

Poetics of Climate Change in Fiction

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Introduction

In an article published in The Guardian, the British newspaper, well known writer, Amitav Ghosh, the author of *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, observes that not much fiction is written about climate change which is threatening our planet. For him this lacunae reflects a crisis of culture and imagination which is reflected in our inability to come to terms with climate change and deal with decisively, if failed attempts to reach an agreement at COP. For Ghosh, this crisis of climate change is also reflected in lack of literary scholarship. I argue that there is sufficient literary fiction in the form of science fiction and other forms which actually depicts planet earth in various apocalyptic climatic conditions. Such depictions of earth and its inhabitants affected by climate change are not just some alarmist hallucinatory imaginations. 'Cli-fi' novels, as they popularly came to be called in the recent years, provide imaginative accounts of life affected by climate change, which are more convincing than hard facts of science. Such fictions actually work to counter the myth that climate change is not real.

Key Words: climate change, crisis, facts, fiction, global warming, literary, scenario, science

Research Background

It is true that writers like Margaret Atwood, Cormac McCarthy, Kurt Vonnegut Jr, Barbara Kingsolver, Doris Lessing and Ian McEvan have imaginatively visualised climate change in its various forms. Amitav Ghosh also quotes renowned historian Dipesh Chakrabarty. For Dipesh Chakrabarty, "humans have become geological agents, changing the most basic physical processes of the Earth." The Anthropocene is definitely a challenge to common folk as well as to the creative writer. But, unlike Amitav Ghosh who tends to consider science fiction as a low literary form, I would argue that science fiction has contributed to raising awareness about climate change and other related scenarios long before the political world woke up to the sad realities of climate change.

In the genre of science fiction one is reminded of Kim Stanley Robinson's 'Green Planet' trilogy that capture international politics, science and real life ramifications of climate change. Kim Stanley Robinson's portrayals earth affected by climate change and the politics and science that follow reminds us of Karl Marx's famous line regarding history, if we see how nations fail to reach an understanding on how to deal with climate change. Marx famously said that historical entities appear two times: first as tragedy, then as a farce.

There exists a genre of fiction known as Climate Fiction or "Cli-fi" which deals with climate change and global warming. Though the word climate fiction is of recent origins, climate fiction has already been written. The names of J.G. Ballard, Octavia E. Butler are familiar to readers. J.G. Ballard is a writer whose novels always show a world where human beings live on the edge in the aftermath of climate induced changes and world affected by nuclear holocaust. Once again Ballard wrote these novels way back in 1960s. It clearly shows that fiction writers were actually ahead of their time in anticipating climate change. In his novels *The Drowned World* and *The Burning World* he depicts a world profoundly affected by climate change. In "The Drowned World" (1962) depicts a post-apocalyptic future global warming has led to the large parts of the world being drowned. The novel has been identified as a founding text in the literary genre known as climate fiction. In contrast to *The Drowned World*, *The Burning World* describes a world in which water is scarce. After an

extensive drought, rivers have turned to trickles and the earth to dust, causing the world's populations to head toward the oceans in search of water. The drought is caused by industrial waste flushed into the ocean, which form an oxygen-permeable barrier of saturated long-chain polymers that prevents evaporation and destroys the precipitation cycle.

The term "cli-fi" is generally credited to freelance news reporter and climate activist Dan Bloom in 2007 or 2008. "Climate fiction" has only been attested since the early 2010s, and the term has been retroactively applied to a number of works. Pioneering 20th century authors include J. G. Ballard and Octavia E. Butler, while dystopian fiction from Margaret Atwood is often cited as an immediate precursor to the genre's emergence. Since 2010, prominent cli-fi authors include Kim Stanley Robinson, Richard Powers, Paolo Bacigalupi, and Barbara Kingsolver. The publication of Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* in 2020 helped cement the genre's emergence; the work generated presidential and United Nations mentions and an invitation for Robinson to meet planners at the Pentagon.

