

## Reimagining the Anthropocene: A Critical Inquiry into the Limits of Literary Imagination in Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*

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**Abstract:** Anthropogenic activities are affecting the sustainability of planet Earth. The consequences include global warming, a sudden rise in sea level, environmental pollution, freshwater scarcity, floods, droughts, and cyclones. Literature is often called “a mirror to society,” but no primary literary form has addressed the origins, causes, and diverse impacts of the Anthropocene in the 20th century. Amitav Ghosh, a prominent writer of the 20th century, explains in this non-fictional work titled *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* that even the ‘Fiction’ primary literary form has failed to address the Anthropocene in the 20th century. ‘Cli-fi’, a kind of science fiction, tried to attract the public in the early 21st century. Still, the imagination and destruction shown in these novels could not make people aware of the Anthropocene's impacts. It has failed to represent the reality of the climate crisis because of the imaginary elements in this fiction. Ghosh also doubts fiction's capacity as a serious genre to address issues such as climate change, global warming, and the Anthropocene. Ghosh also discusses the significance of *Laudato Si* and the Paris Agreement, which address the Anthropocene and climate crisis.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, Fiction, Global Warming, Climate crisis, Environmental degradation.

Climate crises caused by anthropogenic activities require urgent attention and immediate action. Climate change is adversely affecting humans and other species on the planet. Many writers try to turn people's attention toward the hazards of the climate crisis through their writing. Many climate change novels are known as climate fiction. In these novels, the climate crisis devastates cities. Anthropogenic activities, new technology, and scientific inventions are presented as causes of the climate crisis and the devastation of cities. The destruction of society is presented at its most extreme, resembling a fantasy. However, these fictional works do not draw people's attention to the serious issues of the climate crisis and the Anthropocene. There may be many reasons for this.

The primary reason may be that these novels blend imagination and reality. The consequences and circumstances depicted in their works are far from reality. The devastation and destruction reach their peak in these novels, which seem unreal. These novels are known as science fiction because they explore the imagination of the future and depict the devastation of cities through advanced technology. Writers Barbara Kingsolver, Lauren Groff, Margaret Atwood, Paolo Bacigalupi, Rita Indiana, and Nathaniel Rich are known for their work in climate fiction. However, the seriousness of their work has long been questioned because of their extreme use of destruction and imagination about the future. Climate fiction often fails to address the severe impact of the Anthropocene.

The literary form ‘Fiction’ is a mixture of reality and imagination. So, the climate crisis is an issue that needs people's serious attention. So Amitav Ghosh, in his work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, remarks about the seriousness of fiction as a literary form in the context of climate crises and writes,

In the same spirit, I think it also needs to be asked: what is it about climate change that the mention of it should lead to banishment from the preserves of serious fiction? And what does this tell us about culture writ large and its patterns of evasion? (14)

Amitav Ghosh also doubts the seriousness of literary form, which can explore the Anthropocene and its impact on the planet. He explains that he started writing about the tornado in Delhi. It describes the tornado's devastating



impact, with scooters flying through the air. He witnesses that devastation, but he cannot write it in fiction. He cannot explain what he witnessed earlier because these incidents seem unrealistic in fiction. The writer mixes his fantasy with realistic events. So, modern fiction always remains in doubt when discussing serious issues like the climate crisis. The vocabulary of climatology and science is different from literary writing, which may also be the reason for the doubts about the seriousness of literary fiction. In scientific language, the issue appears more serious, and scientists and climatologists predominantly present the serious and hazardous conditions of climate change in their books. Still, when any writer tries to present this serious issue of climate change in literary language, they use literary words that are different from scientific words. Literary words may need to be more accurate in their presentation of climate issues, especially in the literary form of fiction writing.

