

Sharing Ecological Responsibility: Role of Fiction and the Interactive Web

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Climate change is the reality of contemporary times which has many speakers but few protectors. But there are some fiction writers who rose upto the occasion and looked beyond the confines of fiction to delve deep into the contemporary challenges. Amitav Ghosh is one such fiction writer who remembers his social responsibility and produces great works of non fiction from time to time. A researcher, historian, and an anthropologist, Ghosh has a love for deep research on subjects that interest him. A writer who does not believe in borders and boundaries, Ghosh blurs them in his fiction and non fiction alike. Besides Ghosh, many other writers like Arundhati Roy have expressed their concern for climate change. While Arundhati Roy voices her concern on subjects ranging from nuclear bombs to ill effects of dam building, Ghosh's novels as well as non fiction are testimony to his deep concern for ecology and climate change. *The Hungry Tide* is one such work which conveys the climate change message through an engrossing tale of the people of Sundarban delta. *The Great Derangement*, his non fictional treatise on climate change and our ignorance of this stark reality.

Ghosh begins by recalling how his forefathers had to flee from their village, now in Bangladesh, when floods claimed their village. He uses the term 'ecological refugees' for people like his ancestors who are forced to flee because of ecological catastrophes. Nature does not have a way of communicating other than by sudden outbursts which can acquire many forms like floods, earthquakes and many types of cyclones and tornadoes. Sometimes it strikes with a suddenness and sometimes at a slow and steady pace of deterioration. Ghosh cites examples of sudden carbon dioxide cloud burst in Congo in 1988 in which 1700 people were killed while several untold number of animals died, not to speak of birds, smaller creatures and plant life. In *The Hungry Tide* Ghosh dwells deep on the landscape and how it keeps on changing on the whim of the sea thereby making it difficult to pronounce exactly how many islands there are in the delta. The novel seeks to deal with smaller issues concerning human interference like excessive fishing with the help of synthetic nets, exploiting the wild life etc. Greater access to resources has turned us into



entitled beings, who can avenge a wild animal like the tiger in the Sundarbans. Ghosh emphasises the need for fiction writers to embody this concern in their works. Ghosh cites an illustration from his personal experience, 'On the afternoon of 17 March 1978, the weather took an odd turn in north Delhi...dark clouds appeared suddenly and there were squalls of rain. Then followed an even bigger surprise : a hailstorm.' Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* p.17. As he turned a different route on foot, he witnessed a strong tornado, something that is very unusual in those parts of Delhi. The authorities were so taken by surprise that they were able to explain it the next day only, 'A very, very Rare Phenomenon, Says Met Office'; 'It was a tornado that hit northern parts of the Capital yesterday-the first of its kind...' Ghosh, *The Great Derangement* p19.

Ghosh melds the story of borders and boundaries with his concern for the stark beauty of nature. He dwells in detail on the ecology, the delicate balance between the sea, river, aquatic animals both marine and fresh water and the humans inhabiting the islands. The 'Sundarbans' is a character in itself comprising of islands which are constantly changing shape with the invasion of the sea. Some islands disappear completely over time. The diligence and the detail with which Ghosh delineates the islands and the delicate ecological balance is commendable. He goes on to explain how the native Fokir is much more connected with the natural elements than Kanai the city bred man. Piya on the other hand plays a very effective role in not disturbing the balance. She is studying marine mammals and is a responsible researcher who does not disturb the environment in the process. The portrayal of Piya and the aunt who's living in communion with the natives of the islands goes a long way in highlighting the responsibilities that we all should ideally share. In a very prominent instance in the novel, the protagonist Piya raises her voice when the villagers catch the tiger and try to avenge the death of many native men. Thus, the portrayal of such incidents combined with the prominent place given to nature is one of the major thematic concerns of the novel. This makes Ghosh among the few writers who write responsible fiction, which is the need of the hour.

