“The Temporal Order of Modernity Has Changed”:
A Conversation with Amitav Ghosh

Introduction

Amitav Ghosh is the author of many works of fiction and nonfiction, including The Shadow Lines (1988), In an Antique Land (1992), The Glass Palace (2000), The Hungry Tide (2004), the Ibis trilogy (Sea of Poppies [2008], River of Smoke [2011], and Flood of Fire [2015]); he has also written essays in the New Yorker, the New York Times, and the New Republic. The list of awards he has received is equally long and includes the Arthur C. Clarke Award and the Sahitya Akademi Award; he has been short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and the Man Asian Literary Prize. In 2007, the Indian government awarded him the Padma Shri, one of the highest civilian honors.

Ghosh’s latest book, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (2016) is based on his Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin Family Lectures, which he delivered at the University of Chicago in 2015. Multiple critics have called the book “dazzling,” and I humbly add my name to this list. The Great Derangement is a reflection on the work of literature in
the age of global climate change. The age of “the great derangement”—the name that future scholars will give our literary period, according to Ghosh—marks the stubborn unwillingness of contemporary literature and politics to come to terms with the clear, present, and global danger of environmental disaster. “The brilliance of *The Great Derangement* lies in its persuasive revelation of how our modes of representation have derailed humanity, blinding us to our real condition,” notes Julia Adeney Thomas (2016: 938).

*The Great Derangement* mixes family history, literary criticism, historical analysis, and political imperative in a way that few scholars and authors have achieved. It is both a polemic and a reflection—both of which are necessary—as well as a self-reflexive call to political action. It is also a reminder of the collaboration that must occur between literary critics, authors, historians, and activists—now, more than ever, in the age of the Anthropocene. “The climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination,” Ghosh writes at the beginning of the book (Ghosh 2016: 9).

The Anthropocene, as Thomas reminds us, does not simply mean that humans have altered the environment—we, like most animals, have always done that—but that humans have now caused “an irreversible rupture of the Earth system itself” (2016: 932). Ghosh’s use of the term *Anthropocene* in *The Great Derangement*, Thomas writes, “demands not local adjustments to our structures of power, representation, and production but their radical rethinking, with Asia at the core” (932).

*The Great Derangement* asks us to reconsider the very foundations upon which the promises that modernity and globalization offered were alternatively secured and denied. Global histories of capitalism and empire can no longer be untethered from the species history of humans—and, as Ghosh argues, are not always as clear-cut as they sometimes appear.

This conversation should be considered in dialogue with two recent discussions with Amitav Ghosh: a forum in the *American Historical Review* (December 2016), on the Ibis trilogy; and a roundtable in *Journal of Asian Studies* (December 2016), organized by Julia Adeney Thomas, on *The Great Derangement*.¹

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JDE: First of all, congratulations on The Great Derangement. It’s fantastic.

AG: Thank you.

JDE: As you note, The Great Derangement is indebted to a type of thinking promoted most prominently by Dipesh Chakrabarty, when he argued in “The Climate of History” that historians need to produce a new way of writing history in the age of global climate change (Chakrabarty 2009). It is easy to say that this essay was incredibly influential to historians and literary critics everywhere—especially those of us working on postcolonial theory and literature from South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. With some important exceptions, most of us hadn’t been doing this work at all. But it seems equally easy to argue that all your work has been about the Anthropocene—The Glass Palace (2000), The Hungry Tide (2004), and certainly the Ibis trilogy to name a few—and not incidentally so. Why do you think the Anthropocene has taken a subtle role in your work?

AG: Once I started writing The Great Derangement, and I was developing the ideas in those lectures, I suddenly realized that I had been thinking about these things for a long time—and not simply the Anthropocene. Many years ago, I wrote a short piece in the New Republic called “Petrofiction” as a review of Abdelraman Munif’s Cities of Salt quintet (Ghosh 1992). Unbeknownst to me, that piece went on to become a foundational text for a whole new field of study—“petroculture.” I learned of this on a visit to the University of Oregon at Eugene; I had no idea. These things had been on my mind, and I imagine, just as I described in The Great Derangement, a lot of it has to do with accidents of my birth. I am Bengali, and I was told the story about my family’s eviction from our ancestral village, by a flood, at a very early age. The relationship between humans and the environment has always been in my mind in some way.

