

Looking Away: Apathy towards Climate Crisis in Literary Fiction during the Post-Truth Era

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Abstract

There is dearth of literary fiction on climate crisis as is being pointed by acclaimed writers and scholars across the globe. Writers like Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie have initiated a dialogue in this regard. In the post-truth era, the issue of climate change is being blatantly denied and doubt is being manufactured regarding this issue. The novelists need to address this issue urgently, so as to create awareness among the readers. The apathy towards climate crisis needs to be mitigated

without delay. Stories can motivate people to take social responsibility and bring changes that are useful for a sustainable development. It is by means of storytelling that the people across the globe can be educated about climate crisis and the issue can be made more relatable. Fiction can be a catalyst for change. Literary imagination of the novelists needs to extend beyond everyday life to accommodate the issue of climate change. Role of culture and its relationship with climate crisis is duly comprehended in this study.

This paper focuses on the importance of initiating a dialogue on climate crisis and the scarcity of this issue in contemporary literary fiction. Insightful observations and views of acclaimed writers and scholars have been duly incorporated to lend this scholarly endeavour a firm ground.

Keywords: Climate crisis, Climate denial, Post-truth, Anthropocene, Climate fiction.

The best arguments in the world won't change a person's mind. The only thing that can do that
is a good story.

–Richard Powers

In a stunning animated video titled “The Planet isn’t going anywhere: We Are,” George Carlin talks about the way we treat the issue of climate change and threats to our planet. He humorously navigates across difficult waters by telling us that the planet has been here for 4.5 billion years and it isn’t going anywhere. It is not vulnerable to what threats we pose as it has an unimaginable system of self-healing and self-correction. It is we who are under threat due to our lack of wisdom and greed. Civilizations upon civilizations have faced the wrath of nature. People disappeared from the face of earth, but the earth remained. If we keep on with our destructive habits, we will face a similar wrath of nature soon. If we harm our only habitat; that is the earth, we will not be able to exist. It is we who will disappear and be extinct, not the earth. We are not

judicious enough to understand that whatever we do to nature will revert back to us in different ways; destroying our human race not the planet. The planet has tolerated much more damage than we can ever imagine, and has always healed and rejuvenated itself. We, however, will not be able to self-heal that way.

Climate deniers and climate activists need to address this issue with a clearer perspective, or else it will be too late to open a discourse. Literature can be employed to create awareness among people and the climate crisis can be turned into a more relatable issue. Fiction serves as a catalyst for change. In this context celebrated Indian-British author Salman Rushdie professes that, “Before there were books, there were stories” (3). These words of Rushdie lay emphasis on the importance of stories. He further studies the “relationship between the world of the imagination and the so-called real world . . .” (20). According to him, “man alone is the storytelling animal” (21). In India there is dearth of literary fiction that focuses on the theme of climate crisis. The readers find non-fictional works on climate crisis, but they rarely get any literary work of fiction on this issue. Climate change and climate crisis is often overlooked as a concern that primarily belongs to the genre of science fiction. It is mainly concerned to be a product of an author’s fantasy and imagination. It is considered as distant and peripheral to our daily lives. It is true that common people have innumerable issues to deal with, but the issue of climate change is equally important. Mainstream writers need to engage the issue of climate crisis more often into their writings, so as to draw the attention of the readers on a massive scale. In literary fiction the imagination of the author should extend beyond everyday life to the sphere of larger issues such as the current issue of climate change that is taking place rapidly. It cannot be negated anymore because the impact of this crisis is ever-growing and calls for instant action from all the countries across the globe.

Climate denial is an impediment in the way of creating awareness. In the post-truth era, the facts have been replaced by subjectivity and intuition. Feelings have replaced the truth and a majority of people have started to dwell in a world of delusions and false images. Climate denialism is a way to hide ourselves from the doom that awaits us on a grand scale. As observed by Kari Marie Norgaard, “Environmental and social scientific communities alike have identified the failure of public response to global warming as a significant quandary” (1). The research and studies that seek to educate us regarding climate change are being brazenly denied and marginalized. In this regard, Haydn Washington and John Cook aptly put forth five types of arguments regarding climate change denial. These arguments include, “Conspiracy theories, fake experts, impossible expectations, misrepresentations and cherry-picking” (43). Literature can help in addressing such issues and raising difficult questions. Amitav Ghosh affirms in *The Great Derangement* that the, “narrative imagination” (9) must be reshaped and reconfigured to accommodate the element of improbability. This element needs to be given space in the novelistic universe of the writers, so as to synthesis imagination with the facts of climate crisis. In the literary fiction the dialogue about climate change needs to be dealt with urgency. In this regard Ghosh further contends that, “the age of global warming defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense” (35). According to Ghosh nothing is improbable in the era of global warming.