Arundhati Roy also stands out as one of the authors who has given a prominent place to a criticism of exploitative attitude towards nature. Besides the novel, *God of Small Things* in which she herself as well as her mother have a special connection with nature, she has also vocal in her non fiction on many issues related to the ecology. The *Algebra of Infinite*



Justice is one such collection of essays in which she focusses on specific environment issues. An instance is the essay on dams and how they've become a bane for the human society and the environment alike. The race to build more and more dams has resulted in ecological imbalance and an undemocratic world. She dwells in great detail on the ill effects of big dams, how they threaten the world with earthquakes and other disasters. The land around the dams, especially the areas where the reservoirs are created result in a land unfit for any kind of cultivation. The tribal population is forcibly displaced from their native land and are forced to indulge in occupations that they are not comfortable with. Dams, according to Roy are highly undemocratic and defy the basic rule that the natural resources belong to all alike. Dams give the power of using natural gifts like the river water to the powerful and not equally to all as it is destined. The message is expressed very eloquently, that we should stop such undemocratic practices and get rid of dams just as the first world is already doing.

The *End of Imagination* is another loud and clear expression against the amassing of nuclear weapons. The consequences of the use of nuclear weapon is described very evocatively by Roy. The world order after most of the countries acquire the nuclear weapons as deterrents is not a pleasant one to imagine. She is a prominent voice against many such issues like corporate globalisation and the US government's war against terror. Arundhati Roy speaks mostly through her non fiction, but also through the social media which has become an even more eloquent platform in the hands of writers and speakers alike. In fact the audience and readers are in much larger numbers on these platforms and more interactive. Instant comments, appreciation and trolling are a regular feature on the interactive web. These debates are very productive with numerous voices talking and sometimes coming together for a common cause.

Another prominent Indian diasporic writer who has given a prime place to nature in her fiction is Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In some of her novels nature acts as a protagonist. A very good instance is her recent novel, *The Forest of Enchantments*, in which nature plays the role of a dear friend and close confidante to Sita, the main protagonist. The king Janak, Sita's father has been described as a very kind king who has built a palace which facilitates the surrounding forest instead of destroying it. Sita, while describing her childhood expresses her strong love for the forest and also how her parents nurtured and worshipped it. Her connect with nature has given Sita a special power to heal and herbs work magic in



her hands. People from all around her kingdom come to her to get treated for diseases. This emotional bond that Sita shares with nature recurs throughout the epic. While her healing powers remain with her throughout her life, nature as a close confidante is a more recurring theme. She finds solace in trees, rivers and wilderness in her most difficult days. As a feminist also she sees nature as suffering the same way. Through the sufferings of both Sita and nature, Divakaruni conveys the message how insensitive the world is towards the marginalised. She has given voice both to Sita and the elements of nature. The complete work seems to be dedicated to ecology and feminism. The landscape the trees, the bushes everything seems to comfort our protagonist. She literally hugs the trees under which she had to spend a lot of time when she was in captivity in Lanka. Nature supports Sita steadfastly and protects her throughout her life. So at the end when she refuses to go with Ram, she returns to the lap of mother nature. The ending of the novel as well as the epic makes a strong eco feminist statement and does create a strong feeling of sympathy for the protagonist. The message is expressed in very clear terms, nothing can be exploited forever. The readers are made to realise the significance of recognising our boundaries and conserving nature.

The works discussed in this paper are just a few instances and there are many works and authors who have given prime importance to nature and spoken very eloquently on the urgency of reforming the human interface with nature. Besides the works of fiction and non fiction the interactive web too needs to engage more in these crucial conversations. We have exemplary activists like Vandana Shiva who have dedicated their life to these conversations. Shiva is an active voice across the internet and the social media platforms. Her writings have gone a long way to awaken people and raise awareness on multiple environment related issues. A few of her insightful writings are: 'Seed Freedom and the Future of Farming', 'One Planet One Health- Connected through Biodiversity', 'Gene Edited Foods are GMOS: New Research' and many more. There are many bloggers who have dedicated their lives towards the task of creating awareness on this pertinent subject. But all said and done the interactive web is limitless and the earth is vast, inhabited by a populace which is largely callous. The damage to environment both permanent and reversible is huge and it is a mammoth task that we are facing today. The involvement of more activists and writers to take up this issue is the need of the hour. The voices though strong are too few. The damage to the earth and environment is all too real to be ignored

for long. Hence fiction , non fiction , story , essays , blogs and in fact all forms of creative and non creative works need to focus on these urgent issue. The trends on social media also need to be diverted from political or celebrity chasing to the things that actually sustain us. The trends have the power to mould the thoughts and opinions of the masses and be heard. This change in what people read and write about will definitely shift focus towards the urgent need to protect what we have and try to reclaim bits of what we have lost.

NOTES & REFERENCES

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