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**Reflected Realities in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable***

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**Abstract:**

Amitav Ghosh is one of the contemporary writers whose writings are marked by variety and vivacity. He has written both fiction and non-fiction and of which *The Great Derangement* is replete with reflected realities on the most confronting problem at global level. In fact, all living species depend on ecology and environment for their survival Life is in peril when ecology is threatened by global warming and related factors. As a result, unexpected and unpredictable events take place in the universe. These natural elements are subject to experimentation and exploitation. The question of survival holds paramount importance for all species. *The Great Derangement* is a stupefying work on the challenges that the universe has been witnessing for the last two decades. In it, Ghosh has narrated and dramatized historically and politically the developments that have been going in the world to effectively face the crisis. He emphasizes the necessity of ecological balance thereby preserving the universe against the onslaughts of imperial attacks.

**Keywords:** Ecological Crisis,Climate Change,Amitav Ghosh,The Great Derangement, Environmental Literature

“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 plants and asteroids are inert” (2)

Amitav Ghosh writes towards the beginning of his book, *The Great Derangement: Climate change and the Unthinkable* with this dreadful trepidation that forecasts the impending catastrophe as a result of climate change. The book offers perspective on

literature, history and politics of climate change rather than on a common perspective of science and technology. The most unprecedented and convincing of these perspectives is no doubt the one concerning history which decisively shifts the climate change in a wholly new way.

In the words of Rachel Carson from the work *Silent Spring*, “The history of life has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings. To a large extent, the physical form and the habits of the earth’s vegetation and its animal life have been moulded by the environment. Considering the whole span of earthly time, the opposite effect, in which life actually modifies its surroundings, has been relatively slight. Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species –man- acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world. During the past quarter century this power has not only increased to one of disturbing magnitude, but it has changed in character. The most alarming of all man’s assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers and sea with dangerous and even lethal materials. This pollution is for the most part irrecoverable, the chain of evil it initiates not only in the world that must support life but in living tissues is for the most part irreversible.”(23)

Writers like Dipesh Chakraborty in *The Climate of History* (2009) John L. Broke’s *Climate Change and the Course of Global History* (2014) among others threw light upon the issue concerning climate change on the grounds of history and culture that ultimately paved the way to how the issue is viewed so far. As Ghosh puts it, “The Climate events of this era then, are distillations of all human history, they expenses the entirety of our being over time” (155)

In the history section of the book, Ghosh puts forth his argument on climate change by saying that we as human community deranged as a culture to watch something happen and not address it in significant ways. The writer poses a curious question, “Did western colonialism delay the onset of climate change by preventing non-western nations from industrializing?” The implications that are drawn by Ghosh based on history are both morally challenging and unrealistic. Capitalism and imperialism are two sides of the same coin and the relationship between the two has been a complicated one. An Asian centric perspective on climate change which is the first of its kind, that is different from the US and European narratives is presented in this book. The writer summarises his view point very convincingly in India’s case. It was imperialism which was a malignant outcome of capitalilsm that has set the way India maintained its transactions with the world capitalism and thus the trajectory of its carbon emissions. Emissions reached 400 parts per million for the first time in 2014. It is not just capitalism and consumerism that has brought the climate change so far, but the

consequences of empire also, which include the suppression of old knowledge and the over-estimation of the western concept of modernity. Imperialism served to be the major factor in climate change although Asia is sensitive to every aspect of global warming in view of its causes, its philosophical and historical amplifications. Carbon economy is the thrust of imperialism. The carbon emissions were from very early on, closely co-related to power in contemporary environmental but it is often viewed in the public sphere that the developing countries are responsible for climate change more so because the figures show that pollution is on the rise rapidly in countries like India. The onslaught of Industrial revolution in the whole world at the same time would have had disastrous consequences in the entire world. The anglosphere which include countries like US, UK, Canada, Newzealand, Australia have infact arrested the rapid development in its colonies (Asia and Africa).

According to Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha in their work *Ecology and Equity* expresses that, “One expects an imperial power to withdraw from a colony when the value of resources usurped is no longer attractive enough to offset the cost of such usurpation. When the British conquered India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it had a surplus of agricultural production. This surplus had largely disappeared by 1920 when the spurt in population growth that followed by the second world war, while its mineral resources were not very promising.” (12).

Contrary to conventional histories, Ghosh finds coal use in China in 11<sup>th</sup> century and oil extraction in Burma as early as the eighteenth century. Some of the Asian countries had industrial expansions that the western world was unaware of. Chinese revolution in 11<sup>th</sup> century led to the major deforestation lack of medieval technology made the people inefficient to convert coal into fuel. The history of oil trace and its initial drilling was found in the local deposits in many areas of Burma. If colonial wars had not suppressed Burma, it would have been the world’s first petroleum state.