Lee McIntyre, American philosopher, author and educator observes in *Post-Truth* that, “Global warming is perhaps the most egregious case of modern science denial” (27). He alleges that in spite of massive evidence, doubt about anthropogenic climate change is being deliberately and, “shamelessly manufactured over the last twenty years, by those with a financial interest in promoting it” (30). It is clearly evident that the truth about climate change is being denied and skepticism about this crisis is being promoted in the post-truth era. We forget that narratives give

us facts, not just fiction. The discursive element is significant in raising the issue of climate crisis and the impact that it is bound to have on our lives. The literary fictional works bring about social change and if the issue of climate change is accommodated in this genre, then a major transformation can be expected. James Holland Jones, a biological anthropologist and environmentalist scientist questions, “Can stories lead to social action?” Well, the answer is yes, they can and they actually have often inspired people to act. In the post-pandemic world, stories have turned to be our greatest source of motivation for action.

Books have regained relevance and narratives swell with facts. Holland Jones further expresses his views by dividing them into two types of points such as factual and instrumental. In factual points he affirms that, “Fiction provides a powerful tool for modeling complex systems and stories are more effective than facts at changing people’s minds.” In his explanation of the instrumental points, he professes that, “Fiction allows us to imagine better worlds and we need broad diversity of stories from many voices.” When facts stand on the shoulders of a narrative then stories become relatable and deeply relevant for bringing about social change. Adam Trexler in *Anthropocene Fictions*, affirms that a team of geologists headed by Nobel Prize winner and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen preferred calling the current period of history as Anthropocene. The word Anthropocene is derived from the Greek terms for human ('anthropo') and new ('cene'). However, the opposite of Anthropocene is Holocene which is explained as the period from “approximately 11,700 years ago to the present . . . an interglacial period after the most recent ice age” (1). Trexler observes that the term Anthropocene was coined by Eugene F. Stoermer in 1980’s. The astounding human influence upon the earth has created space for a new geological epoch known as Anthropocene. Currently Anthropocene has been a widely discussed issue in terms of global climate change and bizarre atmospheric changes.

The focus of this paper is on the impact of climate change on contemporary literary production and the outrageous insensitivity of the literary coterie towards this issue. The interaction between fiction and climate change is an engaging sphere. Science fiction and postmodern apocalyptic fiction has attempted to press its boundaries and launch a discourse on climate change, but most of the fictional accounts are majorly fictional with minor journalistic details. The gradual degeneration and devastation of earth due to human activities and the resultant climate changes are not primary concerns in many fictional narratives. The environmental hazards and the impact of humans on nature is often portrayed in the novels, but climate change is still in many ways a peripheral concern. However, writers like Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* (2004), Paolo Bacigalupi in *The Windup Girl* (2009), Liz Jensen in *The Rapture* (2009), Marcel Theroux in *Far North* (2009) and Elif Shafak in *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) deal with the issues of climate change. With an increased awareness of Anthropocene fiction, the literary scholars, theorists and writers have started work in this direction. A few writers have attempted to bridge the gap between humans and the environment by means of their fictional works. Some such novels include, Jean Giono's *The Man who Planted Trees* (1953), Ian Mc Ewan's *Solar* (2010), Tania James's *The Tusk that did the Damage* (2015) and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018).

