

# In the 'The Great Derangement' Amitav Ghosh urges us to confront climate change

Ghosh argues against seeing the climate crisis “in terms of the questions it poses to the individual conscience” because the response it warrants cannot be “left to the individual conscience”



Kapil Komireddi

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Amitav Ghosh is descended from ancestors who were, long before the term was coined, “ecological refugees”. They were uprooted, in the mid-19th century, from their village in what is today Bangladesh when the Padma River changed course and devoured nearly everything in its path. When the story was recounted to Ghosh as a child, he imagined “women and children racing through the howling winds as the waters rose behind them”, recognising a “presence that had moulded their lives to the point where they had come to take it as much for granted as the air they breathed”.

Nature ceased thereafter to be an inanimate phenomenon to Ghosh. Yet for a novelist who has been so preoccupied with climate change for a very long time – and witnessed intimately its calamitous consequences – Ghosh has very rarely engaged with the subject in his formidable body of fiction. One of the reasons for this, he explains in this book – adapted from the celebrated lectures on climate change he gave at the University of Chicago in 2015 – is the challenge that confronts novelists: “fiction that deals with climate change is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously”. It is a topic that major literary supplements and journals in the English speaking world explore only in the realm of non-fiction. The result is a culture whose “conception of seriousness ... is blind to potentially life-changing threats”.

Ghosh charts the complicity of fiction in shaping the priorities and consumer choices of the world we inhabit. When readers look back at this moment from a “substantially altered world”, they will “conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature ... prevented people from recognising the realities of their plight”. This moment on earth, he writes, is a “time of the Great Derangement”.

Asia, having historically contributed so little to global warming, is the most vulnerable to rising temperatures. Bangladesh alone will account, by some estimates, for 75 million climate refugees in the near future. The poor are the most immediate victims, but the rich are delusional if they believe they are immune to the change.

In the 1990s, Ghosh published an article on India’s nuclear tests in which he used his powers of description to conjure up Delhi in the aftermath of a nuclear attack. The annihilation was so vividly evoked that it felt impossible, after reading it, to feel any pride in India’s acquisition of the bomb. Here, his description of what may happen in Mumbai – home to 20 million people – should a Category 5 cyclone make a landfall in the city is even more terrifying.



# The Great

# Derangement

CLIMATE CHANGE  
AND THE UNTHINKABLE

The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable by Amitav Ghosh Courtesy University of Chicago Press

Ghosh's works often disinter from the debris of empires stories of men and women – and societies – lost to history. It's a theme he revisits here, in an essay on colonialism's link to climate change that must qualify as the most original and sober analysis of the subject. Ghosh misses nothing. Well, almost nothing. For the oddest omission in his examination of our attitudes to nature in the Anthropocene age is food.

Ghosh argues against seeing the climate crisis “in terms of the questions it poses to the individual conscience” because the response it warrants cannot be “left to the individual conscience”. At the same time, “formal political structures of our time are incapable of confronting the crisis on their own”. The one “promising development” he espies is the “increasing involvement of religious groups” in raising awareness about climate change. But religious leaders mobilise communities by appealing to *individual* consciences. Can personal responsibility be deferred until the crystallisation of a collective response, and can mass action be achieved without some degree of personal sacrifice?

Ghosh was once described by the *Financial Times* as an “adventurous eater”. Certainly, there is no rule prohibiting environmentalists from gourmandising; but it can become difficult to reconcile the author who laments in *The Great Derangement* the exclusion of the “non-human” from our political discourse with the aesthete who recently posted pictures of his dinner on Twitter with the caption: “Incredibly delicious (and beautiful) abstract-expressionist octopus and lamb chops.” I am not suggesting that Ghosh is a hypocrite, or that his abiding commitment to the environment is in any way diminished by what he eats or photographs. But it's impossible not to be mystified by the strange tapering of the imagination in a writer who can reconstruct the history of free trade by looking at

nutmeg but is blind to the desecration of nature and the cruel assertion of human might that would have gone into the production of “beautiful” art in the form of a baby sheep’s flesh wrapped in the body of an octopus.

It’s not just a warming planet that novelists have struggled with when writing about our relationship with nature. In literature, with the exception of Tolstoy, George Bernard Shaw and Isaac Bashevis Singer, I can’t immediately recall a major novelist who has written about humanity’s ability to inflict such intense suffering on animals without so much as wrinkling its exalted self-image. Ghosh’s wish for a new generation that will “rediscover their kinship with other beings” will require us to revive the traditions of compassion in Asian environmentalism that date back to the Buddha and Ashoka, to Emperor Wu of China and Mohammed Akbar of India.

None of this is to deny the sheer force of *The Great Derangement*. This is the most important book Ghosh, a writer with extraordinary reserves of empathy, has written in his distinguished career – and it is one of the most indispensable books published so far in this century.

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Amitav Ghosh, University of Chicago Press