JDE: What’s so interesting about your biography—growing up in Bengal, your experience of the freak tornado in Delhi in 1978, your family history of displacement after a devastating flood—is precisely that the human experience of the environment has always been foregrounded in your life. You have experienced environmental catastrophes firsthand. It is no surprise that the environment has been an underlying issue in most of your work. On the other hand, until fairly recently, the people who read literary work—especially North Americans—could safely imagine that something like “petrofiction” takes place somewhere else—somewhat far away, or in
the Gulf States (as in Munif’s novels). But it seems increasingly the case that “petroculture”—if not “petrofiction”—is happening in North Americans’ backyards.

AG: What you’re saying is absolutely true. Ours is a particularly extraordinary moment in time. Suddenly the world has a completely new aspect. Just the other day, I was reading about the floods in North Carolina following Hurricane Matthew [September 2016]. I have a close friend who teaches at Duke, Prasenjit Duara, and he is from Assam. Assam is also a very flood-prone state. I was writing him a note saying “I hope you’re OK and that you haven’t been affected by these floods,” and then suddenly it struck me that this is the kind of letter that we used to get in India from our friends in the West. It was always the case that we were the ones being hit by floods, or droughts, or some other terrible disaster. Now it’s a universal condition. Everywhere in the world that you look now, the safest places—Devonshire, England, for example—are being hit by epic floods [July 2012]. As I say in The Great Derangement, the temporal order of modernity has changed. People who were at the so-called margins of the world are now actually experiencing the changes in many ways before the people at the center. And not simply new weather patterns or natural disasters. In the 1980s, when I lived in Delhi, political terrorism and violence were a constant feature of life. When bombs went off, our friends in the West would write to us and say “I hope you’re OK.” That experience is now the common condition of people everywhere.

There is a kind of piety in writing about climate change, where one constantly says, “Oh well, it’s the poor—usually meaning the Global South—who will be affected first and worst.” But I think a good case could be made to say that the country that has actually suffered the most from climate change today is the United States. Look at the damage that Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Sandy wrought; look at the recent floods in North Carolina; look at the drought in California; look at the forests that are being devoured by insects; and so on. There can be no doubt that the United States has been badly hit by climate change. One reason for this is because the United States has a very large per capita carbon footprint. But another reason is that it just has more infrastructure; the United States has more stuff. And stuff is what is affected by these calamities.

It’s not just true about the United States; it’s also true in India. In India, too many people say, “Oh, it’s the poor who are going to suffer,” but it’s quite possible that the people who will suffer the most are the middle
classes. Look at the extreme downpours (“rain-bombs”) that have hit Mumbai and Chennai in recent years. They certainly did not spare middle-class people. In India, the urban poor are often very mobile. They have rural connections, they constantly go back and forth to villages, and they know how to use the trains. They can move at a moment’s notice. In a city like Mumbai, the urban poor will be able to leave in the event of a major storm surge, but that’s not the case with the middle class. Not only will they not be able to leave; they won’t want to leave. So much of what the middle class possesses is real estate. They can’t just abandon that and go away. Their whole life is based on a certain kind of stability. That’s what bourgeois life is. But that stability is no longer available anywhere. The basic guarantees that the modern state offers—stability, security, safety—have all gone up in smoke.

**JDE:** I’m from North Carolina, and so I have been thinking quite a bit about my home state. In that context, bourgeois values are exactly what’s at stake, and yet this fails to make any sense in the context of the Anthropocene. In fact, in North Carolina, bourgeois values are competing against responsible responses to climate change. The example that’s been circulating lately from North Carolina is that the governor, Pat McCrory, had reallocated funds from emergency disaster relief to defend his so-called Bathroom Bill [House Bill 2], which effectively prevents trans people from using bathrooms that don’t correspond to their birth sex. So rather than dealing with both the environmental devastation along the coastline, as well as the human costs that devastation produces, the Far Right state government would rather police public bathrooms against its own citizens. It’s with a double sense of piety that the governor can say that North Carolina’s poor have been the hardest hit while restricting access to state protection on multiple fronts.

**AG:** Across the Western world and across the world generally there’s a dawning understanding that something has gone terribly, terribly wrong—that things are not working. And this is what has caused this crazed sense of uncertainty and anxiety that we see everywhere.

