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“Waking Up to the Fierce Urgency of the Now”: Foregrounding Climate Change in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* and Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything: Capitalism v/s the Climate*

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The spectre of climate crisis is hovering over the earth leaving the planet in an emergency mode to save civilization from a complete catastrophe. Climate change is moving quickly toward a tipping point of the incorrigible and life on Earth is slowly dying off. Hundreds of species are going extinct, the oceans are warming, plastic trash is choking wildlife and wars are just imminent in many parts of the world owing to droughts and scarcity of resources. Humanity is careening towards the deaths of billions of people fighting for survival. Yet many insanely self-destructive, greed mongering political power centres prefer to deny climate crisis emergency altogether in order to keep profits high. Their lies about its non-existence are funded by the fossil fuel industrialists in collusion with our major media, which have never reported adequately on the issues.

Naomi Klein’s *This Changes Everything* (2014) is an important contribution to the discussion of strategy and tactics for climate action. Klein has covered a lot of bases in her description of the importance of climate change as an issue demanding concerted action, the social forces which are contributing to the problem or demanding climate action, the weaknesses of frequently touted remedies, the state of the environmental and climate action movements, and possibilities for organizing an effective mass movement. Klein does not go into details about the climate change emergency, expecting that her readers are already familiar with the causes and magnitude of the problem. Instead she focuses on an argument in favor of organizing a mass movement for climate action that fights for big changes in our economic system, representing a conflict between the reigning neoliberal ideology and an alternative worldview "embedded in interdependence rather than hyperindividualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy." She recommends a strategic alliance between climate activists and activists in the various movements for social justice, based on their common interests and the galvanizing effect of climate emergencies. She recognizes the great difficulties that a movement for climate action faces, but is hopeful that effective action can be forced before it becomes too late to avoid catastrophe.

Ghosh, on the other hand, begins by examining the transition in our attitude to nature. He asks the readers to recognise the fact that only less than three centuries have elapsed since human kind began believing that planets and asteroids are inert. Here the word 'recognition' (5) harks back to some prior awareness that flashes before us, effecting an instant change in our understanding of that which is beheld, which is "the presence of its lost other" (6). We are forced to awake "to the recognition of a presence" (6) that had moulded our lives and about which we had taken much for granted. We come to recognize "that the energy that surrounds us, flowing under our feet and through wires in our walls, animating our vehicles and illuminating our rooms, is an all-encompassing presence that may have its own purposes about which we know nothing" (6-7). We were forced into an awareness of the urgent proximity of the non-human presences in the face of confrontation with the portents of change witnessed in the dynamics of landscape changeability particularly "in the receding shorelines and a steady intrusion of salt water on lands that had previously been cultivated" (7) or in the "accumulation of carbon in atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth" (8) in the first years of twenty-

first century. The landscape is "demonstrably alive" (7) as a protagonist in "a stage for the enactment of human history" (8)

The challenges that climate change poses for the contemporary writer of fiction are products of something broader and older. These "derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination..."(9). The subject of climate change takes a very meagre space in the landscape of literary fiction. Even in the highly regarded journals and book reviews, the subject appears in relation to non-fiction. He says, "It is as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel" (9-10).

It is either that the writers are blind to potentially life-changing threats or "the currents of global warming too wild to be navigated in the accustomed barques of narration"(10) In any case the problem does not arise out of a lack of information and Ghosh prefers to link this imaginative and cultural failure with the whole issue of climate change: "But the truth... is that we have entered a time when the wild has become the norm: if certain literary forms are unable to negotiate these torrents, then they will have failed - and their failures will have to be counted as an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate change(10).It is also a fact that when novelists writes about climate change it is almost always in the fiction genres. Arundhati Roy, whose writings on the subject are in various forms of non-fiction and Paul Kingsnorth, the author of *The Wake* who dedicated several years of his life to climate change activism can be cited as typical instances. In Roy's powerful fable *The Briefing*, the tourist guide says "Trees have unfixed their earthbound roots and are on the move. They're migrating from their devastated homes in the hope of a better life. Like people, Tropical palms are moving up into the Lower Alps. Evergreens are climbing to higher altitudes in search of a colder climate." *The Wake* is an ageless story of the collapse of certainties and lives. This choice to rely on non-fiction forms is "not the result of personal predilections: it arises out of the peculiar forms of resistance that climate change presents to what is now regarded as serious fiction.