University courses on literature and environmental issues may include climate change fiction in their syllabi. This body of literature has been discussed by a variety of publications, including *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Dissent* magazine, among other international media outlets. Academics and critics study the potential impact of fiction on the broader field of climate change communication.

Chaudhuri has been involved with environment and development related activism and has contributed to the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report. He lobbies for and supports environment related causes. He has worked for and nurtured development, environment and consumer rights groups, and has spoken about environment and sustainable consumption issues in venues within and outside the country. He has published books, monographs and papers on such topics as the right to water, sustainable food futures, sustainable consumption, and green advertisements.

Chaudhuri has also served as the developing country (Southern) coordinator on the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) NGO caucus for climate change and energy. He has appeared in environment, science fiction and international cultural meetings and communication fora like Escape Velocity organised by Museum of Science Fiction in Washington D.C., International Communication Association (ICA) events and other places speaking about biotechnology in fiction, sustainability narratives and allied issues while doing readings from his books.^{[30][31]} Chaudhuri has lectured and spoken to different audiences on the role of literature and storytelling in understanding and engaging with the climate crisis in programmes of the University of Oxford, Open University (UK) and University of London (School of Advanced Study).

The Butterfly Effect

At the centre of a near-future, post-apocalyptic Darkland is the chaotic city of Calcutta. Here Captain Old, a retired policeman who is also a hired assassin receives news that could help unravel the roots of a scourge that has devastated the continent. But problems begin to pile up for him till his own life is at stake. In another narrative we find a group of Indian tourists disappearing in Korea and a detective arriving in Seoul to investigate. But soon the private eye is overwhelmed by incidents that is far beyond his ken as a crime investigator.

Meanwhile in England there is a hotshot geneticist working away on a secret project which he believes could change the world. Each of these distinct but interconnected narratives, arranged in a Russian doll structure, mingle with each other as we near the resolution of this work of speculative fiction which balances science, spirituality and a gentle way of life. This novel has been compared to Philip K. Dick's *Blade Runner* (based on Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*) for its dystopian settings. This book has been listed by Book Riot community as one of "50 must-read novels about eco-disaster".

The Butterfly Effect is a novel about the effect of intertwined disasters. In an interview to researcher and author Sami Ahmad Khan published in the book *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj-Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction* (University of Wales Press) Chaudhuri, speaking about genetic engineering has said, 'A GM mediated disaster could quickly go out of hand especially if it happens in the backdrop of major natural catastrophes (climate related) or say war...'

Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures

A co-edited collection of short stories with multispecies and solarpunk themes. The editors who also contributed to the book's introduction are Christoph Ruprecht, Deborah Cleland, Norie Tamura, Rajat Chaudhuri and Sarena Ulibarri. This anthology of short stories addresses multispecies justice and Solarpunk futures in urban settings of Asia-Pacific and beyond. This book has stories by Priya Sarukkai Chabria, N. R. M. Roshak, Meyari McFarland, Kate V. Bui, Avital Balwit, D.A. Xiaolin Spires, Timothy Yam, Joyce Chng, Caroline M. Yoachim, Vlad-Andrei Cucu, Joseph F. Nacino, Natsumi Tanaka, Phoebe Wagner, Eliza Victoria, Taiyo Fujii, Sarah E. Stevens, Joel R Hunt, Rimi B. Chatterjee, Andrew Dana Hudson, Amin Chehel Nabi, Octavia Cade, E.H. Nießler, Shweta Taneja and D.K. Mok. The book is on Grist magazine's 'The Definitive Climate Fiction Reading List'. The book is a finalist, shortlisted for the Utopia Awards.