**JDE:** Anxiety, yes, but also willful ignorance. I was really struck by your naming our literary and political age “the great derangement.” There are, in the dead center of the United States, man-made earthquakes, according to Rivka Galchen’s essay in the New Yorker (Galchen 2015). This increased
number of notable earthquakes in Oklahoma is due, as Galchen points out, to fracking. At the very center of the United States, there is both an awareness and also a willful ignorance that the human is now involving him- or herself in geology, and geologic time.

AG: Yes, absolutely. Fracking is a very good example. On the one hand, people’s lives are literally disintegrating because there’s methane coming out of their faucets. But they also want the work. They want the money.

JDE: Do you think that aligns, in some ways, with your argument in the final chapter of The Great Derangement, where you argue against our contemporary moment’s interest in bourgeois single-issue politics? It seemed to me, on my first read, that you were critiquing the Left for its current recycling of a certain type of identitarian-based politics that seems totally irrelevant in the face of environmental disaster. What we’re talking about now seems like a critique of the Right, which makes sense, where the entire project of ignoring the Anthropocene and ignoring the human relationship to our environment is about upholding the notion of the “American taxpayer” rather than the “citizen,” as Toni Morrison has pointed out in a different context (Needham 2015).

AG: Whether you look at India or you look at the United States, the Left or the Right, this is the discourse of politics today. It’s actually not about politics at all—if we consider “politics” to be, in the first instance, about issues of survival, collective betterment, and so on. When we look at politics, or what politics has come to mean, we see that it is now largely about issues of identity. These issues have completely eclipsed global climate change—which concerns our collective survival.

JDE: It seems to me, then, that the kind of literary genre of the period you’re calling “the great derangement” is something like the confessional, or the autobiographical form. What we’ve lost are literary experimentations about collectivity. I’m thinking of Raja Rao’s Kanthapura (1938), where the high-modernist collective narrator is a village on the brink of anticolonial revolution. I’m also thinking of parts of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway (1927)—that opening scene where Mrs. Dalloway steps out into the London cityscape. Or the conclusion to Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable (1936), where the untouchable protagonist, Bakha, finds himself waiting in a massive crowd for M. K. Gandhi. All of these moments are moments of collective subjectivity. And these are moments of collective subjectivity shot through with the
vicissitudes of actual historical facts—Clarissa sees the city and remembers World War I, Bakha is waiting for Gandhi, who delivers a speech verbatim from one of his publications.

AG: That’s an interesting point, actually. Yes, Raja Rao certainly does try to do that. I don’t think Kanthapura is a successful book, but certainly it does attempt that experiment. Again, as I say in The Great Derangement, the collective is everywhere present in the picture, but what happens is that from the midcentury onward, there is a move away from the collective to a hyperindividualized kind of subjectivity. This is to the point where today, it’s almost impossible for many young writers to actually step outside their subjectivity, because increasingly people have come to feel that if anyone steps outside their own subjectivity they’ll be appropriating someone else’s.

JDE: Your Ibis trilogy certainly writes the collective. On the one hand, there’s a certain kind of Russian or Bengali novel—most recently and notably, Neel Mukherjee’s The Lives of Others (2014)—that could tell a collective over time: the great family novel, or the multigenerational novel. On the other hand, the Ibis trilogy and Moby-Dick are novels that tell the story of a collective that occurs not over the longue durée but actually in the space of a concurrent present. Rather than a genealogy, the collective is a horizontal collective—what James Updike so clunkily dismissed as “men in the aggregate” in Munif’s Cities of Salt quintet (Ghosh 2016). It seems to me that one of the issues about the Anthropocene is that we have to think the longue durée—actually even longer; we need to think in geologic time. But at the same time we need a literary form that that reveals the temporally present collective as the basis for politics.

AG: [Laughing.] There must be a way of thinking through that, Daniel. I’m afraid I haven’t got it.

JDE: Following Mukherjee, the modernist writers we’ve discussed, and of course many of your books, one possible way to think through this is to return to the historical novel—a very popular literary genre from the mid-twentieth century to today. I am thinking about Patrick O’Brien and Herman Wouk, as well as recent work that draws on this tradition, like Anthony Doerr’s All the Light We Cannot See (2014) and the Ibis trilogy.