One reason why contemporary culture finds it so hard to deal with climate change is because it is perhaps the most troubling question ever to confront culture in the broadest sense. Ghosh asserts that "climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (12). This crisis of culture is evident in the type of desire it promotes. It generates desires of various kinds which are among the principal driver of carbon economy. The artefacts and other myriad commodities conjured up for the consumption of these desires are "expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being" (12).

This cultural matrix interacts with various modes of cultural activities like art, architecture, theatre etc.. We also know from history that culture is intimately linked with the wider histories of imperialism and capitalism that have shaped the world. However, it is hardly possible to be definite about the specific ways in which the cultural matrix interacts. In author's own words, "If contemporary trends in architecture, even in this period of accelerating carbon emissions, favour shiny, glass-and-metal-plated towers, do we not have to ask what are the patterns of desire that are fed by these gestures"? (14) Hence a writer genuinely concerned about the future of our planet has to write not just the politics of the carbon economy but the larger issues relating to our own practices and the ways in which political power make us complicit in the concealments of the broader culture. If the very subject of climate change should lead to banishment from the preserves of serious fiction, then it does tell a lot about the culture writ large and its patterns of evasion. The literature of our time should provide for the traces and portents that led to this altered world of ours. If not, the subsequent generation of truth seekers

for the changed world of their inheritance will be forced to "conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight" (15). If this should possibly happen, "this era, which so congratulates itself on selfawareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement" (15).

A tornado had hit North Delhi in 1978 when the author was doing his postgraduate programme in the University of Delhi. In probing the vocabulary used by various print media on the day following the tornado disaster, it was evident to him that the disaster was unprecedented. The phenomenon was so unfamiliar that the papers literally did not know what to call it. Only from the report of the calamity in the subsequent days did he "realise that the tornado's eye had passed directly over me. It seemed to me there was something eerily apt about that metaphor: what had happened at that moment was strangely like a species of visual contact, of beholding and being beheld. And in that instant of contact something was planted deep in my mind, something irreducibly mysterious, something quite apart from the danger that I had been in and the destruction that I had witnessed; something that was not the property of the thing itself but the manner in which it had intersected with my life"(18). He considered his encounter with the tornado as "a mother lode, a gift to be mined to the last little nugget" (20).

A novel that would rely on the details of tornado and its impact on the victims would be judged to be one of incredulity and improbability by the readers. The depicted scene would be made out to be "a contrivance of last resort" of a "writer whose imaginative resources were utterly depleted" (21). So "probability" is all that matters in fiction. Ghosh asserts that "Probability and the modern novel are in fact twins, born at about the same time, among the same people, under the shared star that destined them to work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of experience" (22).

At this point the author goes in for an archaeological study of the novel. Before the birth of the modern novel what delighted the story-tellers and their audience was "the unheard and the unlikely" (22). For example, narratives with a blithe disregard for probability like those of *The Arabian Nights*, *The Journey to the West* and *The Decameron* go on from one exceptional event to another. Novels also proceed linking together moments and scenes. However, what is distinctive concerning the form is that it conceals those exceptional moments which function as the motor of the narrative. This is made possible through the induction of "fillers", a term borrowed from Franco Moretti (372).

According to Moretti, 'fillers' serve as mechanisms specially designated to keep the act of "narrativity" under control and also to give it regularity and certain "style. This mechanism conjures up a fairly run-of -the - mill details of everyday, which function " as the opposite of narrative". It is thus that the novel takes its modern form, through "the relocation of the unheard-of toward the background... while the everyday moves into the foreground" (23). The modern novel was thus brought into existence through a deliberate insertion of the everyday and relegation of the improbable. Fillers suddenly become so important because they offer the kind of narrative pleasure with the new regularity of bourgeois life. In between the big narrative turning points, the bourgeois novel stuffs in more and more filler, where the background creeps into the foreground and our characters and their actions seem to get lost in a welter of things. "Fillers rationalize the novelistic universe,"