In the words of Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, “The British wanted to retain India as supplier of cheap raw materials and a market for higher price manufactured goods. Industry was therefore discouraged as was scientific and technical education.” (10). India developed a formidable ship building Industry but the colonial empire banned Indian-built ships from its ports. So if history had taken a different path, carbon emissions would have been much higher and much earlier. Ghosh opines that two important eras of emissions existed, one in the early twentieth century and Asia in 1980’s onwards. Although Asia was industrially underdeveloped, the impact was more so because of population growth. As quoted by Edward O. Wilson in his book, *The Future of Life*, “The pattern of human population growth in the twentieth century was more bacterial than primate, when

homosapiens passed the six billion mark, we had already exceeded by as much as a hundred times the biomass of any large animal species that ever existed on the land, we and the rest of life cannot afford another hundred years like that”.

According to Ghosh, the worst victims of climate change are the Asian countries. The western environmentalists such as Naomi Klien neglect to mention imperialism as well as capitalism as one of the causes for climatic change. Colonial powers are mainly responsible for the particular patterns of climate change.

Man has always been the dictator of nature rather than being a co-existent. Imperial Vanity has driven the present great cities like New York, Mumbai, Honkong on the verge of being swallowed by the sea waters in the form of tsunamis, hurricanes etc because of their vulnerable location which is otherwise viewed as most expensive sites. The topography and the very existence of such water front cities is endangered.

The contribution made by Gandhi’s perspective to India’s economy is noteworthy as he was trying to slow down India’s aspirations to modernity as against Nehru who was in support of technological development. In spite of the vulnerability of Asian people, imperialism has stopped India from carrying on its industrial activities for example the production of steam engine was forbidden in India under British Rule. India’s economy has slowed down their contribution to global warning. As Ghosh remarked, “... signs of changing climate date back to the 1930’s and the concentration of carbondioxide in the atmosphere has already passed 300 parts per million when Charles keeling began to take measurements at the Mauna Loa observatory in Hawaii. This was in the late 1950’s long before the economies of mainland Asia began their rapid acceleration.” (123)

A remarkable contrast from the west that was witnessed in Asian countries was the abstinence to Industrialisation from religion. In India as well as china, religious beliefs served to be an obstacle to industrial growth. Ghosh consideres that the west still is responsible for the damage that is incurred by cliamate change on the whole world including Asia. Global climate change is the world’s problem and it has to be addressed collectively more so because of the statistical figure which reveal the alarming rise in the levels of pollution.

As quoted by Edward O. Wilson, “the constraints of the biosphere are fixed. The bottleneck, through which we are passing is real. It should be obvious to anyone not in euphoric delirium that whatever humanity does or does not do, Earth’s capacity to support our species is approaching the limit” (33).

History will certainly mark this age as an age of derangement because as a human race, we have overlooked the ultimate challenge of climate change and taken the earth and its fullness for granted. There have been and still continue a series of changes in the environment such as floods, heat waves, tornados but we hardly see it in the fixation nor in the form of an initiative on the part of the governments. Ghosh is apathetic to the Paris accord and has a particularly gloomy view of the future and hopes that the world religions would become a force to reckon with in lowering carbon emissions. He is in praise of people like Pope Francis and Gandhi, who believed that real growth is to be witnessed in being part of the nature and not be part of an unreasonable race for an unsustainable growth. The present mindset of young people for whom individual freedom is a matter of great celebration makes it impossible to keep them committed to earth's cause. Ghosh claims that whatever morality that exists in the world today towards climate change is a mere remnant of our total accountability to the mother earth. Ghosh suggests that, treating the problem like it is one among many existing problems is already a sign of our derangement. It reiterates that our lives and our choices are being churned by the paws of history that seems to leave us nowhere to turn but towards our self-abomination.

The book draws our attention to how dangerous is the west coast of India to cope with any of the natural disasters. 2015 has been the first year in the recorded history that Arabian sea has produced more cyclones than Bay of Bengal. If a massive cyclone hits the commercial capital of India, which is Mumbai, the loss of life and property would be beyond our comprehension. Ghosh opines that in the back drop of such probable major catastrophes hitting the coast, countries are still interested in playing the old blame game on each other. It's a matter of certainty that the future generations may look at the 21<sup>st</sup> century with abomination and if the world leaders are not committed to getting the people involved in some kind of pioneering work to regulate the climate change then, within few decades, it will be an era of great derangement.

If the records of history are any witness to how man has displayed his superiority over the nature not realizing he too is a tiny part of the whole creation and if nature is bent upon showing its fury, the whole mankind becomes helpless, vulnerable and absolutely clueless. In the words of Albert Schweitzer, "Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forstall. He will end by destroying the earth". As said in the holy Bible, " And I (God) brought you into the plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and good things. But when you (man) came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination" (Jer 2:7).

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