AG: Yes, you’re right, historical fiction has been very popular in the postwar period. It is possible that the historical novel could tackle the Anthropocene, but I see no evidence of it as yet.
**JDE:** But unlike your work and Mukherjee’s Bengali-English mix, All the Light We Cannot See is written in quintessentially American English: in addition to the general American romance of World War II, Doerr’s Nazi soldiers speak colloquial American English (‘yeah’), and children’s letters are written ‘ungrammatically,’ in ways made possible only in English. On the other hand, your novels, most obviously the Ibis trilogy, are committed to the historical genre at the linguistic level. What is so innovative about the Ibis trilogy, and also more historically accurate, is its concern with the many different languages and vernaculars in the space of the Indian Ocean. Perhaps one way of accounting for an anti-identitarian or heterogeneous collective within the conventions of the novel is to write a proliferation of languages—vernaculars, regional dialects, pidgins, et cetera—all in one cramped space. In other words, to avoid or elide the single-issue identitarian concerns of the modern novel is to, perhaps, interrupt the language it’s allegedly written in—English—with pidgins and vernaculars.

**AG:** It is true that I do not share the identitarian concerns of many contemporary writers, but whether my treatment of language arose out of this I cannot say. It sounds plausible enough now that you suggest it, but I didn’t think of it that way.

**JDE:** I want to press a bit more on the question of scale that you’re envisioning for the literary form, especially the novel, to account for. In The Great Derangement, you note that we likely can’t remember what we were doing “at 400 PPM” (Ghosh 2016: 129)—that is, when scientists in Hawai’i marked that carbon dioxide had crossed the “healthy” threshold of 400 parts per million [March 2013]. On one level, we have to imagine an event occurring in the difference between 399 PPM and 400 PPM, or 400 PPM and 401 PPM. At another level, the Anthropocenic novel must envision a globe and a collective political subjectivity. To write the Anthropocene seems to need a fictional imagination that is extraordinarily large and extraordinarily small in scope—given that, as you point out, the hurricane affecting North Carolina is part of a system that includes flooding in Bengal, that includes flooding in Assam, that includes the drought in California.

**AG:** Yes, the vastness of the scale is certainly the problem. It’s very difficult within the conventions of the modern novel to take on these issues, which are so vast. It’s interesting to read Ian McEwan’s novel Solar (2010) in that context because in fact it’s the very vastness of the subject that ultimately pushes the book into satire. You can see that McEwan is concerned about
climate change, yet the very form of the novel pushes the book in a certain
direction. *Solar* becomes a satirical novel. You might call it “the revenge of
the bourgeois”: from a certain perspective to take on or even to contem-
plate climate change becomes absurd.

**JDE:** *Science fiction might be a better genre for the Anthropocene, but as
you argue in* The Great Derangement, *it is simply not allowed into what
you call the “manor house” of proper literature* (Ghosh 2016: 71). *And yet
it seems like the leading figures in what might be called borderline literary
sci-fi—Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler—seem to be thinking quite seri-
ously about the collective and collective politics in the way that you call for,
especially Le Guin.*

**AG:** That’s certainly true of Ursula Le Guin.

**JDE:** *And yet even the recanonization of world literature has continued to
exclude that kind of form.*

**AG:** That’s absolutely the case, that kind of literary form is absolutely
excluded. The reality is that the audience and the impact of what used to
be called serious literature have dwindled away over the years, and this is
one of the reasons why. Its concerns are increasingly more narrow. Actu-
ally, much of the work that continues to be read today, that survives from
the mid-twentieth century, is science fiction.

**JDE:** *That seems to me to be a central question of “world literature” right
now: the increased interest in a return to a field called world literature, the
renovation of the concept of world literature, and the recuperation of a body
of work dubbed “world literature.” Thinking scale at the level of world litera-
ture is related to thinking a human/environmental relationship at the level of
the globe.*² *It seems to me that we must ask: Is the “global” in “global litera-
ture” the same as the “global” in “global climate change”? Should it be? Do
you think there’s a relationship we can think through about the relationship
between world literature and world climate change? Do you think there’s a
reason they have reemerged at the same time?*

**AG:** Goethe came up with this notion of world literature [*Weltliteratur*] in
1834—a very long time ago. Now we really do have a “world literature.”
People everywhere are writing novels, which is a new form for many places.

2. See also Tanoukhi 2008.
But, as I say in *The Great Derangement*, the concerns of this world literature are also converging around the world. Everywhere you look now, it’s about the same concerns, concerns about the subtle details of people’s interiority, about identitarian issues and so on.

Fortunately, there are other writers as well—Ursula Le Guin, for example.

**References**