Moretti writes in *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, "turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all." Here we may observe that there is planned postponement involved: instead of providing the details what happened, readers are

informed about what was observed first. This style of narration was constructed by certain preferences in the depiction of history. In every culture, an awareness of the precariousness of human existence is handed down to the posterity through folk and religious traditions and other cultural mechanisms. For instance, this is reflected in the Biblical and the Quranic images of the Apocalypse, in the figuring of the Fimbulwinter in Norse mythology, in the tales of pralaya in Sanskrit literature and so on. Here we might ask why these intuitions withdrew, not just from the minds of the founders of colonial cities, but also from the forefront of the literary imagination. Even in the West, the earth did not come to be regarded as moderate and orderly until long after the advent of modernity. But the practical men who ran colonies and founded cities had evidently acquired their indifference to the destructive powers of the earth much earlier. The predatory hubris of the European Enlightenment formed a habit of mind that proceeded by creating discontinuities in relation to the earth and its resources." ... they were trained to break problems into smaller and smaller puzzles until a solution presented itself. This is a way of thinking that deliberately excludes things and forces ('externalities') that lie beyond the horizon of the matter at hand..." (75). On the other hand the earth of the era of global warming, more than at any other time of recorded history, is a world of consistent, inescapable continuities. The waters that are invading the land, deserts that are advancing, occurrences of frequent wildfires etc. are the signs of the consistent continuities. Currently the forces of weather and geology are pressing themselves on us with relentless directness.

Naomi Klein opines that one can foresee important effects of one's action or inaction, confidently aiming for good and for avoiding harm. Our collective actions can build the better future we can imagine. Through long-term planning and collective action (extending globally), we humans (not just elites) can intentionally change our economic and political systems, perhaps just barely fast enough to deal with current emergencies. Scientists are helping us to understand climate change (part of a greater ecological crisis) and our role in it. The prognosis is dire—great suffering among humans, and harm to the natural world—so we must act to prevent disaster.

Climate change is the result of a system in action: the capitalist system, which also results in inequity and many injustices (at all scales, from individuals to countries). Left to its own, it will grind every bit of value out of the earth and our labors. We cannot just blame "bad guys", ignorance, or greed. Politicians, business leaders, and others implementing extractivist policies are acting as the system demands, so we must radically change the system.

Some people believe in technological innovation solving our big social problems, but that's magical thinking. Only a global mass movement may be effective. Violence cannot be part of the strategy, since it leads to severe repression and loss of life. We must, united across the globe, express our love and indignation, set goals, strategize, make sacrifices, and (shifting the balance of power) force governments to rein in corporations and reorient the economy. Decisions should be made democratically, not by elites or bureaucrats, according to our deep compassion, what we collectively value (and our understanding of right and wrong), and what we owe to one another based on our shared humanity and the equal rights of all people. This is challenging because the system enculturates people according to the dominant ideology, which supports the system's destructive operations. For example, the culture leads us to define ourselves by what we buy, worship wealth and fame for their own sakes, compromise, accept change as something that is handed down from above by our betters rather than something we demand for ourselves, and generally not get overly excited about anything. We are also encouraged to believe the narratives of neoliberalism, including the magic of "free markets" and the "fact" that humanity is hopelessly selfish and greedy.

Our cultural narratives include myths about humanity's duty to dominate a natural world that is said to be both limitless and entirely controllable. We must regain a feeling of humility before nature, which is ultimately more powerful than us humans. We are part of a vast biotic community engaged in an uphill battle to create new living beings. We must act (among humans and in relationship to the natural world) according to principles of interdependence rather than hyperindividualism, reciprocity rather than dominance, and cooperation rather than hierarchy. Linear, one-way relationships of pure extraction will be replaced with systems that are circular and reciprocal. Nature sets ecological limits, within which we must live. We must adapt ourselves to the rhythms of natural systems and, acting as stewards, regenerate and renew rather than dominate and deplete, thus fully participating in nature's process of maximizing life's creativity.

Climate change is a crisis leading toward disaster. Everything will change, whether by force of nature or by our choice. We need a Marshall Plan for the Earth, a mass movement. We need to deal with a "savagely unjust economic system." We need a comprehensive vision and serious strategies. Deregulated capitalism is rampant. Its ideology of neoliberalism (market fundamentalism) is dominant. The ideology fetishizes centrism (incrementalism), and has been a key force against climate action. The ideas of materialism have led to extractivism. "The resources required to rapidly move away from fossil fuels and prepare for the coming heavy weather could pull huge swaths of humanity out of poverty, providing services now sorely lacking, from clean water to electricity." (7) "And there are plenty of signs that climate change will be no exception [to The Shock Doctrine]—that, rather than sparking solutions that have a real chance of preventing catastrophic warming and protecting us from inevitable disasters, the crisis will once again be seized upon to hand over yet more resources to the 1 percent." (8) "... opposition movements ... will need a comprehensive vision for what should emerge in the place of our failing system, as well as serious political strategies for how to achieve those goals." (9-10) "... we have not done the things that are necessary to lower emissions because those things fundamentally conflict with deregulated capitalism, the reigning ideology ..." (18)

