing with other two, she worries that “it’s been a huge source of stress for them – I mean, wouldn’t you be stressed, if you had to abandon all the places that you know and were forced to start all over again?” (97)

Because of raising temperature of Earth, insects find difficult to adapt with the climate conditions. Bark beetles are insects which are lived by eating the leaves of the trees. But, in the mountain areas, those kinds of beetles are rare, which even eat up the whole tree for survival. That generates “a long drought” (109) and “a huge wildfire” (109). Like Dipesh Chakrabarty, the Chicago historian to Ghosh, Professoressa Giacinta Schiavon is an old friend and mentor of Deen. She brings a major change in his life. She recommends him to the job of rare books and antiquities dealer in Asian division for the New York Company. “Such was the part she had played in my life that I could not take a call from her lightly,...it was almost as though she had wanted to tell me, once

again not to do the easy thing, out of habit” (45-46). Once, she invites Deen for the conference which celebrates the seventeenth century edition of *The Merchant of Venice* in Los Angeles. At the time, there is a long wildfire spreads in and around Los Angeles—“the loss of tree cover makes it easy to spot those rodents and reptiles that have survived the fire by burrowing underground. For birds of prey the conditions are so favourable that some species of raptor have even been known to actually start, or spread, wildfires by carrying burning twigs afield in their beaks” (117).

Due to the rapid growth of wildfire, the venue for conference changes into the meeting area of hotel where Deen is staying. After the session, Cinta and Deen join with Cinta’s niece Gisella in the beach. There, Gisella’s dog Leola is bitten by “darkly metallic with a bright yellow underbelly two-foot snake” (131). The guard of the beach assures them that this type of snake is not common in Venice. Similarly, the same incident happens in the southern California. While calling with Piya, Deen comes to know about the migration of animals, reptiles and birds due to the warming of the oceans. The biggest drawback of animal migration is those organisms cannot handle the different atmospheres; on one way, they would die or in another way, they become so poisonous.

Gisa asks Deen to be a Bengali translator in Venice for her documentary project. So his stay in Venice is extended. Coincidentally, he meets Rafi, the young protector of Shrine in Sundarbans. Rafi lands in Venice to find a better job. Through him, Deen meets Lubna-Khala, Bangladeshi lady stays there for about twenty-years. Lubna shares her bitter childhood experience in Dhaka during “really fearsome tufaan” (160). She loses her brother and nieces

in the cyclone: “we had no choice but to take shelter in a tree. Somehow my brothers managed to get all of us into the branches. But then we discovered that the tree was full of snakes; they had climbed up to get away from the water, just as we had...He fell into the floodwaters and we never saw him again. One of my nieces was bitten too” (160).

Venice is a large island with full of waters. One can travel the city, only with boats. In spite of its winding canals, beautiful bridges, the frequent floods make the city more submerged in the water. To help Gisa, Deen stays in cannaregio in Cinta’s apartment. Even the place is much under the water, “the soft mud of the venetian lagoon, a substance that tended to shift over time, subtly changing the alignments of the buildings above. This meant that the terrazzo floors of Cinta’s apartment had ripples running through them while some of the door frames were so crooked...” (165). The buildings in the “floating city” are made of woods and stones. Most of the classical architectures lost its elegance due to the climate breakdowns. The Fondamente Nove is one of the tourist spots of Venice. Since many parts are built in woods, they are eaten up by the shipworm at the recent times due to the heating of the earth: “More and more of these are invading Venice, with the warming of the lagoon’s water. They eat up the wood from the inside, in huge quantities. It has become a big problem because Venice is built on wooden pilings. They are literally eating the foundations of the city” (230).

Overseas Development Institute and United Nations Development Programme released a report on “Climate change, Migration and Displacement” on November 2017 which states that people move from their native places because of many reasons like social, economic,

environmental and political. However, World Migration Report of United Nations in December 2019 promulgated that climate change is the main notion for sudden displacement of the people from one place to another. India has the extreme case regarding migration due to extreme natural disasters. Ghosh says, “Migration is something I’ve written about all my life, going back to my first book. Every book, in one way or the other, has addressed this question of displacement, migration, dislocation, travel, and so on, because that’s very much the reality of my own life”. Inspired from John Steinbeck, he visited many migrant spots in Italy before the sketch of *Gun Island*. He talked to many young people about their immigrant process throughout their journey. That he reflects in the character of Rafi, Tipu, Bilal, Kabir and Palash in *Gun Island*. “Making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to pay agents to find them work elsewhere. Some were slipping over the border into Bangladesh, to join labour gangs headed for the Gulf. And if that failed they would pay traffickers to smuggle them to Malaysia or Indonesia on boats” (49).

Tipu and his friend Rafi plan to escape from Sundarbans and travel around Europe for the redefined life. They leave Dhaka with some clothes, little food and 250 US dollars each. On crossing each border, “jackals” “coyote” Dalals change. They travel through Kolkata in the truck, “was slow, with a bad suspension...during the day it was like an oven. There were no windows to look out of. We just had to sit there, bumping against each other as the truck rattled on” (237). No one dare to question the dalal about the whereabouts, if one asks that means “they were going to shove that stick into him” (238). After crossing Iran, they stay in small

village in Kurdish mountain. They have got the instructions that they have to run as fast as they can to reach the Turkey border because the security is so tightened. During the life-death process, Rafi and Tipu got separated. Rafi, alone reaches Venice in Italy and finds menial jobs to save up money in order to look for Tipu who pauses at Egypt.

