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COLONIALISM, CAPITALISM AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE GREAT DERANGEMENT*

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ABSTRACT

The present crisis of the climate is not the result of the current phenomena. It has a long history in the back. The colonial period of India is the gloomiest chapter of the environment. The precolonial period had more coherence and stability than the postcolonial time. The present economic structure is also responsible for the crisis of the climate as it is based on the fossil and carbon economy. The economy facilitates the power and the power comes from nowhere but the consumptions of the fossil fuels. The capitalism is also responsible for the climate crisis as the capitalism provokes for over production. The present economic structure concentrates more on their profit than on the climate crisis. The sad thing is that the developed countries too fail to give solution of the present crisis. It is very sure if we want a better future, we have to demand it and to find out the root of these problems, we have to look back our history. Here in this paper, I briefly discussed the colonial and imperial impacts on the climate in India and also discussed about the present capitalistic minds of the world countries that is the main hindrance of a better future.

**Keywords:** Climate Crisis, Colonialism, Capitalism, Imperialism and Carbon Economy

Introduction

During the period of colonialism, the Indian climate witnessed the most environmental degradation. In the early period of the colonialism, the Britishers made many policies only to spread the colonial boundaries and to preserve the power. It is also assumed that in this early period they were very ignorant about environmental issues. They cut forest after forest to make the railway sleepers and connected the remote places with Railways. Fortunately, in their later period they brought many policies for environmental issues but the policies were more effective on tax collection and opium cultivation than the protection of environment. They made policies to restrict the forest dwellers and peasants not to access the forest resources but never forget to produce the excessive raw materials for their factories. The scholars argued that the characteristics of colonialisms and the mechanism of the exploitation still exist today in the form of political, economic and social imperialism. Ghosh in his book *The Great Derangement* subtly highlights the power relations and the material forces with its sub-

stories of the victims of the colonial brutalities. He thinks that building a just society and holding a view of better future, it is the time to recall the long histories of the injustice.

### Discussion

The book *The Great Derangement* is divided into three parts titled 'Stories', 'History' and 'Politics'. Amitav Ghosh wrote these three parts as three essays. He then interconnected the three parts with each other. In the essay 'Stories', Ghosh focuses on the fiction writings. He suggests that the climate change can be expressed majorly through the fictional writings. At the same time, he regrets that at present time the literary fiction can hardly be seen with the subject of climate change. Ghosh assumes this as a major gap because fiction can express the present situation and also it can conceptualise a sustainable future world. Ghosh wonders that when the Sundarbans, the great mangrove delta in the Bay of Bengal will be swallowed by the rise of the sea-level water, when the big cities like Kolkata, New York and Bangkok will turn uninhabitable then the readers must turn their attention to the arts and the literatures to find the traces but unfortunately that time they will fail to supply their need because at a time most of the forms of the art and literature are drawn in the modes of concealment. The second part titled as 'History', condemns the industrialisation. This essay also condemns the western imperialism that hampers on the climate change mostly. Ghosh says that the European imperial industrialisation was a carbon-based industrialisation and they compelled their colonial nations to supply the raw materials that made the huge crisis of the climate. Ghosh agrees with Naomi Klein that the major cause of the climate change is the capitalism. He also says that the continent Asia is in threat of the global warming. Ghosh points out the view of the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty that the anthropogenic climate change is unintended consequence of the human beings. In the last essay 'Politics', he argues that the present global political structures are incapable of confronting the challenges of climate change. The reason behind this failure is the basic structural plan of the individual nation-states that only focuses on their own interests that does not care about the long-term interests of the global sustainability. He also says that not only the nation-states but also the trans-national organizations like the United Nations have been failed to address the serious issues of the climate change globally. Ghosh questions about the failure of the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Comparing with the Encyclical letter 'Laudato Si' by Pope Francis, he says that the Paris Agreement did not contain any acknowledgement of the practices. The essay proposes that the religions may play a vital role to address the major role of the climate change. Ghosh observes that the major religions can transcend the national boundaries and it can influence on the beliefs and behaviours of many people. He sees a hope that the involvement of the religious groups and the leaders in the politics of the climate change can play a positive role.

Ramchandra Guha, the famous South Asian environmental historian stated that the early phase of the colonial period bears the gloomiest history for environment. He said that during this phase the Britishers indiscriminately cut down the forest for building ships, making railway sleepers and lying roads. This caused the deforestation in different parts. We can remind of Madhav Gadgil also. Together with Guha, Gadgil published *This Fissured Land* where they observed that the precolonial Indian society had considerably stability and coherence. They have also considered the pre-British period as the "golden age". We all know that the change of the environmental phenomena is very slow. It always changes with the course of the time. The very dangerous thing is that it will not response immediately. Ghosh here blamed that the environmental crisis today we are facing is not today's result. For today's result our gloomy past is responsible. He said:

"The events of today's changing climate, in that they represent the totality of human actions over time, represent also the terminus of history. For if the entirety of our past is contained within the present, then temporality itself is drained of significance." (Ghosh 154)

Amitav Ghosh remarkably points out that the West faces difficulty to have an honest discussion about climate change. They find it problematic as this issue is tied up with the history of the imperialism. They cannot deny that the United States and other European countries are responsible for almost half of the human emission carbon dioxide. These countries hold a position in the global power structure and that power comes from nowhere but the consumption of the fossil fuels. Ghosh says that the inequality in the global carbon emissions has its origin in the past. He gave example that before the adoption in Europe the Chinese had pioneered the

use of the fossil fuels and Burma had developed an oil industry before the oil industry in the United States. Unfortunately, later these developments were prevented by force and they could not advance any further. Ghosh agrees with Timothy Mitchell:

“The emerging fossil-fuel economies of the West required that people elsewhere be prevented from developing coal-based energy systems of their own, by compulsion if necessary. As Timothy Mitchell observes, the coal economy thus essentially ‘depended on not being imitated’. Imperial rule assured that it was not.” (Ghosh 144)

It cannot be denied that the excessive growth of the production is one of the many reasons for the growing intensity of the climate change. In contemporary society the environmental problem emerges as the main subject of discussion as it comes as a threat to the human civilization and all the species on the earth. The scholars argued that capitalism took pivotal role for this crisis. The rise of the capitalistic system made the growth of population and productivity as inevitable. Over production, transportation and unplanned social activities enhance the emissions of the greenhouse gases. The capitalism only aims at the profit and this aim never cares for any harm of the ecological environment. Ghosh says...