"A different kind of climate movement [not led by Big Green] would have tried to challenge the extreme ideology that was blocking so much sensible action, joining with other sectors to show how unfettered corporate power posed a grave threat to the habitability of the planet." (20)

"... our economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on Earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity's use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it's not the laws of nature." (21)

"... even more powerful than capitalism... is the fetish of centrism—of reasonableness, seriousness, splitting the difference, and generally not getting overly excited about anything. This is the habit of thought that truly rules our era ..." (22)

We need a shift in political "power—specifically ... a shift in who wields it, a shift away from corporations and toward communities, which in turn depends on whether or not the great many people who are getting a rotten deal under our current system can build a determined and diverse enough social force to change the balance of power." (25)

"But I have never said that we need to "slay," "ditch" or "dismantle" capitalism in order to fight climate change. And I most certainly didn't say we need to do so first. Indeed I say the opposite, very early on in the book (page 25), precisely because it would be so dangerous to

make such a purist claim. " (Source: "No, We Don't Need to Ditch/Slay/Kill Capitalism Before We Can Fight Climate Change. But We Sure As Hell Need To Challenge It" by Naomi Klein)

"Some say there is no time for this transformation; the crisis is too pressing and the clock is ticking. There are all kinds of measures that would lower emissions substantively that could and should be done right now. But we aren't taking those measures, are we? The reason is that by failing to fight these big battles that stand to shift our ideological direction and change the balance of who holds power in our societies, a context has been slowly created in which any muscular response to climate change seems politically impossible, especially during times of economic crisis (which lately seems to be all the time). (25)"

"So this book proposes a different strategy: think big, go deep, and move the ideological pole far away from the stifling market fundamentalism that has become the greatest enemy to planetary health. If we can shift the cultural context even a little, then there will be some breathing room for those sensible reformist policies that will at least get the atmospheric carbon numbers moving in the right direction. And winning is contagious so, who knows? Maybe within a few years, some of the ideas highlighted in these pages that sound impossibly radical today—like a basic income for all, or a rewriting of trade law, or real recognition of the rights of Indigenous people to protect huge parts of the world from polluting extraction—will start to seem reasonable, even essential." (26)

"... the thing about a crisis this big, this all-encompassing, is that it changes everything. It changes what we can do, what we can hope for, what we can demand from ourselves and our leaders. It means there is a whole lot of stuff that we have been told is inevitable that simply cannot stand. And it means that a whole lot of stuff we have been told is impossible has to start happening right away." (28)

So we see that Klein's *This Changes Everything* is as much about the psychology of denial as it is about climate change. "It is always easier to deny reality," writes Naomi Klein, "than to allow our worldview to be shattered, a fact that was as true of diehard Stalinists at the height of the purges as of libertarian climate deniers today." Much of this book is concerned with showing that powerful and well-financed rightwing thinktanks and lobby groups lie behind the denial of climate change in recent years. There is not much reasonable doubt as to the findings of science on the subject. As a result of human activities, large-scale climate change is under way, and if it goes on unchecked it will fundamentally alter the world in which humans will in future have to live. Yet the political response has been at best ambiguous and indecisive. Governments have backed off from previous climate commitments, and environmental concerns have slipped down the policy agenda to a point at which in many contexts they are treated as practically irrelevant.

Though she identifies the prevailing type of capitalism as the culprit in the climate crisis, Klein doesn't outline anything like an alternative economic system, preferring instead to focus on particular local struggles against environmental damage and exploitation. Throughout *This Changes Everything*, Klein describes the climate crisis as a confrontation between capitalism and the planet. It would be more accurate to describe the crisis as a clash between the expanding demands of humankind and a finite world, but however the conflict is framed there can be no doubt who the winner will be. The Earth is vastly older and stronger than the human animal. Even spraying sulphuric acid into the stratosphere will not trouble the planet for long. The change that is under way is no more than the Earth returning to equilibrium – a process that will go on for centuries or millennia whatever anyone does.

Very few writers have attempted to integrate climate change concerns that demands praxis into their works. Ghosh and Klein, with utter dexterity, focus on the need to re-incorporate climate change consciousness in literature and our collective consciousness. Naomi Klein and Amitav Ghosh points out that our placement within a natural world has increasingly receded in our consciousness. *The Great Derangement* and *This Changes Everything* are the kinds of books that tell that climate change is on us and as writers or readers we need to engage in a collective action.

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BIO-NOTE

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