Fiction in the late 20th and early 21st centuries fails to represent the severe impact of the Anthropocene and has worked to conceal the issue's seriousness. The themes of literary fiction revolve around an individual's life, moral adventures and human place in society. However, nature and climate issues have always remained in the background of the fiction. Humans are always connected with the force of non-humans. Humans are not alone on the planet. The unseen presence of non-human elements has shaped our cultural and economic practices. Still, fiction has consistently failed to discuss its significance and role in shaping human life. Environmental uncanniness is different from supernatural elements. Issues like global warming connect more directly to humans because humans created them. Elements like global warming are a collective human predicament, but in the literary mainstream, the cultural idea of the collective has been exiled. These elements have started to haunt humans as well as non-human elements. However, the mainstream has failed to make people aware of the seriousness of climate issues and their consequences, which will soon haunt everyone.

Sometimes, it is difficult to express in words; it is better conveyed through visual media such as TV serials, movies and documentaries. These issues have yet to be reflected in language. So, events like tornadoes and global warming have yet to be seen in mainstream literature. Climate issues have yet to be negotiated because of a failure of broader imagination. Issues such as rising sea levels, droughts, floods, carbon emissions, and global warming require scientific language to explain them. Writers cannot express these issues in the literary mainstream because of the failure of imagination to consider these themes as primary issues in the text. These issues appear in the background and setting of a literary text rather than as a primary theme or subject. So, the Anthropocene has challenged the arts and humanities to portray the seriousness of climate issues. The Anthropocene and climate change have challenged not only art and the humanities, but also contemporary consumer culture and the regularity of bourgeois life. This raises questions about the practices and assumptions that guide the arts and humanities, as well as various literary forms, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Modern fiction largely promotes individualism and focuses on individual achievement and heroic deeds. Climate issues require more collective effort from everyone. However, climate crises need everyone's attention and require collective effort across communities, genders, and races. First, everyone must recognise that climate change is a serious contemporary issue. As Amitav Ghosh says about recognition in his work *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, "A moment of recognition occurs when a prior awareness flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which is beheld" (06). So, humans have to understand the seriousness of this contemporary issue.

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh discusses how the two literary narratives address the climate crisis. One is Pope Francis's encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, published in May 2016. This letter is remarkable for its clear language and simple structure. The letter presents the actual predicament of human society and culture, which is responsible for the present situation on Earth and the climate crisis. It also critically analyses the diverse effects of the carbon economy, which has created an ecological imbalance. The letter is a prayer to God for the world's salvation from the climate crisis. The letter explores the moral duty to protect nature and act in ways that sustain resources. However, solving the climate crisis requires a collective



force, and religion may be that force. Many people around the world have started following the letter and acting in accordance with it. This letter is not an agreement but a request to the people to save and protect the Earth from this coming hazard.

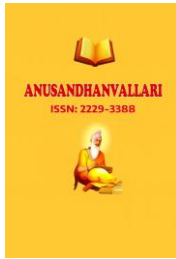
On the other hand, the Paris Agreement is an international, legally binding treaty of 194 countries on climate change. This agreement aims to limit global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 43% by 2030. However, the targets of Western and Eastern countries have not yet been mentioned. Each country must decide its goal for limiting global warming and carbon emissions. The Paris Agreement posits that new technology can save the Earth from the climate crisis and global warming. Advanced technology may be the force that protects Earth from becoming hazardous. However, the promises made in the Paris Agreement seem futile, and countries have yet to show any progress. Amitav Ghosh compares *Laudato Si* and the Paris Agreement in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*.

Here again lies an unexpected difference between the two documents. Because of the prayerful ending of *Laudato Si*, it might be thought that there would be more wishful thinking and conjecture in the Encyclical than in the Agreement. But that, too, is no mean the case. It is the Paris Agreement, rather that repeatedly invokes the impossible: for example, the aspirational goal of limiting the rise in global mean temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius- a target that is widely believed to be already beyond reach. (205)

So, no prominent 20th-century novelist has come forward to provide readers with insight into the climate crisis and its impact on human life. No critic or writer has discussed the effects of anthropogenic activities on the environment and ecology in the literary form of fiction. Readers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century ignored the aftermath of climate hazards and took no steps to address the climate crisis. Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Ramachandra Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Pankaj Mishra, David Wallace-Wells, and many others are trying to awaken readers to the problem of climate change through their non-fiction works. However, the primary literary form, "fiction," has failed to provide insight into the climate crisis and environmental hazards.

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