Amitav Ghosh questions in an article published in *The Guardian*, "Where is the fiction about climate change?" His words reverberate with concern for climate change and dearth of fiction on this issue. In *The Great Derangement* Ghosh further points to the contribution of Arundhati Roy whom he considers to be, "passionate and deeply informed about climate change" (11). However, he claims that Roy writes about climatic changes and other environmental issues in her prose, not in her fiction. Even internationally acclaimed writers like M. Atwood, Kurt Vonnegut, Doris Lessing and Ian McEwan focus on climate change in their non-fiction, but the

dangers and threats of climate change are rarely spotted in popular fiction. The picture is bleak even in the Indian context as there is dearth of climate fiction. However, there exists a corpus of non-fiction that deals with ecological issues and that addresses climate change as a cerebral issue. Some such non-fictional works include *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* by Vandana Shiva, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Ghosh, and *A River Runs Again: India's Natural World in Crisis, from the Barren Cliffs of Rajasthan to the Farmlands of Karnataka* by Meera Subramanian, *Environmentalism: A Global History* by Ramachandra Guha and *India in a Warming World: Integrating Climate Change and Development* edited by Navroz K. Dubash. Ghosh's question about the dearth of fiction on climate crisis redirects our attention towards the words of Holland Jones mentioned early in this paper, where he philosophizes about the link between stories and social action.

Culture is deeply linked to the climate crisis across the globe. It varies from one nation to the other, but it is connected deeply to this crisis. In this regard, Ghosh contends that, “. . . the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture . . .” (12). He explains that it is culture which aggravates desires for a certain kind of lifestyle that encourages “carbon economy” (13). The currently launched LiFE movement by the Government of India is a great step towards ensuring individual and collective efforts to address the climate crisis. LiFE stands for Lifestyle for the Environment movement that promotes lifestyle changes to confront the escalating impact of the climate change. This movement is a reflection of what Ghosh professes about the connection between crisis of climate and crisis of culture. By changing our perspective about our lives and about our cultural choices a great deal of change can be attained. Like the fading art of Papier-Mâché that yearns for survival, stories about climate change too need readership to survive. As rightly affirmed by Elif Shafak, “Stories bring us together, untold stories keep us apart” (9). It is by means of the art of

storytelling that people can be united for a cause. The story of climate change should be told to the people by employing various narrative strategies, so that their focus can be drawn towards the predicament of the climate change. The issue of climate crisis cannot be relegated to the margins and we need to arouse empathy towards this issue urgently.

In the Indian context the climate crisis is an issue that needs immediate inclusion in literary fiction, so that the apathy and the ignorance regarding this issue can be mitigated. The narratives need to address the issue of climate change and the hazards related to it. The writers as observed by Ghosh must develop an apparatus for delineating the issue of climate change in their fictional works. The Indian writer Shubhangi Swarup's *Latitudes of Longing* is an example of contemporary cli-fi being written in India. *The Hungry Tide*, *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* and *Jungle Nama* are some notable works by Ghosh that focus on climate crisis. However, the production of cli-fi in India is meager and such examples of cli-fi are countable. *Aranyaka: Book of the Forest* written by Amruta Patil and Devdutt Pattanaik is a graphic novel. There is also a poetic collection by Urvashi Bahuguna titled *Terrarium* that addresses our ecosystem. The crisis of the climate is also being recorded in some notable works of narrative journalism. These works contribute greatly in educating the readers across the globe about various aspects of this crisis. Some such works include P. Sainath's *Everybody Loves a Good Drought*, Mridula Ramesh's *The Climate Solution* and Bahar Dutt's *Rewilding*.

Apathy towards climate crisis is an impediment in creating awareness among the readers. This paper aims to discuss the urgency of eliminating this apathy, so that literary fiction can accommodate issues related to climate crisis on a full-fledged scale. Significant observations and ideas of eminent scholars and writers have been incorporated to provide firm ground to this scholarly endeavour. Looking away will not aid in such a scenario when climate catastrophes have

greatly increased and the situation is becoming perilous day by day. The phenomenon of climate change is increasingly becoming a grim reality that must not be overlooked, or pushed to the periphery. Writers across the globe need to address this issue with utmost sincerity and urgency. The post-truth scenario has fuelled the rise of denial and doubt about climate change. The manufacturing of denial and doubt has caused great damage to the efforts that are being made by scientists, researchers, environmentalists and writers in trying to raise awareness about climate crisis. Stories can restore the faith of the people in the issue of climate crisis and can motivate them to take immediate actions. The writers can convince the readers to look beyond their lives into escalating climate crisis by incorporating such themes into their literary fictional works.

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