Like Rafi and Tipu, there is another young pair attempted to elope from their original place—Bilal and Kabir. Bilal is the friend of Rafi. One and the other are working in the same spot in Venice. Because of the family circumstances, Bilal leaves Bangladesh along with Kabir. They get the Emirates with the help of relative. Similar to Rafi and Tipu, they also under the guidance of dalal; they are given instructions all the time. They have crossed Chittagong, Sharjah, Tripoli and Zuwara. “For the Next year and a half we were beaten, tortured, and sold by one gang to another. They made us work from morning to night, paying us almost nothing and giving us only bread to eat. We were like slaves; what we went through was something that should not happen to any human being” (193). Being eighteen-years-olds, they toil in the strange land. They suffer like in Hell. They can either step forward or return to their fatherland. At one time, they travel in the ship, sitting near the engine, due to less payment. The “Scafisti” order them to wait for the rescue ship or helicopter; after that, they can transfer to the safe place. In the meanwhile, the sea is at “steady swell” (194). Both Bilal and Kabir lost each other in the exhausting waves. From that day, Bilal hopes to find Kabir in one day and consequently, he takes care of Kabir’s family.

In both the cases, climate change plays a vital role in demolishing their teenage life. Regarding Rafi and Tipu’s conditions, Sundarbans is the

place often damaged by heavy storms. The older one can go for alternative jobs. The younger ones are amidst the internet gadgets. They move out of the rural areas. They search for illegal paths to have a better life—“From their phones of course. That’s where they see pictures of other countries; that’s where they view ads where everything looks fabulous...And the same phone that shows them those images can also put them in touch with connection men” (61-62). In relation with Bilal and Kabir’s situations, the problem starts in between the families for the properties. Despite there is frequent floods which spoil more land areas. Bilal’s uncle threatens Bilal’s family to move the boundaries. At that time, Kabir helps Bilal. Nevertheless, Bilal’s uncle uses his political powers to haunt down Bilal’s family. To save his life Bilal along with Kabir leaves Bangladesh for a better life.

Though migrants are healthier in the new place, they always miss their “home” which does not replace with anything. “First they would look disbelieving, as though they could not believe that someone who looked like a tourist was addressing them in Bangla. Then slowly their faces would light up and we would soon begin to exchange that immemorial question: ‘Desh Koi—Where’s home?’” (163)

Dispersion due to climate changes leads to human trafficking. According to the latest survey, UN Environment Programme have assessed that trafficking are increasing every year by 20-30 per cent during calamities. Most of the Indian states particularly—Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are trapped in this transaction. When people wish to shift to other countries, they use their android phones to check the availability. The smart gadgets always pop up the similar content whenever they are on the internet. This will

automatically kindle the desire of the humans. “It was the desires and appetites of the metropolis that moved people between continents in order to churn out ever-growing floods of saleable merchandise. In this dispensation, slaves and coolies were producers, not consumers; they could never aspire to the desires of their masters” (279). They check out the quickest way to reach the other countries. In the middle of these, the connection house, “where large numbers of refugees had been kept captive by traffickers. The place was known to have been a hub for the trade in human organs” (262), has lots of traffickers to turn the circumstances according to their needs. The Bursars first create hope in the mind of migrants and then molest them to give extra money to continue their journey. In case the refugees cannot pay the amount, the traffickers torture them and sell their organs for the needed ones. The dealers’ main intention is to earn money and they never bother whether it comes through the people or their organs.

Even the refugees get through the connection house; they admit to carry out the menial jobs in the colonial countries. They work in plantation, hotels, and as delivery boys, as a clerk or to clean toilets. The “duffadars” and “mahajans” record the personal details of the workers and pay them a small wages for their long working hours. On one hand, they prefer the coolies as “bonded labour” (200) and their advantage are “to keep people in debt” (200). On other hand, the workers have “no idea of where they were going or of the conditions that neither awaited them there; nor did they know much about the laws and regulations that governed their destiny” (278).

There is a saying that art is nature and nature is art. They are inter-related and intertwined. In

old times, people had a connection with nature. They depend on nature for everything. But, because of human's interest and ability, they create science and technologies to satisfy their dissatisfied desires. In the meantime, they slowly distance themselves from Mother Earth. They forget to take care of the nature and start to utilize her resources. To remind that, critics establish various schools and concepts—Environmental studies, Green Studies, Eco-criticism, etc. On the list, Climate Fiction is the recent enrollment. Unlike others, the main role of this genre is, in Ghosh's words from *Gun Island*, "How can a translator do her job if one side chooses to ignore her? And why would her constituents obey her if they knew that those she was addressing on their behalf—the merchant and his fellow humans—had refused to acknowledge her voice? Hence the urgency of her search for the merchant...by the quest for profit—would recognize no restraint in relation to other living things" (153).

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