Calcutta Nights

Translated work of narrative nonfiction originally written in Bengali (titled *Raater Kolkata*) by author Hemendra Kumar Roy in the year 1923. Translated into English by Rajat Chaudhuri, *Calcutta Nights* is the real-life account of the night-time wanderings of author Hemendra Kumar Roy in the forbidden, dangerous and exciting places of the city of Calcutta. The chapters in the book cover the brothels of Calcutta's red-light district, the dens of hoodlums, the crematoriums, night-time theatres, beggars hovels, festive streets, the 'white town' area of Esplanade, hotels among others. The book according to reports 'reveals Calcutta's best kept secrets' and acts like a 'guidebook to the dark dens of eeriness' of the city of Calcutta. The South China Morning Post in its review, described this book as 'a 1920s tour through the seedy nightlife of Calcutta in this tale of beauty and decadence'.

Hotel Calcutta[edit]

An old Calcutta hotel is under the threat of demolition from land sharks who want to replace it with a shopping mall. At this time a monk appears and prophesies that the hotel can be saved if people tell stories within its four walls every day. Thus begins a chain of storytelling by guests and hotel staff which brings together realistic and speculative storytelling traditions. The frame story of the hotel's possible demolition flows parallelly till in the final pages there is an unexpected resolution. This book has been mentioned by critics for its evocative descriptions and the magic of storytelling. The book has been noted for its visceral urbanism by academics and critics

Amber Dusk

Amber Dusk is a cross-cultural novel set in Calcutta and Paris amidst the rapid economic changes of a newly liberalised India. The young Rishi, in love with the French photographer Valence, travels west for work. Meanwhile, his friend, the hardnosed Pedro Braganza, looking for the good life, is taking too many chances in Calcutta.

While in Paris, Rishi gets drawn into a vortex of racism and sporadic violence unleashed on the city by a little known neo-Nazi white supremacist outfit. Pedro has been putting in place his get-rich-quick plans and the initial success goes to his head. Then something happens which puts the two friends on a collision course against each other. It will be difficult for both of them to come out of it unscathed.

The novel was welcomed by critics for exploring surrealistic themes and for its handling of cross-cultural themes.

J.G.Ballard's two texts are sample of creative writing that directly deals with climate change. There is considerable body of work on climate change which goes back to the years before climate change has captured lay man's imagination. Arthur C Clarke's "The Forgotten Enemy" (1949) explores the possibility of new ice age. If one wants a much familiar landscape of climate change, we have novels like David Brin's *Earth* (1990), Bruce Sterling's *Heavy Weather* (1994) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312* (2012), the *Science in the Capital* trilogy (2004, 2005, 2007) and arguably *Green Mars* (1994). Thus there is no dearth of literary fictions which deal with climate change.

I argue that imagination is a powerful tool to come terms with climate change. But the rise of capitalism which coincides with anthropocene epoch in the history of our planet where human activity led to significantly affected earth's climate and its ecosystems. But capitalism is always at odds with human imagination whether it is in the form poetry, fiction and philosophy. I argue that imagination alone can alter the course of our doomed planet. But the question is whether the political class of the world would utilize the power of human imagination which calls for radical reorientation of political world as it exists today. Literary fictions abound in utopias of alternative worlds which offer life without capitalism. My thesis would examine the literary fictions as possible alternatives to capitalistic modes of living which currently pose existential threat to our planet.

Amitav Ghosh in his "The Nutmeg's Curse" argues that the origins of climate change can be traced to European Colonialism and its greed that views earth as a source that can be exploited for power, dominance through enslavement of native population. For Ghosh climate change had its origins to political causes, which the standard narratives of climate change conveniently ignore.

Conclusion

A fundamental feature of climate change is its critique of modernity which promises economic growth and development. Climate fiction questions such narratives by drawing our attention to situatedness of humans. Thus we have a new category of people called climate refugees. Though they already exist in the real world, it requires fiction to draw our attention to them in the absence of general acknowledgement. Anthony Doerr argues that "The world we're handing our kids brims with challenges, climate instability, pandemics, and disinformation." The American Writer, Richard Powers, in his novel *The Overstory* describes how the lives human beings are intertwined with trees. Powers builds *The Overstory* ground-up — roots, trunk, crown, seeds, the titles of successive chapters.

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