

Research Abstract

Literary Imagination of Climate Change and Climate Disasters

Debashree Chakraborty

Over the last few years a lot has been written and discussed about the representation of climate change in literature. The discussion escalated with the publication of Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* (2016) where he noted, rather sadly, about the conspicuous failure of contemporary "realist" fiction to address climate change. He went on to add that even though science fiction engages with climate change, it does so by relegating it to an extent that makes the literary imagination of climate change "somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel". His argument is quite straight forward in this regard – since climate change is an event that is all pervasive, its reflections in literature must also have semblance of its impact in the here and now. With this argument, Ghosh cites a few novels published in recent times that deal with climate change in the present like Barabara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012) which looks into climate change and climate migration in the border areas of the USA and Mexico and a few others. Three years after the publication of *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh published *Gun Island* (2019) which, apart from being an attempt to use climate change as a thematic concern, is also a literary representation of the historiography of climate change beginning with the Little Ice Age and covering present day events like wildfires, exceeding numbers of cyclones and super cyclones, erratic patterns of non-human migration and of course, human migration.

A look at bookshelves around the world would now reveal a significant number of novels that deal with climate change in its various manifestations and these also straddle a lot with the effects of climate change the most notable of which is climate migration – human and non-human and the subsequent impact such migrations have on ecology and also global governance, energy politics, impact on biodiversity, etc. These novels belong to multiple genres – thrillers, political fiction, realist fiction, petro fiction, etc., and the list goes on. Needless to say, much of this spurt is an outcome of the discourse around climate change in academic, governmental and popular parlance. Also, it may be noted that fiction dealing with climate change or climate fiction is not just an Anglophone literary phenomenon. Rather, such novels are coming up across several other literary systems the world over. Adeline Johns Putra and Adam Trexler in the article "Climate change in literature and literary criticism" provide a comprehensive definition of climate fiction along with an analysis of how it adjusts to other genres. They opine that any work of fiction that deals with human induced climate change (global carbon emissions, global warming or cooling, polar ice melt, etc.) and its effects can be termed as climate fiction. Needless to say, such a definition entails a lot of engagement with the concept of the Anthropocene which in the simplest of terms means that human beings have been the pivotal reason behind contemporary climate change.

However, a question that becomes necessary to ask here is whether the working definition of climate fiction as suggested by Putra and Trexler is enough to achieve a broad spectrum understanding of climate change as it happens in the here and now. While the scientific

discourse on climate change started building up during from the time of the discovery of ozone layer depletion, recent sociological and historicist critiques largely attribute the onset of this present day crisis to the times when colonialism and imperialism were at the peak. Alfred Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange* (1972) is one of the preliminary works that sought to understand how colonialism brought about unprecedented changes in earth system in North America and elsewhere. Recent critical works like *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (2014), Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller's *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* (2020), Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* (2021), Naomi Klein's *Kohei Saito's Capital in the Anthropocene* (2021) are a few works that have also sought to establish the deep relationship which exists between colonialism and climate change. Add to that the notions of development, liberal economy, etc., and what transpires is an entanglement of multiple factors like deforestation, clearing of catchment areas, recourcing of major rivers for dam constructions, scrapping off indigenous forest communities' rights to forests, etc., that play a role in the escalated climate crisis as we face it today.

India, being at the forefront of colonial and imperial designs and post-Independent India being an experimental ground of the idea of "development", has been at the receiving end of all the components mentioned above. Indian literature, Indian fiction in particular, has always documented these factors. In this regard, such literary pieces can be termed as pre-cursors of contemporary climate fiction or if I may put it in this way, "proto climate-fiction". Some such works are notably Aditywa Mallabarman's *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (1973), Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyaya's *Aranyak* (1976), Kamala Markandya's *The Cofferdams* (1979) to the more recent *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *The Folded Earth* (2011) by Anuradha Roy or Ambikasuthan Mangad's *Enmakaje* (2017). All these works have documented change in the form of damage and disaster in some form or the other. So, for my research this year, I would like to look into those literary works which have addressed what could be termed as the foundation of climate change and seek to understand how these facets have influenced the human and by extension, non-human life as the world around them changed and the subsequent ways in these changes/occurrences have been represented in Indian fiction.