“In accounts of the history of the present climate crisis, capitalism is very often the pivot on which the narrative turns.....I believe that this narrative often overlooks an aspect of global warming that is of equal importance: empire and imperialism.” (Ghosh 117)

In the chapter ‘History’ Ghosh argues that the capitalism is the critical contributor to the climate crisis. They paved the way of inequality. In the climate change discussion, inequality has been a persistent issue. Poverty and livelihood have an internal connection with the climate change. The poor people comparatively suffer more from the crucial effects of the climate change than the rich. The inequality and the climate change are attached within a vicious cycle. The hazards of the climate change end up with fatal inequality. The hazards cause severe harm to the disadvantaged groups. It decreases their ability to manage and recover from the hazards. Consequently, they suffer from the disproportionate loss of assets and income. The exposure is not limited within the disadvantaged groups of the rural areas particularly. We can also find this problem in urban areas also. The scholars found that the inequality is the main barrier to take action on the environment problems. This inequality affects on the global air and water pollutions. A study says that the countries which are more equal, had cleaner environments. The study also finds the link between the higher inequality and the increased environmental harm. The sociologist Andrew Jorgenson’s view says that those countries are more unequal, have the tendency of more carbon-intensive forms of production and consumption. According to the above studies, we can say that the global inequality causes the climate crisis. In this regard we can draw Ghosh’s remarks:

“The fact is that we live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by empire and its disparities. Differentials of power between and within nations are probably greater today than they have ever been. These differentials are, in turn, closely related to carbon emissions. The distribution of power in the world therefore lies at the core of the climate crisis. This is indeed one of the greatest obstacles to mitigatory action, and all the more so because it remains largely unacknowledged.” (Ghosh 195)

To discuss about the inequality, we are confined within nations and national boundaries. If we go beyond the national boundaries and consider the whole world as a single community, we will find that only the 10 percent of the world population are responsible for the 45 percent of global carbon emissions. To our extreme wonder we will find that these high emitters live in the countries of the North Globe where about 40 percent people live in the North America and the 22 percent People live in the Asian countries. If we deeply analyse, we will find that for this global inequality and the climate crisis the lifestyle of a tiny minority is responsible and among whom two-third people live in the rich countries and the rest people spread in various part of the world.

The climate change is a long-term process. Its result comes out in very slow process. In the world economy the carbon played a vital role. The national and the global economy are connected with the carbon economy. It has introduced the anthropogenic climate change. The scholars viewed that this carbon-based economy has dominated the world environment so much that such kind of environmental degradation is very

rare in the human history. The present economy is also based on the carbon economy. The world is completely dependent on the planet's fossil fuels such as coal, natural oil and natural gases. The scholars believe that for the growth of the economy, much consumption of the fossil fuels rises the concentration of the greenhouse gases that causes the overheating of the planet. Long ago the scientists have suspected a genuine link between global warming and industrialization but unfortunately, this issue did not come to focus until the second half of the twentieth century. In this regard we can remind of the suggestion of Svante Arrhenius that the fossil fuels burning that adds carbon-di-oxide, may increase the planet's temperature. At that time the main stream scientists rejected his view saying that major climate change would not likely to come but could have slowly over tens thousands of years. Later the scientists confirmed Arrhenius's theory that the levels of carbon-di-oxide were rising every year:

"There can be no doubt that the climate crisis was brought on by the way in which the carbon economy evolved in the West, it is also true that the matter might have taken many different turns. The climate crisis cannot therefore be thought of as a problem created by an utterly distant 'Other'." (Ghosh 154)

Ghosh uplifts the Western-centric climate politics. He argues that they do not acknowledge Asia's centrality to global warming rather they simply blame the Asian countries such as India or China for their recent pattern of the industrialization. He does not forget to provide the technical descriptions of the climate crisis. He provides real cases behind the displacement of the potential human. He informs us that if anyone wants to experience the real imperialism, he/she needs to understand the historical explanation. He regrets that the Asian countries delayed to enter into the carbon economy but still they fuelled the growth and the development of Europe. Ghosh analyses the global issues related with the climate crisis by showing the instances of Su Dongpo and Gandhi and says that we require all the intellectual resources to solve the climate crisis.

### Conclusion

In terms of theorizing the imperial and colonial experience it's a must that we need much focus on the environmental history. It is true that the scope for it is still remained very limited. It deserves much attention of the scholars for a safer and more human future. Ghosh points out very subtle issues in his book. He argues that capitalism and the consumerism are not the only factors but the ramifications of the empire are also responsible. He questioned about the Western concept of the modernity. In Western-constructed modernity, they do not think themselves as the part of the nature rather they assume themselves as the conqueror of the nature. Analysing the present crisis of the world-wide climate condition he warns us that the future does not look good for us. He finds hope that the religious institutions and their leaders are coming forward to voice for the present crisis. Inspiring by Pope Francis's *Laudato Si*, he says that if all the religious grouping join hands, the movements will drastically move forward. He also said that if we want the change, we have to demand it.

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